

Second Alliance
An *Inuyasha* Fanfic
By Susan Amund

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Chapter 1: Opening Negotiations

“How was your trip, Kaede-sama?” Miroku asked from his spot against the wall of the hut. Kaede had been gone for several days at the request of another village that had no healer. Kagome hurried to relieve the elder priestess of her basket of supplies. She noted with worry that Kaede looked tired. Her single eye was sunken and her mouth pinched at the corners.

“Ashai village has also shown signs of the new illness,” Kaede replied without inflection.

“That makes three villages in two weeks.” Sango sat back from the soup she was stirring and shared a glance with Miroku. “It is moving south.”

“If it continues at this rate, it will reach Edo in another week or so,” the monk noted thoughtfully.

“Did any of the new medicines we made help, Kaede-sensei?” Kagome asked hopefully. She began unloading the basket, putting away herbs and ointments.

Kaede settled herself with a sigh and the creak of old bones, gratefully accepting the bowl of soup Sango offered. She took a few sips without speaking, and Kagome’s worry increased. Since Naraku had been defeated and the jewel made whole, she had begun serious training under Kaede as a healer and priestess. She was able to use the well only on the new moon, and so trips home were regular but far-between. She had finished high school, barely, and begun a distance course in nursing. Studying in the feudal era was surprisingly easy, even with her additional lessons from Kaede, since she was no longer constantly travelling and under attack from youkai. She had even found time to try several new remedies for the strange illness that had been reported in other villages.

“The meadowsweet tincture you have been working on seems to reduce their discomfort.” Kaede met Kagome’s eyes with a serious expression and the younger woman felt her hope sinking. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t appear that the sick can fight off the illness on their own. Without something to attack the underlying disease, I fear there is not much we can do but wait.”

“But there are so many...” Kagome trailed off and swallowed.

In the villages that had reported the new illness, one in every two people got sick. Of those, so far, one in three died. She knew there might be another treatment in the future that could help, but she was torn over going to find it. She would have to see the victims herself to be able to research the disease effectively, and that would run the risk of catching the illness and potentially transmitting it to the future.

Even if she managed to find out what was causing the outbreak and discover a cure, there was no way of knowing if she could obtain or manufacture enough to be of any use. She had discussed the problem of time travel with Miroku many times, and they had both agreed that she could use her future knowledge with relative freedom. She had been doing so for more than three years without any serious repercussions, but the fewer things she brought back from the future and used on the general population the better. Even her modern medicines she had not administered outside of the group. Instead, she did

her best to replicate them with natural substances that could be found in the feudal period. Ground and distilled meadowsweet had made an acceptable substitute for aspirin.

“I’ll try to learn more when I go back tomorrow, Kaede-sensei. Do you think you could help Shippo draw a picture of the rash you saw?”

Kaede nodded, and Kagome waved off Sango’s offer of supper in favor of going outside to find Shippo. The kit had been doing some training of his own, with, surprisingly, Inuyasha. Since Naraku’s death and Kikyou’s second, and hopefully final, funeral, Inuyasha had lost some of his anger. He still acted like an idiot a lot of the time, but when Kagome calmly requested that he teach Shippo the basics of hunting and tracking he had agreed. In exchange, he would receive no more than one ‘sit’ per day - unless it would save someone from mortal danger. The two were sitting on the edge of the forest, talking quietly about scents and wind direction when she approached.

“Kagome-mama!” The kit jumped up and grinned.

“Did you learn lots today, Shippo?” She couldn’t help but smile at his bubbly excitement, despite the serious situation worrying her.

“Inuyasha-nichan showed me how to use the wind to disguise my location!”

“Stop callin’ me that, ya stupid!” Shippo barely managed to dodge a blow from the hanyou’s fist. Kagome had to put a hand over her mouth to hide her smile; Inuyasha did not appreciate being called ‘big brother’.

The lessons had started out rocky, but Inuyasha had gradually grown to tolerate teaching Shippo all of the things he had been forced to learn by trial and error. He would never admit it, but Kagome suspected that he took pride in the young demon’s successes. In turn, Shippo had stopped playing quite as many tricks on Inuyasha, and didn’t tattle to Kagome as often either. He had found a new method of teasing his new sensei, though.

“Stop calling you what, Inuyasha-nichan?” He smiled in mock innocence and Kagome interrupted Inuyasha’s growl before they could break into a real argument.

“Shippo, supper is ready.” She snagged his collar before he could run back to the hut. “After you eat, please help Kaede with a drawing I need. It has to be done before I visit my mother tonight.” The kit nodded and took off as soon as she let go. Kagome sighed and sat down next to Inuyasha.

“The medicine didn’t work, eh?” he said.

“How did you-” Inuyasha pointed to one furry ear and Kagome smiled sadly. “I suppose Shippo heard too?”

“Kit’s ears ain’t as good as mine, and he was kinda busy.” He paused and stared into the village.

Kagome enjoyed the comfortable silence. She had halted her efforts to start a romantic relationship with Inuyasha shortly before Naraku was destroyed. Sometime after Kikyō's funeral, her heart had stopped pining as well. She loved him, she really did. And she knew he loved her, but Inuyasha was still feeling the grief of his loss. Even once his heart had healed, Kagome doubted he would ever be able to feel *that way* about her. She reminded him too much of his first love. They were friends, best friends. And that was enough - more than most people, especially hanyō, had.

"When we go back, I'm going to see what I can find out about this disease. With Shippo's drawing and Kaede's description, hopefully I can figure out what it is and what we can do to slow it down."

"And if ya can't?"

Kagome shivered in the slanting sunlight. Night was approaching faster as summer had faded and autumn was fully entrenched in the village. Inuyasha had seen more death and destruction than anyone else she knew - except maybe his brother, although she suspected most of that was Sesshomaru's own doing. Her friend had lived through the desperate, horrifying, famine-ridden Warring States Period, but she knew there was no way he could imagine the kind of world-wide destructive force of some diseases. She wasn't sure she could explain to anyone in the feudal era the magnitude of thousands of deaths from yellow fever, hundreds of thousands of deaths by influenza, or millions of deaths from bubonic plague.

"We will quarantine Edo. It will make for a long winter, but the crops will be harvested in the next few weeks, and then we can wait for the cold weather to stop the traffic between villages. Once the disease has no way to spread, it will die out in those places it has already infected. I did tell Kaede to advise the villages to burn the clothes and futons of the infected along with the bodies - just in case."

"They won't all listen."

"It is all I can do, for now." Kagome sighed, then straightened her shoulders. She would do her absolute best to keep her friends safe, and to prevent the suffering of others. "I'll come up with something, Inuyasha."

"Keh. *We'll* figure it out..." He nudged Kagome with his shoulder and she smiled.

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"It's okay, Sesshomaru-sama. Rin will-" A hacking cough interrupted the little girl and Sesshomaru found himself frowning. He quickly wiped the expression off of his face. His ward used a scrap of cloth to clean the pink mucus from her nose and mouth. "Rin will be better soon," she assured him in a raspy voice. "Jaken is bringing tea for Rin, and then she will feel good again."

“Quiet, Rin.” She ceased her rambling immediately and relaxed into the generous blankets of the futon.

He noted that her skin was much paler than usual. He placed his palm on her forehead. She was very hot for a human, but she still shivered and struggled to pull the covers further over her narrow shoulders. Her eyes slid closed, and his frown returned. It was not strange for Rin to contract an illness. In the nearly four years he had travelled with her, she often had runny noses and sore throats. She was always better within a week or so, less if they were at the castle and she received adequate rest and warm food and drink.

This disease had been different. It had not been contracted while walking the lands in cold weather or by associating with human villagers who did not bathe as they should. No. This illness had begun among the *demons* at the castle. Rin seemed to get worse once she began to show symptoms and she progressed faster than any of the demons had. The sixth night of her illness was well underway.

His frown deepened. Illness among youkai was not unheard of, but it was very rare. However, he had never seen a disease that affected both demons and humans. Even more troubling, it did not appear to be something that his healers could successfully treat. He’d sent close-mouthed messengers to the East and South, searching for medical scrolls or information of a similar illness. To the north he had sent nothing. He did not trust even his most secretive vassals under the suspicious eyes of the North. No weakness could be perceived by his enemies - not that the West had anything to fear from any of the other three lords of Japan. His thoughts were interrupted by the sliding of the shoji screen.

“My Lord,” Jaken bowed and scraped in his usual obsequious manner.

Sesshomaru cleared his face of all expression, settling the cold mask over his features that inspired fear in his allies and enemies alike. The toad knelt on the floor, bowing low to touch his head to the wooden boards. “I regret to inform you that the kitchen maid has died.”

Sesshomaru considered this news carefully. The illness that had struck his servants and some of the inhabitants of the nearby youkai village was puzzling and worthy of attention in its singularity. However, record of demon deaths from disease was almost unheard of. The matter elevated with the news of a single mortality to have his utmost attention. Treatment and cure would be his first priority, above even concealing this news from his allies in the East and South. It had not yet escalated to the point where he needed to consider extreme measures, such as requesting assistance. He would resolve the situation before such a distasteful thing occurred.

“Jaken,” he intoned, “you will-”

He was interrupted by a sharp, bitter smell, immediately followed by retching. Rin had barely managed to hang her head over the edge of the futon before she emptied the contents of her stomach. She had not eaten much recently, so the result was mostly bile. Sesshomaru flicked his eyes to the toad, who quickly stood and held back the girl’s hair. He squawked and accused her of making a mess, but his little claws were gentle as he patted her mouth dry and helped her to lie down.

“Sorry, Jaken-sama, Sesshomaru-sama,” she mumbled. He leaned down to press his hand against her

hair, knowing the small gesture would comfort her greatly.

“Jaken, you will stay with Rin while This Sesshomaru-” He hesitated, staring at his young ward.

“My Lord?” Jaken squawked.

Sesshomaru ignored his inquiry, staring at Rin’s pale face and open mouth. His keen eyesight found something which accomplished a feat that no enemy had ever managed - a tingle of fear slid down his spine. The tongue and inner cheeks of the little girl were covered in raised, dark red bumps, dotted with white in the center.

The same rash had covered the dead kitchen maid from head to toe.

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Shippo felt like his stomach was trying to climb its way out of his mouth. His knees shook and his heart was beating fast. He knew that the daiyoukai could smell his fear, but he had to ignore it. Sesshomaru was the most powerful youkai Shippo had ever met, maybe even the most powerful in Japan. The fur draped around him, larger even than when he had traveled with their group, indicated his wealth and status. For demons, it was also a display of his strength.

An orb of light had streaked across the sky. The subsonic echo of impact was followed by a swirling wave of youki that scattered the other children and forced Shippo to the ground. He stood as soon as he’d realized what was happening. Instinct told him that cowering before a predator like Sesshomaru would be deadly. The villagers had stopped their work and stood in shocked, frightened silence, when Sesshomaru had appeared in the center of the village.

“Sesshomaru-sama,” he managed without squeaking. He tilted his head to the side out of respect.

Miroku skidded to a stop at the edge of the path, panting from his run. Sango had felt the youkai presence as well. She turned quietly from her place by Kaede’s hut where she had been giving instructions to the villagers on building a wall to quarantine the village. Although Kirara had already transformed at her side, she didn’t have Hiraikotsu with her, and Shippo gulped. Sesshomaru had been their ally against Naraku; hopefully he wasn’t ready to end that alliance.

“Sesshomaru-sama,” Miroku said quietly. He bowed deeply out of respect and addressed the powerful demon. “To what do we owe the great honor of-”

“Bring the priestess,” Sesshomaru interrupted Miroku, and Shippo felt fear pinch his throat. The daiyoukai had gained a distant respect for the future girl while they traveled together. He even seemed to listen to her suggestions, although he didn’t acknowledge them. *He wouldn’t hurt her, my human mama; there is no reason for him to hurt Kagome-okasan.*

“Kaede-sama is not in the village at the moment. Perhaps I can-”

“The *miko*, Monk.” His voice left no room for objection. They all knew who he was referring to, and if Miroku continued to avoid the subject, Sesshomaru would not be pleased.

“Kagome isn’t here either, Sesshomaru-sama,” Shippo blurted. Golden eyes focused on him and the pinch of fear grew into a claw that threatened to choke him completely. “She - she went with Inuyasha to visit her home.” A protective feeling pushed against the terror that the inuyoukai inspired and words tumbled out of the kit’s mouth before he could pull them back. “You can’t hurt her!” He clapped both hands over his lips and stared at the daiyoukai with wide eyes. *I am so dead.*

Sesshomaru stood in silence for a moment, before finally taking a deep breath through his nose. A shadow of distaste crossed his features, and then he streaked down the well-worn path to the well, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

Shippo was quick to follow him, and Sango, Kirara, and Miroku were not far behind. The demon perched on the edge of the well, staring into the dry depths. The others hesitated, but Shippo stepped forward, careful not to step on the yellow bag and empty pot stacked against the old wood. “She’ll be back tonight.”

“What magic is this?” Sesshomaru did not look at them, and the question went unanswered. Shippo glanced at Sango and Miroku, who seemed to be trying to decide if they should reveal Kagome’s secret. “Kit.” His deep order tingled Shippo’s spine with a youki command.

Shippo wanted to tell him, he had to tell him. *Secret, secret! Kagome’s secret!* He felt the knowledge trying to force its way out under the heavy weight of Sesshomaru’s power. A low growl pushed against the kitsune’s will, instinct driving him to give in, to obey the command of one far more powerful than him.

“If I tell, you can’t hurt Kagome!” As though the daiyoukai had been taken by surprise, his power hesitated, and Shippo could take a deep breath without feeling compelled to bend to Sesshomaru’s will. “Or the well,” he continued in a more even voice. “Or us,” he gestured to himself, Sango and Miroku. “Or Kaede...or Inuyasha,” he added as an afterthought.

There was a long, pregnant pause.

“This Sesshomaru has no desire to waste time on such insignificant lives.”

Shippo decided that was as good as a promise as he was going to get. Before Miroku could interfere or Sesshomaru could reassert his dominance, he gave in. “The well transports Kagome to her home. It is the only way to get there, and only she and Inuyasha can use it.” *No need for him to know when Kagome is from.* “They left last night and they’ll be back before nightfall.”

“This Sesshomaru has need of the miko *now*.”

Shippo decided it was telling that Inuyasha’s scary older brother didn’t even blink at the news that Kagome needed to use a magical portal to get home - or that it was disguised as an old well.

“Unfortunately, we have no way of retrieving Kagome-sama sooner, Sesshomaru-sama. She will return when she returns.” Miroku paused, and Shippo felt a spark of admiration for the monk who did not flinch under the cold gaze of the tall demon. “Perhaps we may be of assistance in her absence? Or we may pass along a message for you when she returns, if you do not wish to wait.”

“She will not return sooner.”

Sesshomaru’s monotone made it difficult to tell if it was a question or a statement, but Miroku smoothly answered, “That would be most unusual.” Before the monk could make his offer of help again, a turbulent swirl of youki exploded and Sesshomaru disappeared in a ball of light. Shippo was the first to turn back to the well, peering over the side in the hope that Kagome had decided to come back early. Only the cool darkness stared back at him.

“What do you think he wants with Kagome-chan?” Sango asked worriedly.

“It is difficult to say,” Miroku answered. “However, I believe we should make every attempt to alert Kagome and Inuyasha to Sesshomaru’s intent to seek her out - prior to the return of the Western Lord.”

“Especially Inubaka,” Shippo muttered to himself. As much as he had enjoyed the past year with the calmer, more brotherly hanyou, he didn’t think that attitude would last long in the daiyoukai’s presence. Once their fight started, it wouldn’t end until Sesshomaru had something better to do or Inuyasha was too exhausted or injured to continue. *Worse than kids*, Shippo groused.

The two adults continued with their own conversation. “I really think someone should stay here, but the villagers need help with the new wall if they are going to get it started correctly.”

“I agree, Sango, my dear; they need your expertise. I have not yet finished preparing the letters to the nearby shrines to notify them of the illness. If I hurry, I may be able to return to the well before nightfall, but if they should return sooner-”

“I’ll stay,” Shippo volunteered. “Since Sesshomaru has been here, the mothers will all want to keep their kids close anyhow, so I won’t have anyone to play with. I’ll wait for Kagome.”

“Thank you, Shippo,” Sango smiled. “I’m sure Kagome would rather see you first.”

“Certainly, you may be the best watch we could set,” Miroku mused. Shippo was suspicious of the gleam in the monk’s eyes. “And if Sesshomaru returns before Kagome, he is far less likely to murder Rin’s one-time playmate than one of us. Come, Sango.”

The two left with a transformed, small Kirara and only a wave over their shoulders and Shippo slumped against the well. *Hurry back Kagome!*

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“No way! I’ll take these clothes back with me!”

“Be reasonable, Inuyasha,” Kagome tried again. “If you take those clothes back, they’ll have to stay in the feudal era. There is no sense in Mama having to buy you more clothes here, and they shouldn’t stay in that time anyway. It is a waste!”

“I did everything you asked this time, I even wore those stupid Rubs-”

“Scrubs,” Kagome corrected.

“Whatever. I wore those weird things to steal the medicine you needed, but I ain’t jumpin’ back naked, and that’s final!” Inuyasha turned his back on her and Kagome stared at the cobwebbed ceiling of the well house and counted to ten. *Don’t sit him. Don’t sit him.*

“Inuyasha,” she began, then took a deep breath. “Inuyasha, I know that all this stuff about disease and bacteria is a lot for you to understand all at once, if you need me to-”

“You think I’m stupid?” He glared at her, the smallest gleam of hurt in his eyes. “I get it. ‘Cause Kaede was near the sick humans and then we were near her, the sickness might have got on our clothes. That’s why you made us leave our old stuff there and why you told me to pour that fuckin’ hot water over my head.”

Told him to- Kagome’s eyes widened in fear. She had made Inuyasha turn his back while she stripped and scrubbed with hot water before she jumped in the well. She’d told him to count to five hundred before he jumped in. As soon as she had arrived in the future, she had run through the darkness to the laundry line and wrapped up in the first thing she grabbed - which happened to be a sheet. She’d tossed one of her grandpa’s robes in the well house for Inuyasha, and when he came out, he *looked* wet. But in the darkness and with his hair black because of his human time...

“You did it, didn’t you, Inuyasha? Please, please! This is so important-”

“Feh, ‘course I did. Keh. If anybody took my fire rat while we were gone, wench-”

“Okay, okay.” Kagome waved him off, suddenly sagging in relief. She had taken the extra precaution before leaving the feudal era just in case whatever flu strain or illness the villagers had was still dangerous in the future. After she had completed her research that morning...she shuddered, unwilling to even think about what could have happened.

“I still don’t see why you can take your clothes back but I-”

“I always wear future clothes in the feudal era, Inuyasha. Everything I have left there will stay there from now on, including these,” she pulled at her old tank top and button up shirt. “That’s why I am wearing my oldest clothes. Mama paid a lot of money for what you have on so you would have something to wear while - argh!” She threw up her hands in the air, completely frustrated. “We don’t have time to stand here arguing about this, Inuyasha! If you don’t care if Miroku and Sango see you in your future clothes, I will explain to Mama. Just get going!”

She pointed at the well, knowing she was yelling loud enough that anyone at the shrine could hear her but unable to stop herself. Inuyasha narrowed his eyes, and Kagome prepared to have to 'sit' him to get past him and jump down the well. His lids lowered, and he looked down at his own clothes. Dark jeans, which he always complained were too tight but which Kagome and her mother agreed were perfect for him, were topped by a red t-shirt that outlined his muscles more than was intended after an accident with the dryer. A blush rose on his cheeks.

"Fine!" He barked out. "Turn around and count."

If she hadn't been so preoccupied with what she knew about the feudal illness and the supplies she had packed in her new bag, she would have smiled at his capitulation. Instead, she turned to face the closed well house door and began a quiet count. "One. Two. Three. Four-" At twenty-five a blue light flashed behind her. Kagome got to almost two hundred before she lost the battle with her anxiety.

"It isn't like I haven't seen him naked before. He'll get over it," she mumbled to herself. She dropped down the well, eager for the surge of power that would carry her to the people who needed her help more desperately than they could ever know.

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Sesshomaru stared at the little kit, his face impassive. Despite his warning and Jaken's near constant threats, the kitsune appeared to be edging closer to the God Tree. Rin lay between the roots on a thick blanket, quiet and still except for the occasional racking cough, wrapped in furs and his own mokomoko. When he had realized that the miko was not in the village, and accepted that he had no way to retrieve her but must *wait* - and that galled him nearly as much as it angered him - he had returned to the castle to risk moving Rin closer to the miko.

He'd flown back to Edo on his cloud as fast as he deemed safe, carrying his ward while Jaken followed on Ah-Un. Rin needed treatment immediately. *If the miko does not return by nightfall, I will...* Sesshomaru forcibly relaxed his claws and turned his mind from thoughts of ripping the well apart to fetch the strangely powerful priestess who followed his imbecilic half-brother. She would return, and Rin was close enough that the miko could begin treatment immediately.

However...he sent out a low pulse of youki in warning. The fox demon ceased his cautious movements forward. The disease could be spread by proximity - that much was obvious. It would not do to have the kit contract the illness and carry it to Edo and other human villages.

It was not Sesshomaru's responsibility to look after the welfare of Edo. Technically, Inuyasha's forest and the nearby village were in the East, but they bordered his lands, and as Inuyasha was part of his - Sesshomaru let out a long breath and reordered his thoughts. Rin would also be less happy if her playmate were ill once she was well again. Humans seemed to be healthier when they were happy. That was reason enough to keep the kit away.

He noted the darkening sky and turned his eyes to the old well. Behind him, Rin's breath was difficult. His sensitive ears could not help but pick out the slow beats of her heart as she slept. The thick, watery

sound of air in her lungs. His nose had to search for her light, grassy scent - only recently tinged with a deeper floral note - under the thick, sanguine smell of her illness. A bitter, metallic taste was in the air around her. The knowledge that neither the Meidō nor Tenseiga would be able to return her to this plane if she died again was a constant, irritating pressure against his mind. He refused to dwell on such thoughts and instead began devising ways to distract the hanyou while the miko healed Rin. He had come to the decision that he would vent his considerable frustration on his half-brother's skull, when his senses demanded his attention.

Power. Pure, unadulterated power with no taint of good or evil exploded into being in the clearing around the well. A blue light flashed briefly, and then all traces of magic disappeared. Sesshomaru, had he been a lesser youkai, would have been stunned speechless. As he was a daiyoukai without compare, he considered the circumstances in stoic silence. He had not detected any deceit from the humans or the kit when they told him of the portal, but the amount of power the well displayed was far beyond what he had expected.

He would reflect on the nature of this artifact used by the miko another time, when he was not distracted by the scent of angry inuhanyou. *Angry...embarrassed inuhanyou?* In a blur of movement that was incomprehensible to any eyes other than his, Inuyasha leapt from the well and crouched behind it, next to a yellow bag. The half-demon was quite naked.

"Jeez! What happened to your clothes, Inuyasha?" The kit's tail twitched in discomfort and anxiety. "Kagome sit you straight out of them, or what?"

"Shut up," Inuyasha growled. "Just...don't say anything to the monk about this - or you'll regret it!"

Sesshomaru was in the unusual position of containing a smirk. He was grateful the wind kept his scent from the well. The hanyou would not be any trouble in that condition while the miko... A quiet, short growl escaped his calm facade. *Where is she?*

"Inuyasha," he said coldly, stepping out from under the shadows of the Goshinboku and immediately garnering the hanyou's attention. "This One requires the miko."

Inuyasha's ears flattened and he dropped his hands from the buckles of the bag to grab Tessaiga. He did not, thankfully, stand. "You!" He spat, eyes wide.

If Sesshomaru had been less concerned with Rin's welfare and more *not* himself, he would have rolled his eyes. Instead, he strode forward within a few lengths of the well. "Fetch your miko," he ordered.

"What the fuck do you want with Kagome?" Inuyasha stood, to Sesshomaru's displeasure, and leveled his sword towards the older brother. "She ain't here, and if you don't tell me what you want, she ain't comin' either. Just back the fuck-"

Another wave of power flashed across the clearing, ruffling Sesshomaru's youki and disappearing as quickly as the blue light that heralded use of the portal. He did not require note of the widening of Inuyasha's eyes or the indecision flashing across his features to know the miko had arrived. Her

distinct scent, familiar to him from their alliance against Naraku, burst into his nose from the nothing that was the dry, musty well and day-old scents of both the human woman and the hanyou.

“Shit.” Although Sesshomaru appreciated the hanyou’s predicament, his language left something to be desired and the situation would only devolve further if he allowed his younger sibling to steer matters.

“Inuyasha!” Her voice called from the bottom of the well. “Just throw on your pants and get me out of here. I need to get-” Sesshomaru did not wait for her to finish, but leapt into the well, secured the female against his side, and ascended again faster than she could let out a startled gasp.

“You will tend to Rin.” He did not look at her, but stepped away to lead her to the God Tree. He was aware that her human eyesight was lacking, so he would show her the way so that she might begin as quickly as possible. “Jaken,” he continued, “fetch firewood and-”

“Excuse me?” There was something in her tone that Sesshomaru had rarely heard. *Was it defiance? Surely not.* Jaken scrambled away, recognizing the minute details that signaled his Lord’s ire. Sesshomaru’s nostrils flared and he turned slowly. Rin was ill. The miko’s assistance was required. *She would* - “I am not-”

“You will obey, woman, or-”

“She said fuck off, you bastard!” Inuyasha yelled. He leapt in front of the miko, and Sesshomaru felt his iron control slipping. Rin was ill. The miko’s assistance was required. He flexed his hands and dokkasou dripped from his claws. His human child would not suffer even a moment longer than necessary. *If I must end the life of Inu-*

“-YASHA!” The girl shrieked. The shrill volume pierced his ears and flattened the hanyou’s furry appendages against his head. “You’re *naked!*” she continued in a strangled whisper. “I can handle Sesshomaru - certainly better than you right now - what are you going to do, embarrass him to death?” The hanyou tried to respond but she cut him off. “Get out of my way and get dressed or I’ll you-know-what, and think about how *that* is going to feel without your pants on!”

The hanyou looked venomous, but he jumped away and back to the yellow bag, and, presumably, his clothes. The miko took a deep breath. “Sesshomaru-sama,” she bowed, and for once Sesshomaru was displeased with the respectful formality. Rin did not have time for that. “If you would please expl-”

He grabbed her wrist and yanked her against him again, speeding to the tree and dropping her at Rin’s side in less time that it would take a human to blink. “Rin is ill. This Sesshomaru requires your assistance.”

Looking down at his ward, even in the growing darkness he could see that her condition had grown worse. The flattened welts that had covered the inside of her mouth and spread to her face and neck and were beginning to appear on her chest where it was exposed by the vee of her kimono. The newest lesions were pale pink. Those more than a few hours old were already turning dark red. Raised white dots marked the center of each oval shape. The miko remained silent, and Sesshomaru growled in

warning. “Begin healing now, woman, or risk This Sesshomaru’s displeasure.”

“Sesshomaru,” she sounded more exasperated than afraid, “I can’t - oh...wait.” The miko slipped a bag from her shoulders, not unlike the yellow one left by the well, and dug for a few precious moments. Finally she withdrew a lantern, which lit in an instant and flooded the area with a light so intensely white Sesshomaru almost had to shield his eyes. The miko blinked and leaned over Rin, carefully pulling the mokomoko away so that it did not shadow her face. “Oh, no,” she whispered. Her hands ghosted over the still features of the little girl, assessing, but not touching, and then she turned to him. “I am so sorry, Sesshomaru-sama, I-”

He wasn’t even aware he had moved. The miko was pressed against the tree, his claws around her arm and throat, poison seeping onto her skin. Her eyes were wide and her skin pale, but the daiyoukai cared only for her words.

“You will heal her,” he snarled. He refused to believe that the miko would, could, do anything else. She cared for other humans, hanyou, even youkai. She helped everyone, including those who should be her enemies. The foolishly soft heart and immense power of this untrained miko was all that stood between Rin and death. She *would* heal Rin. He knew his youki was bucking wildly and he fought for control. He heard the kit whimper. Inuyasha snarled and unsheathed Tessaiga and Sesshomaru lashed out with nothing but his own demonic energy, bending the hanyou to his will and throwing him across the clearing. The emotion that still froze his spine was a powerful thing, making his control appear inconsequential in the face of Rin’s worsening condition. “You *will* heal her.”

He might have injured her irreparably if not for the softening of her eyes and the glitter of tears that threatened to fall. Her scent penetrated the haze of anger and despicable helplessness that threatened to overwhelm him. *Fresh cut cherry wood and new magnolia blossoms. Salty tears. Anxiety like dry mace.* Her fear, the smell of ripe sour melon he knew from previous battles, was absent. She did not fear him, despite his claws, his poison, his power, his feral anger.

“Of course,” her words were garbled from lack of air, but he understood and released most of the pressure on her neck. “I am only sorry for the pain she has felt, and what you have endured on her behalf. I will get to work as soon as-” Her eyes flicked down and he released her at once. His anger and a twisting fear he refused to acknowledge were still present, but her calm agreement had deflected his animosity from her. He forced his cold mask back into place, noting the way his acid slid down her skin, smoking without leaving injury, and stepped aside to allow her access to Rin.

“I will do my best, Sesshomaru-sama. But you should know that there are many humans, in other villages, who have been taken by this same illness.” She was quiet for a few moments while she pulled items from her bag. She did not look at him again, but she spoke softly and with a seriousness that he had not often heard or expected from the indecently dressed companion of his foolish brother. “I know this sickness, Sesshomaru. Where I come from it has plagued entire nations many times. I will save Rin, or die trying, but you should know...this pox has killed hundreds of thousands of humans. If it hasn’t already begun, it will sweep across your lands as it is doing here in the East.”

“You will discuss it with This Sesshomaru once Rin is well.” He stepped back. Once. Twice. Until

another tree was at his back and he could sink to the ground in an elegant act of nonchalance that concealed the racing pulse of his blood - still hot from the moment where he believed that Rin would die because the woman could or would not act. That was not a thought he desired to pursue. Rin would be well. The miko would make it so.

He watched her further loosen his mokomoko and use unfamiliar devices from her bag to look in the girl's mouth and listen to her lungs. He ignored the hanyou, who ordered the kit back to the village with instructions to let the others know of Kagome's return, and to keep them away from the clearing. Inuyasha settled against a tree on the other side of the Goshinboku, fully dressed and with his sword against his shoulder, and took up a tense watch over the miko. *At least he has the sense not to interfere with this.*

Gradually, Sesshomaru became uncomfortably aware that he would owe the one called Kagome a debt. In addition, if she truly knew so much about this disease, he would require further assistance from her. Assistance which most priestesses would be unwilling to give, as it would save the lives of demons. He firmly locked away such thoughts and the unfamiliar feelings that tried to stir as he watched a human woman care for his child.

"You misspeak," he said instead. She raised a brow, but did not interrupt or turn to him. "This plague is already in the West. It has brought low many human villages in This Sesshomaru's territory." He paused, weighing the value of sharing tactical information before it was absolutely necessary against the pang of, of...whatever it was that the miko's actions called out of him. "This 'pox'," he tried out the unfamiliar word and found it unsatisfactory, "infects demons as well.

Chapter 2: Extinction Event

Sesshomaru watched the miko closely, noting each time she touched Rin to assess her condition or administer some medicine, for several hours. Jaken came and went in that time, building a small fire and leading Ah-Un away to forage for food. She had spoken only once, to order Inuyasha to take some of her strange devices to the village. There was a heated argument, only the low volume of their voices kept him from interrupting them. Finally, she had pressed a bound tome into the hanyou's hand and threatened to subjugate him if he did not take the things to the monk and assist him. Sesshomaru understood that his half-brother was reluctant to leave the miko alone with him. *Foolish*. As if the hanyou's presence would be more than a minor inconvenience if he decided to harm the woman.

Once Inuyasha was out of her hearing range, but still well within the capacity of the daiyoukai's senses, she spoke to him. "I have given her something to ease her pain and make her breathing less difficult, however..." She held Rin's hand gently, careful not to disturb the blood and pus filled lesions that heavily coated his ward's palms. Sesshomaru wondered why the human did not have any concern for catching the disease herself. She seemed aware of the life-threatening nature of the illness, but he did not scent any fear or anxiety for her own well-being. Her actions were almost...maternal. How odd that one would have such deep feelings for a child that was only briefly familiar to her. Such sentimentality was far beyond that of any other human he had encountered; the species seemed far more self-absorbed and cowardly than what this woman frequently displayed.

She interrupted his thoughts, "I have a medicine that can keep a few from getting sick, and it can make those already sick less severe. But-"

"You will treat Rin." Something tightened in his chest. The miko would not refuse, he would not allow it. Rin would live.

"I already said I would, Sesshomaru." In her exasperation, she forgot his honorific, and he let it go, too focused on her promise of help. "The medicine has to be administered in the first three days of symptoms to be effective, and it looks like-"

"She has been ill for seven nights." He refused to believe that there was no other recourse. If the miko had something which would help Rin, she would use it. If the medicine needed to be made stronger, they would find a way. If it was within his power, it would be done. If it was not, he would obtain the power.

"I thought so." She muttered to herself, frowning and arguing with no one. Her voice was so low even he could catch no more than a few incoherent sounds. After a time, she seemed to come to a decision. She squared her shoulders and faced him. "With your permission, I would like to try to heal Rin with my reiki." Before he could answer she rudely waved him off, "Of course, you must understand that I have not tried this before with something so...I have only ever healed cuts and bruises - only things for practice. I am not certain it will work."

"Proceed." He did not have to smell her to know her surprise and determination. The miko was, as always, ridiculously expressive. Much like Rin.

“You should step back, Sesshomaru-sama. I am still poorly trained. I burned Inuyasha only a few weeks ago when I lost control.”

“This one is no mere hanyou.” He remained in his position less than ten feet from Rin’s nest. “Proceed.” The miko looked like she wanted to argue, but wisely snapped her mouth shut and turned back to her patient. Her hands settled on either side of Rin’s head and she closed her eyes. Within a few moments, he detected the faint aura of her holy power. Her hands began to glow softly, the pink light washing over his ward’s features and painting her with warmth. The power continued to grow steadily, until both the miko and Rin were limned in rosy hues.

His youki tingled from the proximity of her strength, familiar and yet unfamiliar. This was not the destructive, purifying force she infused in her arrows. It was a power of growth and new life, of healing and renewal. Reiki and youki were opposites, and he was intrigued to find that his own nature, although roused by her display, was not disturbed by it. Rather, he felt as though he was standing near a warm fire - aware of the potential for danger but appreciative of the light and heat.

Rin seemed to value the flow of energy as well. The stiffness in her limbs relaxed, her breathing eased. Sesshomaru listened closely to her heart and lungs. Her pulse grew stronger and steadier, the wet sound of her breath decreased to something much closer to normal. Minutes passed, then hours, and still the miko knelt quietly by the girl. The sky was beginning to lighten, just a relaxation of the absolute darkness that signaled eventual dawn, when a shout rang out from the path to the village.

“Oi!”

The miko opened her eyes and made a surprised, squeaking sound. Simultaneously, her aura flared. An explosion of reiki licked along his skin and fluttered the leaves in the trees. Sesshomaru tensed for the uncomfortable hot sensation of purification, but it did not come. Instead, he was washed in a gentle, warm embrace. Like a summer wind on the ocean, the smell of fresh air and salt tickled his nose. Power lifted his hair, tugged at his clothes, and brushed across his skin. The sensation of soft petals on his face and the scent of magnolia disappeared as quickly as it came, followed by another shout.

“Fuck! Ow! Kagome!” The hanyou appeared, jogging toward them and slapping at faint tendrils of smoke that rose from his reddened skin. He snarled at the miko, and Sesshomaru had to fight the urge to growl back. The miko did not belong to Sesshomaru - but she was working at *his* behest, on *his* Rin. His half-brother would do well not to interfere. Although, perhaps the instruction was not necessary. The ozone and singed hair scent of purification was thick around the idiot. He must have learned something from the pain, as he stopped twenty feet away from the priestess.

“Oh, sorry Inuyasha! I was...I...” She blinked heavily and Sesshomaru noted that her power had winked out, as if it had never been. She was swaying slightly, and her eyes were unfocused. “I told you not to surprise me when I’m using reiki,” she finished weakly.

“How the fuck was I supposed to know you-”

“Language. Not...not in front of...of Rin, okay?”

Sesshomaru inhaled discreetly. Her scent was exhausted, and her heartbeat was slowing down. He stood and walked to her side, ignoring the protests of his half-brother and catching the miko as she fell unconscious. He lowered her to the ground beside Rin. Finding the child's fever had lessened significantly, he rearranged his mokomoko to cover both humans. He chose not to examine the motives behind ensuring *her* comfort.

“What the fuck did you do to her, you bastard?” The furious whisper would not be heard by the sleeping females, but it easily reached Sesshomaru's ears.

He stiffened. Only one as ignorant as the hanyou would call his honor into question by implying that he would harm one under his protection. The miko had agreed to help him. He would, regrettably, owe her much before she was finished. He would care for her as part of his pack until her task was complete. “Mind your tone, foolish one. She has exhausted herself. This Sesshomaru has done nothing to the miko.” He raised a brow and pointedly took in Inuyasha's disheveled and smoking appearance. “*She* appears to have done something to *you*, however.”

The comment drew an immediate frown and a sound of extreme displeasure. “Just how the hell did you manage not to get caught in that shit? Her reiki stings like a motherfucker if she isn't concentrating on not hurting me.”

“You assume This Sesshomaru ran from *that* one?” He allowed the barest smile to grace his lips. Rin was healing, and with the miko at his side he would be able to ensure that she was returned to health and stayed that way. His foremost concern alleviated, he was able to take some small pleasure in antagonizing the hanyou. It was really far too easy. “This Sesshomaru was also affected by her power. It was most...soothing.”

He leaned back against the God Tree, fully aware it was the hanyou's favorite perch and that he would be unable to use it while Sesshomaru was there, and listened to the quiet curses of Inuyasha. His eyes slid partway closed as the first streaks of dawn appeared in the sky.

The miko would be a valuable asset. Once Rin was well he would bring both humans back to the castle. He was confident that he would successfully convince the woman to heal the demons as well. One such as he had never had anything to fear from the strange priestess, but since he had been exposed to her power and felt not even the slightest pain of purification, he was even more confident that he could manipulate her as he saw fit. It might even be amusing if she attempted to truly purify him. Her ire would be humorous, and he would not mind repeating the sensation of her reiki either.

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“Ugh,” Kagome moaned softly. She felt as though she had run 10K and then let someone pour sand in her eyes. Her stomach was painfully empty, her muscles sore, and she wanted nothing so badly as to go back to sleep. Right after she found a secluded tree and took care of personal business. She attempted to sit up, but found her arms and legs helplessly bound in the softest, furriest warmth. Kagome's eyes shot open and she was met with the piercing golden gaze of Sesshomaru, framed by white fur. “What in the...”

“Sleep, Miko. You are not yet replete.

“Replete?” She blinked, confused. She could not understand why Sesshomaru staring at her, and what was she using as a blanket.

“It means-”

“I know what it means,” she interrupted, and then blushed. The unfortunate rudeness was forgotten as her memory came back to her. Swiftly, she pushed out of the fur - it seemed much larger up close than she remembered it looking draped around Sesshomaru - and turned to Rin. Her patient was breathing easier. Her color was better, and the welts on her face were lighter and fewer. Kagome folded back the covering. To her satisfaction, she noted that the girl’s hands were also less spotty, and her chest was completely clear. She let out a pleased *hum* and dug in her bag for her stethoscope. She listened to Rin’s heart and lungs and took her pulse. Her improvement was much more rapid than Kagome had hoped for.

She stood and stretched, determined to find a nice tree and a place to wash up before she had breakfast and examined Rin more closely. She didn’t manage more than a step away from the makeshift bed before she found a solid wall of daiyoukai in her way. Only his hands on her shoulders kept her from running directly into his spiked armor. *Who designed this thing right at eye-height? Well, I suppose it is intended to be danger-*

Sesshomaru interrupted her thoughts. “You will not leave, Miko.”

“Actually, I will leave, *Daiyoukai*,” she said with a raised brow and a smile. She was in a wonderful mood. Her reiki had worked - *really well* - and in a way she had never tried before. She had only singed Inuyasha a little, and Rin was getting better. She would not let stuffy Sesshomaru ruin it. Plus she really had to pee. “I have to take care of a few things, then I will be back to see to Rin.”

“There is nothing that cannot wait.” His haughty tone irritated her and made her forget herself.

“Relieving myself *cannot* wait, so get out of the way. Please.” She could feel the blush working up her cheeks, but she tilted her head back, far back, and met his gaze. His face was impassive, as always, but there was something about his eyes. The dark honey color was the same, but, at the corners, his skin was pinched, causing tiny worry wrinkles that marred the smooth skin of his face.

Kagome felt her traitorous heart melt a little. Sesshomaru was a frightening killer, and he was often really mean to her best friend, and if he didn’t let her go soon, she was going to irreparably embarrass herself. However, he cared for Rin, maybe even loved her. His concern for her health was so great he allowed it to cause imperfections in his perfect self. “I will be right back, Sesshomaru-sama. I promise,” she said softly.

His hands dropped from her arms and he turned abruptly. “Jaken, tend the fire.” She walked away listening to the subdued complaints of the toad followed by the sound of a boot connecting with soft flesh and silence. She washed her hands in the tiny stream that flowed through the woods and nearly fell in when Inuyasha dropped out of a tree behind her.

“Gawk!”

“Keep it down, wench. That asshole’s hearing is even better than mine.” He scowled and crouched next to her.

“If you don’t want to startle people, you shouldn’t sneak up on them.” He *hrumphed* and she straightened herself out. Her ponytail was probably crazy, and her shirt was terribly wrinkled, but her leggings and hiking shoes were clean enough. She longed for a bath, but her supplies were back at the well and she doubted Sesshomaru would appreciate it if she was gone that long. Not that there was enough water in the stream for a proper bath anyhow. She finger combed her hair and watched Inuyasha fidget. “Did Miroku get a hang of the needle?”

“Yeah. He gave the shot to Sango and Kaede.” An evil grin split his face, “I showed him how on himself.”

“I hope you didn’t dig the needle around, Inuyasha,” she said reproachfully. “Miroku might deserve a little pain every now and then, but needles can really hurt, and I only have a few replacements with me - so don’t break it.”

“Keh, he’s fine.” They lapsed into silence for a little while and Kagome was content to sit and admire the crisp morning while Inuyasha worked up to what he wanted to say. It took less time than she expected. “How’s the kid?”

“I think Rin is going to be fine. I need to examine her again, and, remember, I have never actually seen anyone with smallpox before, so I won’t feel really comfortable until she is completely healthy.” Her happiness with herself dimmed a bit as she considered the work still ahead of her, but she was optimistic. “When she gets scabs, I’ll save some to make an inoculation for the villagers. Although...” she frowned, “if Sesshomaru is right about demons getting sick, you and Shippo should get a shot too. I don’t know how it will react to youkai...”

“You can try it out on me first, and if it goes okay, give it to the brat.” Inuyasha stood and offered her a hand. “Be careful with that asshole, Kagome. He needs you right now for the kid, but if he decides you aren’t doing a good job-”

“I’ll be fine, Inuyasha.” She smiled warmly at him. It was nice to have someone worry over her, even if it wasn’t necessary. “Besides, I can always zap him if he gets too pushy.” She made an exploding motion with her hands and Inuyasha gave her a strange look.

“I don’t think he-” Branches rustled and cracked and Inuyasha stepped protectively in front of her. He sniffed, and relaxed, “It’s only the toad.” Jaken appeared moments later, out of breath and covered in a thin sheen of mucus that Kagome assumed was his version of sweat. *Gross.*

“Come, filthy human,” he gurgled. Inuyasha stiffened and Kagome rolled her eyes. She understood why Sesshomaru always seemed to have a pebble handy to bean the self-important little retainer.

“Don’t you call Kagome-”

“Silence, half-breed!” It was Kagome’s turn to narrow her eyes. *That pompous little-* “Rin is awake. Sesshomaru-sama orders-” She didn’t wait to hear whatever drivel he had to say, but took off back

towards the God Tree. There was a thump and a squawk of pain, and then Inuyasha was scooping her up and bounding through the trees. He stopped a short distance from the mound of blankets and fur and let her down under Sesshomaru's watchful gaze.

"Remember what I said, Kagome. I'll be right here."

She waved him off absently and he withdrew into the clearing. Rin was, indeed, awake and sitting up against a tree root. The white fur that Sesshomaru usually wore had been rearranged to provide both blanket and pillow. It created a cozy nest that would protect her from the rough bark of the Goshinboku and keep her warm. Pleasant, nice feelings towards the stoic daiyoukai returned at the thought of him providing such comfort for his ward.

"How are you feeling, Rin?" She asked softly. The girl's eyes turned to her. The brown color was still a bit glassy, but her skin was no longer the deathly pale it had been the night before. The rash appeared to still be receding as well.

"Kagome-san! Rin is very happy to see you! Sesshomaru-sama said-" There was a low, disembodied rumble and the raspy chatter cut off abruptly. "Rin is feeling much better. Thank you, Kagome-san." Kagome shook her head at the strange image of the Killing Perfection reproving a child and sank down onto the fur. She lay one hand on Rin's forehead, and happy with the low fever, she reached into her bag to find her stethoscope.

"Does your throat hurt, Rin-chan?" The girl shook her head and watched with wide eyes as Kagome put the ends in her ears. She loosened the fur and blew on the metal diaphragm to warm it before sliding it inside Rin's kimono over her chest. "Take a deep breath, Rin." She had the girl repeat the exercise, and then listened to her heart.

Rin was avidly curious, and Kagome could practically feel the daiyoukai's eyes on her back. She smiled. Inuyasha and the others were used to her medical instruments; she had forgotten how strange they would seem to someone else. "Would you like to hear your heart?" The girl nodded and she adjusted the stethoscope into her ears.

The girl's eyes widened. "It is so loud, Sesshomaru-sama! Almost as loud as your heart!" That telling sentence was enough to keep Kagome's mind reeling with contrasting images of Sesshomaru shredding his enemies into unrecognizable gore, and the same youkai cuddling a small child against his chest. She continued her exam, finally sitting back and noticing that Jaken had started fish over the fire while she was working. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that supper was long past, and she guessed that it had been even longer since Rin had eaten.

"Inuyasha, would you see if Kaede has some plain broth for Rin-chan, please?" He scowled, but she knew he would help. He disappeared over the hill and she urged Rin to drink water while she scarfed down a fish as quickly as possible without looking like a half-starved animal.

Once Inuyasha returned and Rin was settled under Jaken's watchful eye with a bowl of soup, she motioned Sesshomaru over to Inuyasha and settled onto the ground. After a brief pause, he did the same, albeit more gracefully than she had.

"I think I should use my reiki again when she's done eating, just to be safe. Would that be permissible, Sesshomaru-sama?"

"Hn."

"Good. Why don't you tell us about the demons who are sick?" She probably should have made it a sound more like a question and less like a command, but Sesshomaru's reticence was frustrating.

"This One sees no reason for the hanyou to hear of such things."

"Hey! Wait a sec, you-"

"Inuyasha," she warned. Her friend shut his mouth, but he sulked as he handed over the medical pouch and book she had sent to the village the night before. "Anything you want to tell me, you may as well tell Inuyasha. I will certainly tell him anyhow." She smiled sweetly and punched the hanyou's arm to get rid of the satisfied grin that had no doubt erupted on his face.

She did not look at him, but kept her gaze on the daiyoukai while Inuyasha grunted in exaggerated pain. She readied her syringe while she waited. Inuyasha calmly removed his haori, although she knew he must be dying to rub his superior knowledge of her medicine into Sesshomaru's face - *he really has matured* - and rolled up his sleeve.

Again, the daiyoukai's curiosity was almost tangible, pushing against her senses and demanding answers. "In exchange, I could tell you about this." She held up the vial of vaccine.

"This Sesshomaru shall-" he paused, and his nostrils flared. He breathed deeply again, almost, but not quite, sniffing. "It has no scent." It was spoken as a statement, but Kagome heard the question and smiled.

"You were saying about the demons?" She listened to his deep, even voice attentively while she prepared Inuyasha and gave him the injection. She sterilized the bifurcated needle while he named the human villages that had reported the illness. She put away her supplies while he described how the first demons in his household fell to the sickness. She held still, heart in her throat, when he flatly stated that one had died.

"The demons do not progress as quickly as Rin. However, This Sesshomaru estimates that within the week another ten will succumb. All are lesser youkai in villages or in this one's service." Kagome had to force herself out of her shocked silence. Inuyasha never got sick - ever. He was a hanyou; she couldn't imagine how virulent a disease would have to be to infect full-demon. Sesshomaru spoke again, as though the words were forced from him. "Such a thing is not known in the history of youkai."

She could believe it. A curl of dread unfurled in her belly. She glanced at Inuyasha and the serious look on his face fueled that terror. "Do you think..." She couldn't finish the thought.

"Maybe, it - hell, fuck if I know, Kagome." Inuyasha pulled his haori on with jerky movements. "Just cause I never smelled 'em, doesn't mean they aren't there. I told you-"

"Never, Inuyasha. In nineteen years, I have never sensed one. If this disease-"

“You will explain your fear to This Sesshomaru.” She froze. For a moment she had forgotten he was even there. Sharp thorns of worry pricked her and she debated silently. If she told him, there was no going back. If he believed her, there would be one more person who could upset the flow of time. If he didn’t... Sesshomaru wasn’t in a patient mood. “Miko,” he growled threateningly. It was the third time in less than twenty-four hours that he had lost his cool with her. She decided that was a sign that he needed to know.

“The well doesn’t take me to a place. It takes me to a *time*.”

“Kagome?” Inuyasha questioned, but she continued, not breaking eye contact with Sesshomaru.

“I am from five hundred years in the future. In my time, there are no demons.”

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Sesshomaru could smell her fear. *Finally*. She had suffered his claws, still bore bruises from where he had gripped her and held her against the tree, and lived through his poison without even a *wiff* of unease. Here in the autumn sunlight, hearing of the death of a youkai she did not know, she smelled of fear. Dry mace and sour melon flesh almost overpowered the mildly sweet cherry wood and magnolia of *her*.

“You will explain your fear to This Sesshomaru,” he demanded. She did not respond, but instead the fear grew stronger. The urge to eliminate the combination of pungent and bitter was almost undeniable. “Miko,” he growled.

“The well doesn’t take me to a place. It takes me to a *time*.”

Sesshomaru fell completely still and considered her words. The power of the well was immense. That supported her claim. So did her strange clothes and manner of speech. She was unusually well educated, but seemed to lack basic knowledge that he would expect any human woman to know. And she was not lying. Her fear was still present, but there was no putrid scent of deception around her. The miko was from the future. *The future miko*.

He turned that over in his mind a few times. She was untrained, but still an incredibly powerful priestess. She had proven many times her ability to destroy youkai, but she apparently posed no such threat to him. For those reasons she had value as an ally. She had saved Rin and had the skills and instinct to protect and care for a human child in ways he could not. For that reason he would bring her to the castle; it would be worth much to him to convince her to stay. Knowledge of the future, of events that would come to pass were invaluable.

He determined then, between beats of her heart, that he would keep her. Such power, prophecy, and utility were clear advantages to the West. Her heart and soul were of advantage to Rin. *Advantage to This Sesshomaru*.

“Kagome,” Inuyasha interrupted, but her eyes stayed on the daiyoukai, as if trying to force him to listen and understand by sheer willpower.

"I am from five hundred years in the future. In my time, there are no demons." She paused for a long moment. "Sesss-

"You are mistaken." The hanyou and the miko stared at him and Sesshomaru held back a sigh. It pained him to explain the obvious. "This Sesshomaru is far superior to other youkai. It is not possible that This One would not survive such a measly number of years."

"Measly?" The human echoed faintly.

"It means-

"I know," she cut him off and he had the uncommon urge to growl at her disrespect. He seemed to have such inclinations often around the miko. *The future miko*. "I had thought that perhaps youkai went into hiding," Sesshomaru raised one brow, as if one such as him would hide, "or had learned to conceal their youki and markings to blend in better with humans."

"Demons have no need for such deception. Humans pose no threat to any but weak and foolish youkai...or hanyou."

"Fuck you, asshole!" Sesshomaru almost smirked. Inuyasha was too easy to rile. "You think you can overcome anything? There is a big difference between a village armed with pitchforks and a samurai army."

The daiyoukai remained passive. If Inuyasha thought to frighten him, it would not work. "This Sesshomaru has destroyed such armies before."

"Keh. You think that is the worst they can come up with? You-"

"How many humans are in the West, Sesshomaru-sama?" The miko cut in, silencing his half-brother's rant. He named a figure that was more estimate than fact. Humans died and gave birth too quickly to keep accurate numbers. "The village where I am from, the Edo of the future, has more than 40,000 people living in it. It is part of a larger city called Tokyo. Tokyo is home for more than 13 million human beings, Sesshomaru. That is more than all of the people in Japan today, in the feudal era - *your* time. You think that there will never be a day when strong youkai, when *you*, have to fear humans? In my time, we are not one army of samurai. There are 7 billion humans in the world, and we are still adding more." She spoke quietly, but every word was the truth.

He could not understand it. There was no possible way they could reproduce so quickly in a mere 500 years. *Where would they all live?* As though he had spoken aloud, Inuyasha answered him.

"They have built houses of metal and glass that rise higher than trees - higher than even you could jump, Sesshomaru." For once, the hanyou was serious and calm. Sesshomaru tested his scent. There was no trace of lies in him either, but something else - a sadness, and a hint of fear as well. "There are no open spaces for miles and miles. It stinks of the machines they use to build and run their cities. Everywhere there are humans, and they have forgotten us."

A fire burned in Inuyasha's eyes and his next words were a dagger to Sesshomaru's pride. "They do

not believe we exist. They -" the half-demon swallowed convulsively. "Kagome's brother showed me a story book about the Great Dog General." Golden eyes, so reminiscent of his father's, met Sesshomaru's and twisted the blade. If he had believed he had a heart, he would have thought his was broken. "They call it a fairy-tale. You think you cannot be defeated. Everything is defeated with time, *big brother*." Inuyasha made one last dig with his endearment, stood and stepped away.

Sesshomaru, even in his shock, did not draw attention to the smell of salt that trailed his half-brother. "I-" He began, then he shook himself to regain his formal manner and started again. "This cannot be." It was not possible. So many great youkai, and himself at the pinnacle, they could not have been conquered by humans. *And yet these two spoke the truth.*

"I don't think there was a war or outright killing of youkai, Sesshomaru." The miko spoke quietly, but it was her hand on his sleeve that drew his attention out of his own thoughts. It was strangely comforting. "It would be in the history books, however disguised. I think...I think now, that this disease might be the answer to what happened to demons between the feudal era and my time."

"You are changing the future." She drew back at his observation, and he was acutely aware of the loss of slight pressure from her hand.

"Always," she agreed, "but not in ways that have ever affected my time in a noticeable way, although that is a matter of debate given the physics of-" she shook her head, "never mind. I had wondered why the well allowed me to continue to travel, after the Shikon was completed. I think, maybe, I still have something to do here."

He stared into her blue eyes, so unusual for a human - *for a human from this time*, he corrected himself - and was surprised by her again. A miko. A human of divine power. A killer of youkai. Sent back in time to defeat Naraku and save the demon races. It was ridiculous. It was unbelievable. In a convoluted way, it was exactly what he had come to expect from the strange, clumsy girl who always seemed to be in exactly the wrong place, at exactly the right time. The girl who always needed saving, who had saved them all. It deserved further thought.

"Hn." She stared at him for a moment, then laughed. The clear, silvery sound should have pained his ears. Instead it lightened something in him. He wasn't sure he liked the feeling.

Chapter 3: What Will Be Mine

A cold wind blew off the sea and brought the scent of snow to the Northern Lands. Ryukostokken dug his claws into the stone wall and stared at the slope of the mountain below him. His territory stretched out to the south, disgracefully reduced from the time of his father and grandfather. Dragons had ruled from the north for millennium, instilling fear and obedience in all those who fell under the shadow of their wings. Lesser demons used to offer tribute and respect to the Ryuu; humans had worshiped them as gods and the lords of the North had bathed in the blood of their enemies. The soil was wet with their glorious and terrible victories.

Then there was the *dog*.

Gouges appeared in the stone and sharp flecks of granite broke away and fell to the empty training ground far below. *The Inu no Taisho*. Ryukostokken snarled and slammed his fist into the wall. A block weighing more than three men split into pieces. The coward had attacked his indomitable sire, Ryukotsusei, and sealed him, rather than giving him an honorable death. The disgrace of the dragons was completed when the dog's half-breed whelp managed to kill the magnificent Ryukotsusei - again using trickery. The sealing of his sire had forced Ryukostokken from Japan for many years, driven out by enemies of the North who became emboldened by his sire's defeat at the hands of the dog. If not for his journey to the mainland, he would not have suffered as he had. Endured his great indignity. And then, to return and be on the cusp of regaining greatness – and then to hear his father had been released from the seal and defeated by a *hanyou*. The bastard pup of the original enemy. The dragon snarled in fury and turned his back on the view of Japan.

If he could still have maintained his true form, he would have swooped down on the half-breed bastard and gnashed his bones with one bite. He would have already drank the red blood of the bastard son of the Great Dog General, then he would have sought out his heir: Sesshomaru. *Lord of the West. Killing Perfection. Saidai Mao*, the highest lord.

The titles of the young dog were undeserved!

The quiet scrape of a boot on stone drew Ryukostokken's attention and ire. He lashed out, striking his servant with vicious claws. The male fell to the ground in a crouch, four bloody slashes laying open his scarred cheek. "Forgive me, Ryukostokken-denkaue!" The young dragon prostrated himself, but his Lord remained unsatisfied.

"Five lashes," he snarled and the male cowered.

"Yes, my Lord."

The taste of the servant's fear in the air did little to soothe his irritation. The dragon lord could feel the heat of his fire churning under his grey skin. "Why have you disturbed This One?"

"Your spy has returned from the East, he awaits your pleasure, my Lord."

"And the West?" Ryukostokken simmered with pent up anger and anticipation.

"No message has come." The servant added, hastily, to forestall any additional punishment for bringing unwelcome news, "But word has reached other ears that Sesshomaru seeks healing knowledge in the

East and South. The infected furs were spread among several villages, as you ordered, my Lord.”

The Dragon Lord bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile. Many dragons had died so that he could bring his vengeance on the House of Inu no Taisho. The West would fall before the might of Ryukostokken; the pup would grovel at his feet and beg for his life in the end.

“Go,” he ordered. The servant scrambled away and Ryukostokken turned back to look over the wall. His jaws were poised to snap off the head of the dog, and then he would turn to all of Japan. He would bring humans and youkai to their knees, and they would know fear again. “Soon,” he murmured into the wind. “This Ryukostokken will be Saigo Mao no longer. No more will the North be last among the Demon Lords, but first! Not Saigo, but Saidai!”

He lifted his face to shout his claim to the heavens. They responded with the first cold flakes of winter. Snow settled on his dark hair and in the deep, pitted scars of his face and hands. His whisper sent a thrill of fire through his lungs, wreathing him in smoke, “No longer a mere prince. Not denka, but Emperor.”

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Shippo sat on the edge of the well and twitched his tail with barely suppressed excitement. It had been three days since Sesshomaru had brought Rin to Edo. Three long days since he had been allowed near Kagome. He had watched her taking care of the little girl, using her reiki to speed recovery. Every time they’d laughed or Kagome had cuddled Rin, he felt a little stab of jealousy. Rin was his friend; he couldn’t wait to play with her. At the same time, he was not used to having Kagome near, but being unable to snuggle in her arms, to smell the soft, sweet scent that always soothed him. He missed her. He missed Rin too, and he knew it wasn’t the girl’s fault that she was sick, but the minute he was allowed to do so, he was going to hug Kagome – just as hard and long as he could.

He rubbed at the pale bruise that hadn’t quite faded on his arm. Miroku had been gentle with the needle - Shippo wasn’t stupid enough to let Inuyasha stick him - but it had still formed an odd scab and sore spot that didn’t heal like injuries normally did for the little youkai. The night after, he had gotten sick - just like the hanyou. He was hot and sweaty, and his joints ached. When he’d woken up he felt fine, but Kagome had said he had to wait another full day before he would be safe around Rin.

A blur of white caught his eye, and Shippo froze at attention. Sesshomaru had returned to the little camp. He had left for the first time early that morning, right after breakfast, no doubt to hunt. Shippo’s nose and ears quivered. The daiyoukai kept his scent and youki tightly leashed unless he wanted his presence known. Inuyasha thought it was just another indication of what a sneaky bastard his brother was. Shippo knew better. His father had done the same thing. It’d made playing tricks on humans easier, but more importantly, it had kept his family safe. Unless he was fighting, the only place the older kitsune had let his scent and youki accumulate was in their den and on Shippo and his fox mother.

His close attention was successful. Shippo breathed deeply and caught Sesshomaru’s scent. It was strange. When he was fighting Inuyasha it was laced with amusement or irritation. When he’d fought for real against their enemies, there was excitement or anger in his scent. Even then, Sesshomaru had better control than even Shippo’s dad, a five-tail, had ever had over his scent. It was always faint and

disappeared quickly. It smelled different now. Calmer, possessive.

The daiyoukai circled the camp slowly, pausing to rest a hand on Rin's head. His clothing brushed against Kagome as he walked by. She didn't seem to notice, but Shippo stiffened. The wind was blowing in his face, and he clearly caught the subdued earthy musk and cloves of Sesshomaru. It marked the area, warning other predators away from his territory. It layered Rin, completely covering the fading metallic, putrid scent of her illness. What most distressed the kit was the way it settled on Kagome as well. He could still smell *her*, but his instincts also told him that she was Sesshomaru's. The kitsune wasn't sure what to think about that.

Sesshomaru was an Alpha. A predator above all other animals and youkai. Kagome could not be safer anywhere than she was under his protection. Before, Kagome had always been his. Inuyasha's too, but mostly his. If Sesshomaru claimed Kagome as pack, where did that leave Shippo? The kit frowned. Lost in thought, he almost missed the approach of the daiyoukai.

"Sesshomaru-sama!" His voice squeaked a little in surprise and he nearly fell backward into the well. A clawed hand caught him by his scruff and set him on the ground. Golden eyes in an impassive face looked him over.

"The miko will allow you near today." Shippo yipped in excitement and took off at a run. His progress was immediately halted by a hand on the scruff of his neck, again. "You will be gentle with Rin and the miko."

Shippo frowned. Of course he would be careful with Rin, she had been sick, but Kagome was his. No matter how many times Sesshomaru put his scent on her, she was his *first*. "You can't have her, Kagome is mine! Me and Inuyasha claimed her first!" He crossed his arms in anger. For a brief moment, he had forgotten that Sesshomaru had earned his name, the Killing Perfection. He was lifted until his face was level with the older demon's. His feet dangled far above the ground, and a cool, assessing gaze settled over him. Shippo gulped.

"You have more sense than the hanyou." Shippo blinked, prepared for denial at best and, at worst, outright death. "Those that travel with This Sesshomaru are marked for their protection." Shippo felt tears threatening to fall. So Kagome would go with the daiyoukai. She would leave again, and then he would be alone. He would have friends, but no family. Sesshomaru set him down, but left him with a few more words before releasing his hold. "A pup...or kit...does not claim. It is claimed."

Shippo dashed away from the Sesshomaru, but he couldn't stop thinking about what older youkai had said. Maybe he had it wrong. Maybe he and Inuyasha hadn't claimed Kagome. Maybe she had claimed them. *If I belong to Kagome, and Kagome belongs to Sesshomaru...* Shippo grinned, surprisingly comfortable with that new knowledge. As he ducked under Kagome's arm to receive a kiss and cuddles, another thought occurred to him that made him laugh out loud. If he was Sesshomaru's because of Kagome that meant Inuyasha was Sesshomaru's too.

He couldn't wait to tell the hanyou.

Rin was very happy. Sesshomaru-sama was with her. He had wrapped her in his mokomoko-san and let her keep it even after she started feeling better. She wasn't sick anymore. Kagome-san was with her, and she was the nicest person Rin knew. Rin loved Sesshomaru-sama. He was the bravest, most powerful, most beautiful thing in the world. He had saved her and he took care of her. He'd even brought her to Edo when she was sick - and Rin knew Sesshomaru-sama did not like going to human villages. He had asked Kagome-san to heal her, and her Lord never asked anyone for anything.

Rin let her chin rest on her knees and enjoyed the sensation of Kagome's brush in her hair. She loved Sesshomaru-sama, but Rin was almost sure that she was beginning to love Kagome-san too. The miko was always nice. She smelled good, and she shared her special soaps and pretty brush with Rin. She told stories and sang lullabies in a soft voice. She gave lots of hugs and cuddles. Rin had forgotten how nice it was to be hugged. She hugged Sesshomaru-sama sometimes, and he would pat her head, but he was a great, powerful daiyoukai. He did not give hugs. That was okay, she didn't mind - much, but still... Kagome's hands smoothed over Rin's hair and shoulders before she began pulling it up into a tail. If she had to pick between Sesshomaru-sama and his occasional pats, or Kagome-san and lots of hugs, she would choose Sesshomaru-sama, *of course*.

But maybe... Sesshomaru-sama reappeared in the camp and let his palm rest on Rin's head. Rin sighed in contentment. Her Lord circled the nest of fur and, like the day before, brushed against Kagome-san as he moved. Rin knew that he was putting his scent on the camp. Jaken-san had told her once it was why he walked the Western Lands rather than flying - to mark his territory with his scent and youki. Kagome-san was in their pack while Rin got better, so it made sense that she got his scent too.

A kernel of an idea began to take root in the little girl's mind. Maybe Sesshomaru-sama could *keep* thinking Kagome-san belonged with them. If her Lord wanted the miko, then Rin could be with Sesshomaru-sama *and* Kagome-san. And where Kagome-san went, so did Shippo-kun.

It was an excellent thought, but Rin wasn't sure how to make it happen. She needed advice. She was twelve, but she hadn't spent a lot of time with anyone other than Jaken-san, Ah-Un, and Sesshomaru-sama. The servants and soldiers at the castle were always respectful, but they did not speak to her very much. She was happy when Sesshomaru-sama had traveled with Kagome-san and her group, but she'd mostly spent time with Shippo-kun or Kagome-san. Sometimes Sango-san had taken baths with them or helped Rin with setting up camp and making food, and she was nice too, but not as nice as Kagome-san.

The miko had rearranged the freshly washed blankets and mokomoko-san. Rin giggled to herself at that memory. Sesshomaru-sama had been most irritated when Kagome-san insisted that the fur had to be scrubbed with hot water and soap. He was very protective of his fur, and there was more of it to keep clean than there had been when she'd first started traveling with him. True to the miko's promise to the daiyoukai, the fur was just as soft, if not softer, than it had been prior to washing. It smelled good too, still like Sesshomaru-sama, but also like the oil Kagome-san had worked into mokomoko-san. Her Lord had not said anything when the miko had rubbed the stuff into the pelt, but he had watched her hands very closely. Rin thought maybe he had liked that too.

Shippo-kun's arrival disturbed her thoughts. "Kagome!" he cried, throwing himself into the miko's arms and snuggling into her neck. Rin smiled. The kitsune had grown since she had last seen him. Although he was still smaller than her, he was too big to sit on Kagome-san's shoulder.

“Shippo, I missed you! How are you feeling? Does your arm hurt?”

Rin listened to them talk, like a real mother and son, and felt a rush of envy. She quickly shrugged it off, not liking the ugly feeling. Shippo-kun must have felt awful the past few days, seeing Kagome-san but not able to come close. Rin knew how bad she felt if she could not be with Sesshomaru-sama. *Shippo-kun is my friend and he-* Rin paused mid-thought, an idea wiggling loose. Shippo-kun spent a lot of time with Kagome-san and the rest of her group. He was really smart too, he knew all sorts of things about youkai and packs and scents. Her eyes went wide and she grinned at the kit. *Shippo-kun would give great advice!*

He smiled back hesitantly and glanced at Kagome-san.

“It’s okay, Shippo. You can play with Rin now, just don’t be running around and tiring her out.” The miko got up to follow Sesshomaru-sama on a walk toward the well, and Shippo-kun pulled his crayons and paper from his vest to share, chattering happily. Rin waited until she was sure that her Lord was too far away to hear her before she whispered conspiratorially, “Can you keep Rin’s secret?”

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“Since Rin is feeling better and Shippo is here to keep her company, I’d like to go take a bath, Sesshomaru.” The daiyoukai did not respond, and Kagome realized belatedly that although her tone had been respectful, she had forgotten his honorific. Again. *Well, he won’t even use my name, so there is no reason for me to give him title.*

They walked in silence for a few minutes and Kagome had to rearrange her yellow bag on her shoulders. It was unusually light, carrying only the clothes she had worn the last time she returned from the future and her bathing supplies. All of her medical equipment was in the new bag, and most of her clothes and belongings were back at Kaede’s hut. Thankfully, her one kimono had been in the bag, but it was starting to look pretty poor after two days’ use and being slept in. She wondered if it smelled to Sesshomaru. She had given Rin and herself sponge baths in the little stream, but she was sure the sensitive nose of an inu was still bothered.

“You require a guard.”

“Miroku hasn’t spied on me in ages,” she laughed, “Sango would never allow it. I’m sure I will be fine without Inuyasha on the lookout for perverts.”

“This One shall guard you.”

Kagome felt her mouth fall open in shock. If his tone hadn’t been so flat and serious, she would have been upset at his high-handed declaration. As it was, she was equally surprised he would be willing to stay in close proximity to her while she was naked and insulted that he might think she would leave Rin permanently. A moment of awkward, intimated desire passed out of existence as soon as she recognized it. It was ludicrous to so much as suggest, even to herself, that the Lord of the West, the Killing Perfection, would have any interest in seeing a human priestess naked. She almost laughed again at the idea. *He is depending on me to keep Rin healthy, and to look into the illness among the demons in his lands. It isn’t as though I haven’t given him ample reason to think that I can’t be left*

alone without being attacked, or kidnapped, or both. She sighed.

“Thank you, Sesshomaru-sama. I am sure you have more important matters on your mind. I can get Inuyasha to hang out within yelling distance.” She bowed slightly, and promptly tripped over nothing.

Sesshomaru caught her by the strap of her backpack and set her on her feet without breaking his stride. “This One shall guard you,” he repeated. Kagome sighed again and nodded in acquiescence.

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Sesshomaru stood calmly under the shade of a tree, blocking the path to the hot springs and spreading his youki into the surrounding area. Behind him, the miko bathed quietly. He did not understand her hesitation at first. She had washed her clothes and laid them out to dry and then stood uncomfortably on the edge of the pool. He had given her his back for privacy, but distance was irrelevant for a youkai of his abilities. His senses were so acute, he would be able to recognize every shift of clothing and splash of soap on water whether he was ten feet from her or one hundred. Even now, his ears, nose, and youki sent him images of the miko’s actions as if he were looking right at her.

She ducked her head under the water and popped back up almost immediately. Sheets of hot liquid slicked down her hair and ran across her exposed face, neck, and shoulders before returning to the pool. She smelled better already, just having gotten wet. The dirt, sweat, and hundreds of other little odors were dimmed and the wet air amplified her own scent: sweet cherry wood, magnolia buds and the faint, fresh, sharp turnip smell of her embarrassment. The water lapped against her skin as she moved to retrieve a dry cloth and the strange liquid soap she claimed everyone used in the future. His sensitive ears easily picked out the motions of her hands as she lathered her hair: the quiet waves against her arms and chest as she washed; the almost imperceptible sound of bubbles sliding down her neck, *gliding across the slope of her breast-*

Sesshomaru straightened, his already perfect posture becoming infused with iron. There was no reason for him to focus so intently on the miko. Although he could not avoid knowing what she was doing, even how she was feeling to a certain extent, he did not need to *react* to her. The very idea that he was even capable of such was, it took him a moment to find an apt description, *unsettling*.

He willed his blood to cool and turned his mind to a logical dissection of why he would be unwillingly attracted to her. Certainly, he was no lesser being who would deny evidence of such unconscious responses. He had found himself caring for her as he would a packmate, which was not inappropriate, but it *was* without thought on his part. That was not acceptable. He would be in control of himself. *He* would decide how he would treat the miko, not some base need or desire. He would determine the source of such inclinations, and cease the cause of such warmth. His mouth twisted with self-disgust over the hint of unwarranted emotion.

She was powerful. Although still woefully untrained, the sheer mass of her reiki could not be ignored. He was youkai, and inu, and as such he acknowledged that power would call to his instincts. That was acceptable. She was his ally; he would not contemplate alignment with anyone less than nearly equal to his own power. His true equal did not exist, but she was more than most - perhaps even more than any other he had considered affiliation with. His interest, both conscious and on an instinctual level,

was appropriate.

She was maternal. That too, called to his instincts - especially when she directed such actions towards his human child. He cared for Rin, and so should appreciate any who made Rin's health and safety a priority. The miko also made Rin happy. Less important than survival, the girl's state of mind was a significant aspect which Sesshomaru admitted to himself that he anticipated and made adjustments for. He determined that he approved of that trait. It added to the miko's utility and would make her more loyal to her packmates. He could appreciate the results of her own instincts - uncommonly strong for a human.

She was unusual. Her strange habits and knowledge of the future made her valuable and interesting. Sesshomaru understood every creature, tree, and rock in his domain. It was logical that he sought information about the miko as well. Knowing her presented a rare challenge.

She was not unattractive. Sesshomaru frowned, considering what he had seen of the miko and finding his own assessment lacking. Four years ago he could have said such of her. She was then a pretty human, but nothing he would have been justified in noticing. She had matured in the intervening years and, when he reviewed his impressions of her face and form honestly, he found that she had grown quite beautiful. Even among youkai, her appearance would be pleasantly viewed. Such thoughts rekindled the heat in his blood, and he frowned again. *My pack should garner respect and admiration for the West.* That was as it should be. His pulse was stronger, but only because she added to the perfection of his House. There was no personal feeling involved.

Satisfied with his organized assessment, Sesshomaru turned his attention back to the miko just in time to hear her sounds of anxiety. He cataloged the living things in the forest around them and a rapidly approaching youkai. It was familiar to him, and he prepared for the demon's arrival. Thankfully, he did not anticipate an immediate conflict. The miko did not share his knowledge and apparently had concerns significant enough that she dashed from the water. He turned to assure her that there was no immediate danger, and was unable to avoid the sight of her wet, naked flesh before she snatched up a towel and tucked herself behind him.

He should have moved away from her, but she pressed herself against his back and wrapped one hand tightly around a strap of his armor. "My clothes are still wet," she said in horror. Sesshomaru was acutely aware of her softness against the muscles of his back and legs. The embarrassment in her scent intensified, spiced with a whisper of anxiety, but it did nothing to detract from the heady mixture of cherry wood and magnolia that wrapped around him - borne straight to his nose on the steam rising from her skin.

His jaw tensed, the only outward sign of discomfiture he allowed himself. He came to the realization that he might have overlooked something in his assessment of the miko. He knew that he had ignored the truth in himself and the reason for the heat that rose in him when he thought of her body, but he said only, "You are dripping on This One."

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No, please no, am I really grabbing Sesshomaru like some sort of modesty shield? Her face burned

with embarrassment, but Kagome didn't move. The approach of an unfamiliar youkai had urged her out of the spring. She had been caught in the bath by enemies before, and she wasn't eager to repeat the experience. Sesshomaru made an excellent deterrent for both ravenous killers and ravenous perverts. According to more than one carnivore, she smelled tasty, and according to Miroku she looked tasty. In her ragged towel and without her bow and arrows, she wasn't prepared to defend against either.

"You are dripping on This One," he said stiffly.

Perhaps she might have found a better way to seek Sesshomaru's protection other than plastering herself to his back. The fall air felt downright cold after the hot spring, and goosebumps sprung up all over her skin. The daiyoukai, however, radiated heat. She held onto the knot of her towel with one hand and gripped the strap of his armor with the other. He might not appreciate her position, but he didn't push her away either. If he needed to kill anything, he could damn well do it with her behind him, because she wasn't in the mood to be ogled or chewed on.

"Send me the dry cleaning bill," she muttered. Her face felt hot, but she *knew* that she was the only one affected by their proximity. Sesshomaru was, certainly, irritated with her presumption with his person, but there was no way he was interested in her body. She could depend on him to remain stoic and apathetic about her state of dress. He would just have to deal with the intimacy he no doubt found distasteful. She would rather have to apologize to him and deal with her own unwelcome responses to his impressive physique than worry about *another* demon. *The devil you know...* She blew out a short breath, knowing the intruder would be upon them soon. "Sorry, Sesshomaru-sama. I will take care of it once I'm not so-"

"Hn." A swirl of youki energy abruptly stopped, and Kagome peeked out around Sesshomaru to see a male demon bowing before him. His dark blue hair was pulled into a tail and his skin was the color of mushrooms. His black eyes looked up, fangs poking slightly over his lip. "Kento," Sesshomaru said flatly. Kagome relaxed marginally. If Sesshomaru had bothered to learn his name, he couldn't be *all* bad.

"Saidai Mao," the demon responded, standing. *He must be one of Sesshomaru's men.* Kagome was sure he was aware of her presence, but he did not look away from the daiyoukai. "Two more at the castle have died. Four outside of the quarantine have fallen ill."

Sesshomaru took so long to respond that Kagome finally spoke up, although she kept everything but her face behind him. "How many days from the time they showed symptoms until death?" The demon did not respond, and Kagome let out a sound of frustration. "Well?" she growled.

The demon blinked - the miko could have sworn his pointed ears twitched - but he did not respond until Sesshomaru gave him a nod. "Sixteen days for one, seventeen for the other."

"That is slower than for humans..." She trailed off, wondering how many demons would need to be treated and trying to calculate how long it would take her to make more inoculate.

"Return and await This Sesshomaru." The demon turned to go, apparently needing no further explanation.

"Wait!" Kento froze and Sesshomaru stiffened.

"Miko," he said in warning.

Kagome rolled her eyes at him. “Did you come straight from the castle? Or did you go through any villages on the way here?” Kento looked to Sesshomaru for permission before acknowledging that he had avoided any contact and had not stopped on his journey.

“Do the same on your return,” Sesshomaru ordered. Kagome gave a small sigh of relief. Hopefully, the risk of infection was minimal.

Kento nodded and leapt across the water. He paused there, and looked over his shoulder, “Pardon, my Lord, how is Rin-yojosan?”

Kagome was surprised at the honorific, but even more so at Sesshomaru’s reply, “Rin-yojochan is well. She will return with This One and honored guest.” *Rin is his adopted daughter?* Kagome’s eyes widened as Kento disappeared with a bow and a swirl of leaves and youki. *I am an honored guest of Sesshomaru, highest among demon lords?*

Chapter 4: My Actions Are My Own

“Please, at least try to be reasonable, Inuyasha,” Kagome pinched the bridge of her nose and counted to ten. She expected her friend to object, with extremely foul language, to her plan to travel by air with Sesshomaru and have the others follow once the village was secure against the disease. Actually, it had been the daiyoukai’s plan, and it hadn’t been a plan he proposed so much as the only course of action. It was a good thing Kagome agreed that haste was a priority, and that her friends and Kaede could administer the inoculate in Edo. She doubted that Sesshomaru would have done anything differently if she had refused.

Unfortunately, Inuyasha hadn’t just objected, he outright demanded that she not travel with the daiyoukai. “You ain’t goin’ with that bastard, and that’s final.” He crossed his arms, as if the conversation was over.

She could feel an eye tick coming on. Inuyasha meant well. He honestly thought that Sesshomaru would not protect her as well as he could, because of the daiyoukai’s well-known hatred of humans. “Inuyasha-” she began, but was cut off.

“What’s he gonna do if he’s attacked in the air? Keh. Drop you, probably. And what if those snotty assholes at his castle don’t like having a human hangin’ around their ice prince? He gonna protect you from all of ‘em? Or you gonna fend for yourself against a bunch of fuckin’ demons?”

“Rin is human, and she seems to get along fine.”

“She’s a kid, Kagome!” Inuyasha exploded. “They see him bring home a human woman and they’ll think he’s gonna shame the West like father!” He obviously hadn’t intended to say that, but his temper got the better of him. The hanyou’s mouth snapped shut and he turned away, face burning. Kagome felt her heart twist for him. She imagined how awful it must be to be hated for something you can’t control. Even worse, to think that your own father was disgraced by your birth.

She wanted to comfort him, but, unbelievably, Sesshomaru beat her to it. “All in the West will respect the miko as an honored guest, and as the protector of the Shikon, or they will answer to This One.” His voice dropped a few degrees, “Do not presume that This Sesshomaru is no more capable of defending against attacks than yourself. The miko will come to no harm.” He turned away, clearly expecting Kagome to follow, and tossed a final, quiet observation over his shoulder. “Inu no Taisho was not shamed by fathering a hanyou. His disgrace was in keeping a concubine, in her father’s house, while he remained mated to another.”

Kagome’s eyes bounced between the two brothers in shock. Inuyasha was still, mouth open and red-faced. Sesshomaru continued to move toward his group with the same measured stride he used for patrolling his lands or stalking prey.

She wondered if the demon lord had finally gotten over his hatred of humans. Certainly, he still found them weak and, for the most part, offensive, but his words implied that he had distanced what he felt were the sins of Inuyasha’s mother from the entire human race. Kagome tried to imagine how it would have felt, to see your own mother cast aside while your father courted another. And apparently the Dog

General had never divorced - if that was something demons could do - Sesshomaru's mother, nor had he really legitimized his relationship with Izayoi. Kagome had a lot to consider.

Inuyasha must have been drowning in revelations as well. His brother had all but admitted that he didn't care that Inuyasha was hanyou, and at the same time called their father's honor into question. They both had a lot to consider. Perhaps, when Inuyasha arrived at the castle, the brothers could be convinced to speak further. *It could do them both good.* Kagome rolled her eyes at the thought and shook herself out of her stupor. She never minded her role as peacemaker, but getting Sesshomaru and Inuyasha to have a calm conversation about their parents was not a task anyone in their right mind would take on.

"As soon as the wall is done, follow us to the West," she hugged her friend impulsively, earning an absent pat on the back from Inuyasha and an irritated 'hn' from Sesshomaru. "I better not keep him waiting." She smiled, and waved to Sango, Miroku, Kirara and Kaede before jogging over to her new companions. Shippo and Jaken bookended Rin on Ah-Un. She frowned. She wasn't sure there was room for her, unless Shippo sat on her lap. She picked up her bag and moved towards the dragon.

"Miko," Sesshomaru commanded her attention. "Come here."

"You know, Sesshomaru-sama, a 'please' every once in a while can go a long- *oomph*." He tugged her against him with more force than was necessary. Her irritation at being manhandled won a narrow race with embarrassment from being so close to him. "*Excuse me, I-*"

"Hold on," he ordered without looking at her. Cool air circled around her leggings, making the thin cotton feel even thinner. She tried to look at her feet, but Sesshomaru's arm kept her secure against his side. She leaned her head back as far as she could, prepared to tell him off, and found that they had risen well above the trees in Inuyasha's forest. She gasped and latched on to Sesshomaru. She gripped his armor with one hand and circled the other around his back, clutching a handful of clothing under his hair. If she hadn't been plastered against him, she might have missed the vibration in his chest. She narrowed her eyes.

"Are you laughing at me, Sesshomaru-sama?"

"You are afraid of flying," he observed dryly.

"I've flown lots of times, Sesshomaru," she responded. She squeezed as much sugar into her voice as she could manage. "It isn't the height that bothers me, it's the service." He didn't respond to that, but only stiffened. She sighed, "Try giving me a little warning next time." She had seen Sesshomaru use his cloud before, and it looked substantial enough. She prodded around with the toe of her boot. Sesshomaru shifted, and she almost lost her grip, her foot sinking into what felt like thick mud. He growled, and the heat of his youki warmed her boot and licked along her calf, pushing her feet back into place on the 'ground'.

"Miko," he warned, "be still."

"Right," she laughed shakily. They were far above the land, moving at a pace that whipped her

ponytail around her shoulders and stung her cheeks with cold air. "I'll be more careful." She glanced over her shoulder to see the children, securely holding on to each other and Jaken. Both kids were wrapped in a blanket on Ah-Un's back. She shivered, although her front was warm enough where she pressed against the daiyoukai, her back and legs were freezing. Kagome was determined to just bear it, but she didn't have to. A length of white fur draped heavily onto her shoulders and curled around her waist. The end nearly reached her ankles, and it seemed unaffected by the wind. Within moments she was toasty warm.

"Thank you, Sesshomaru-sama," she whispered. After such an unexpected kindness, the respectful honorific he deserved came easily and without sarcasm.

"Hn."

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Sesshomaru was not one to lie to himself, or shy away from examining uncomfortable issues. He strove for perfection in all things, and had achieved it in most. Ignoring potential weakness or failure was counterproductive. There had been no need to carry the miko. Her weight was nothing to his dragon, even combined with the two children and Jaken. He barely repressed a frown. Others might see his action as bestowing favor on the human woman, or even believe it would tarnish his honor to bear her upon his cloud - acting as her transport. He let out a short breath, almost a snort, although he would never admit to such a sound. He *chose* to carry her, he could *choose* not to at any time. The opinions of others were irrelevant. His honor was his own, and if it pleased him to carry the miko, Rin, or the severed heads of his enemies, he would do so.

If those at his castle, or any in the Western Lands, believed he favored the miko, then that was right. It was the truth. Certainly, there was no other human he would allow so close to his person, excepting Rin.

Sesshomaru considered his reasons. The miko was apart from, above other humans. She was the Shikon Priestess. She stepped across time. She had a disregard for race that defied every convention he had known of humans or demons. She trusted. Everyone. Everything. Until proven wrong, and sometimes more than once, she trusted others in a way that only a naive child could do. But she was also immensely powerful and did not hesitate to protect her friends, or those she deemed innocent, even if it resulted in death at her hands. She had not flinched when the final blow was needed to destroy Naraku. Now that he understood where she had come from and what the completion of the Shikon had meant for her, and her place in his world, her bravery was more impressive.

He alone decided who was deserving of his favor, and he chose the priestess - the future miko. *Kagome*. The wind whipped through her hair and blew it against his cheek. It brought with it her scent - magnolia and cherry wood with a thread of citrus he knew to be excitement, and the faint, persistent scent of his half-brother. It irritated Sesshomaru - and that did make him frown. She *would* smell like

the hanyou. They were nearly always together, she often rode on his back. Still, he could not shake the prickling anger that the musky scent of Inuyasha, layered over the miko, brought out in him.

Why should his scent not irritate me, as the hanyou himself does? That logic was reasonable, but it did not soothe his tension. She shivered, and he became aware of the dropping temperature as they rose higher and the speed of the wind as it passed by. Cold did not affect him as it did others, even other demons, as his immense youki was constantly simmering under the surface. The children had a blanket, but the human woman – dressed improperly as usual – would not fare well.

She shivered again, and Sesshomaru twitched his mokomoko over her shoulders. The miko was small, the top of her head just below his shoulder, and the white fur was large enough to cover her entirely. It lay across her back, curled around her waist tightly and secured itself against her legs, completely blocking out the cold air.

“Thank you, Sesshomaru-sama,” she said quietly.

He nodded, acknowledging the appropriate respect in her tone that was absent more often than not. “Hn.” They continued in silence for a time. He was absently aware that she was bored, fidgeting slightly and then stilling once she realized what she was doing before repeating the process. He did not take time to examine the mild amusement her guilty motions inspired in him. Instead, he focused on his senses, guarding against attack from any quarter and monitoring Ah-Un and the dragon’s passengers. He kept his youki tightly controlled, as usual, to limit the chances of detection. He was pleased that her reiki was also hidden, although how she managed to contain such massive power with no apparent thought or will was a question he would pursue when the opportunity presented itself. He was just beginning to wonder how much longer she could contain her restlessness when she spoke.

“Sesshomaru-sama,” her voice was even, but markedly more formal and polite than he had come to expect from her. It did not bode well. “Would you reconsider my offer to inoculate you?”

“No.” He dismissed her medicine as he had done the first time and instead turned his mind to the advancements of her era. She claimed there were many billions of humans in her time. *Such healing knowledge would allow them to-*

“Sesshomaru,” she interrupted his thoughts. This time he could smell her irritation building. *Inuzansho pepper*. That pleased him. He almost smiled, but held it back. It would not do for her to think that it amused him when she questioned his decisions or actions. “This strain of smallpox is deadly to youkai as well as humans and if you-”

“This Sesshomaru will not succumb to *disease*, miko.” His chastisement did not seem to have any effect.

“But I-” He released a ribbon of energy that threaded through the high tail of her hair and wrapped around her neck and shoulders in warning.

“You would do well to remember that the Western Lord is no insignificant demon. This Sesshomaru is daiyoukai, and the poison in these veins is surpassed in power only by the blood alongside it.”

“*Hrumph*,” she frowned and rolled her eyes at him. “Such ego,” she muttered. “I guess if you were going to get sick, it would have probably happened already, since you have been so close to Rin.”

He knew that the disease would not dare affect him, but he would not disabuse her of her notions if it kept her from foolishly insisting on the medicine. His youki slackened, but he did not withdraw, allowing it to rest against her skin, exposed as it was by her strange unfastened coat and immodestly low-cut shirt. Her future clothes. She brushed one hand against the youki, pressing it against her flesh and sending a tendril of her own reiki to travel along the ribbon back to him. Had it been anyone else, the action would have been deliberate and he would have given them painful notice that such displays of power were disrespectful and ineffective. There was no doubt that the miko did it unconsciously. He was certain that not only would she never think to raise her reiki against him, but that she would be embarrassed if she realized that she had done so.

He examined the effects with interest. Once again, he received no hint of purification. A faint, fresh salty scent tantalized him. Gentle warmth, akin to a sunny day, trailed along his own threads of power and washed against his skin like ripples on a pond breaking against a stone. His power rose in response and an eager feeling began to grow. Her reiki matched him, calling his power out and growing in heat and intensity.

He slanted his gaze down at her. The miko’s eyes were wide and unfocused. Her breathing was slow and deep, her heartbeat heavy. Green light, his energy made visible in its growing magnitude, pulsed between them and her potent, intoxicating purity responded. The hand that clutched the back of his clothing relaxed, her small fingers kneading into his muscles. Her lips parted and her head fell back, exposing her neck. He lowered his head a fraction of an inch, ready to sample her scent and her power closer. Her pulse throbbed under the delicate skin. He was conscious of his fangs, sharp and deadly in his mouth.

Sesshomaru snapped back. His spine straightened and his will hardened like ice over them both, extinguishing the display of...*such display*. He quickly evaluated their surroundings, which had fallen to the background in his senses. Finding no threats, he corrected their course slightly and took in a deep breath. That was a mistake. Her sweet scent was thick around him, still tinged with excitement but also with a contented lethargy. No trace of her power remained. He glanced down at her to find her eyes nearly closed, her head dangerously close to leaning into his chest.

“Sorry, Sesshomaru,” she mumbled. “I must not have slept well last night.”

Her breath and heartbeat were steady and slow. He suppressed another frown. She was a sharp contrast to the pulse of his own blood and the air that rushed into his lungs. She appeared unaffected, while he was – *he was*. It merited more consideration, at a time when there was not such dire concerns ahead of them.

As he had told the insufferable hanyou, she was under his protection. He already showed her unique favor and high respect. She would be asleep in moments, if her scent was correct, and he knew it was. Her healing would be less effective if she arrived at the castle exhausted and uncomfortable. He applied gentle pressure to her neck and head, letting her fall against him. The dragon was at his back and none could see her. *My actions are my own*, he reminded himself. He lifted her under her knees and

pulled her close to him, careful of his armor. He would allow her this highly unusual intimacy to better serve his purpose in bringing her to the Western Lands. The uncomfortable knowledge that other motives might lie beneath the surface prickled at him, but he pushed them aside with the promise to himself that he would thoroughly examine his intentions as soon as it was convenient.

He breathed deeply, calmly, and her scent coated his nose. He allowed the relaxing sensation it inspired to work on him. He reasoned that there was no harm, but that he could benefit from a serene mind in the decisions to come. It did not escape his notice that the smell of Inuyasha had been completely washed from her scent, and along with it, his irritation. He better secured his mokomoko around her, and inhaled again cherry wood, magnolia blossoms, and a new thin, stubborn layer of dark, woodsy musk that he recognized with contentment.

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Shippo leaned closer to Rin and pressed his mouth near her ear so that the toad would not hear his whispers. "I can feel his youki," he glanced at Jaken, apparently oblivious to the subtle display of power going on in front of Ah-Un. "You really promise he won't hurt Kagome?"

"Sesshomaru-sama said she was under the protection of the West," she shook her head and her ponytail tickled his nose. "Besides, he doesn't keep things he doesn't want. He just kills them." Both children nodded in complete understanding and acceptance of that grim and undeniable fact. "What does it feel like? Is he upset with Kagome-san?" Rin frowned and looked at her friend with worried eyes. "Sesshomaru-sama likes quiet and Kagome-san can be..."

"Not quiet?" Shippo filled in for her. They both smiled. Shippo concentrated, screwing his eyes closed and trying to assess the lord without revealing his own small youki in the process. "I don't think he's mad," he said slowly. "He's sort of...tapping her nose? And Kagome is," he frowned, puzzled, "...she's rubbing his ears?" He shook his head and opened his eyes to meet Rin's puzzled gaze.

"You can see all that with your senses?" She glanced forward at her Lord's back. "She doesn't look like she's touching his ears."

"She's not really- look it's-" Shippo sighed, cheeks pink in embarrassment. "Youkai energy can be used to do a lot of things, without really doing them." He concentrated again and let a little bit of demonic power wrap around his friend. It stopped abruptly, and he sagged against her, exhausted from the effort of spying on the adults and trying to show Rin what he meant.

"It's like a pat on the back!" Her eyes were wide with excitement and wonder.

"Yeah, it can be. I'm not very good yet. My mom could use her youki to help me go to sleep at night, or make me feel better when I was sick. When I was naughty," he smiled a little at the memory of a particularly good trick he had played on another kitsune, "my dad could press his youki on me, like a feeling of, of -"

“Disappointment,” Rin whispered. She glanced from Shippo to Sesshomaru and the kit nodded. “Sesshomaru-sama did that once. It was awful. Like Rin made him sad and angry and Rin felt bad, bad, bad.”

“Yeah,” he yawned, barely able to keep his eyes open and not really interested in the adults now that he knew they were getting along. The blanket was warm, Rin’s kimono was soft under his cheek, and the gentle rocking motion of the dragon was nice. “He tried to put her in her place, he’s a daiyoukai after all, and she settled him down. Ka’ome does it to Inubaka all the time, but not with reiki,” another jaw popping yawn interrupted him, “usually. He did somethin’ else too, like Father used to do to Mother.” He rubbed his nose against her shoulder and let his eyes fall closed. “Imma goin’ to sleep now.”

“Okay, Shippo-kun,” Rin whispered. Shippo didn’t even get a chance to acknowledge her before darkness overwhelmed him.

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Sesshomaru debated for a moment whether to let the miko sleep. She had rested peacefully for the majority of the journey. Even as the sun began to descend and afternoon faded she only curled further into him. He decided that she would want to examine those who had fallen ill as soon as she arrived. She would also, no doubt, be foolishly excited to see the castle as they approached.

“Miko,” he said quietly. He would have nudged her with his youki, as he often did to wake Rin, but, reminded of their last encounter, he tightened his hands instead, squeezing her knee and ribs where he held her. She mumbled incoherently and pushed her face deeper into his clothing. “Miko,” he said again, and this time he jostled her and the mokomoko slid away from her face, allowing cold air to brush across her cheeks.

“Wha?” He glanced down, and was forced to look away again quickly. Her blue eyes were dark and heavy-lidded. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips swollen from sleep. Her soft scent sharpened as she woke up, blinking and trying to make sense of her surroundings. His mask was firmly in place; there was no chance that she or anyone else would see the emotions that he couldn’t name and didn’t have time to investigate. He relaxed the arm under her knees and she slowly slid into a standing position. He waited for her to wrap her fingers around his armor before he let go completely, focusing on his descent and the rapid approach of the castle.

The last, low layer of clouds parted and he did not deny the satisfaction her quiet “oh!” instilled in him. Her scent stirred with excitement and she nearly fell through his cloud again, trying to crane her head to see everything at once. “It’s magnificent,” she whispered.

Sesshomaru felt a surge of pride, entirely deserved, as he tracked the growing number of creatures in proximity, sensed her pleasure and interest, and reviewed his holdings with a critical eye. The outer moat, a river that had been diverted by his father’s father, surrounded the jokamachi, the castle village.

Strategically placed arched bridges connected the town to the rest of the Western Lands. Sesshomaru noted that several new huts had been constructed outside of the moat; he would need to consider expanding his defenses if the village continued to grow. The plateau that formed the town rose sharply to the outer wall and the second moat. The waters there flowed through stone canals and dispersed into aqueducts and narrow stone channels throughout the houses and shops to provide water for the villagers before joining the river.

The outer wall was in need of minor repairs and white washing. The disease had disrupted tasks throughout the Western Palace. Sesshomaru felt a ripple of irritation. So far, nothing had been neglected that resulted in more than an unpleasant view. If the defenses suffered... He would not allow that to happen.

He passed over the outer wall and the bailey containing workshops, storage buildings, training spaces and barracks. The inner wall rose to meet the mountain, and Kagome let out a quiet gasp as she saw the political and military heart of the Western Lands. The palace had been built into and of the very rock of the mountains. Tiers of the castle, the topmost layers painted white and resting on storied foundations of stone, dominated the multiple courtyards, gardens, and accessory buildings that made up the inner bailey.

Sesshomaru slowed his descent, to give the servants and guards time to prepare for his arrival, and to allow the miko ample opportunity to admire his home.

“Before even Himeji, and so much better,” she murmured in awe.

Sesshomaru puzzled over her words for a moment, but quickly pushed them aside as his feet touched the stone courtyard and he dismissed his cloud. Ah-Un landed behind him with a snort and servants stepped forward to help the children down. The miko turned to face the small crowd bowing before him, but she did not loosen her hold on the back of his clothing. He caught a brief whiff of anxiety from her, but it was swiftly controlled and replaced with a calm demeanor. That was good. Not all of the demons present could smell her emotions the way he could, but it would be simpler if none viewed her as prey. He did not wish to waste time putting any in their proper place, and killing one of his own, while an efficient means of establishing order, would add to the losses brought by the disease. The miko would not be pleased either.

“Kento,” he stated in a cool voice. He did not wait for the inuyoukai to respond or step forward, but continued knowing that the demon was present and awaiting instruction. “Send for Captain Hisao, he will wait in the study.” Kento gave the briefest motion of his fingers and a younger demon bowed and raced away towards the training grounds.

“Hello, Kento-san,” the miko smiled hesitantly. “It is nice to see you again when I’m, er, I mean-” she coughed, and embarrassment was strong in her scent.

“Kento,” Sesshomaru ended her fumbling words, and the secretary nodded to the miko with polite acceptance. Without waiting for a response or acknowledging any others, he began striding towards the infirmary. The miko quickly let go of his clothing, and trotted to keep up with him. She nearly tripped over her own feet, and Sesshomaru slowed his pace so that she could walk with more care. He

listened with one ear to his secretary's detailing of another death and reports of the progress of the disease in some of his villages, magnified by the loss of a caravan of physicians that had been attacked on the road. It was troubling; Sesshomaru had gone to a great deal of effort to ensure that the physicians would travel in secret. The spread had been halted, at least for a time, by his orders to barricade the roads and discourage travel. The miko asked a few quiet questions, which Kento answered with only slight hesitation. That was good. Those in the castle should recognize her place as his...*his*... Sesshomaru roughly pushed such thoughts away. She was his guest, and if all went well she would be the savior of many demons.

"Miko," he demanded her attention. She stopped and stared at him, eyes wide and her being taut with focus. "There are healers here who will answer your questions and assist you." He considered her for a moment before lowering his voice. "None here will harm you, if any-"

She waved him off, interrupting him again with her rude familiarity. "I can make my own friends, Sesshomaru." She raised one brow, "Better than you, I imagine. Now let's get to work." She clapped her hands together and turned to the closed door, waiting for him to open it for her like a common valet. Kento, no doubt reeling from the disrespectful tone and words of the human, was a beat slow to slide open the door for them.

It was worse than Kento had described. Sesshomaru had prepared himself for the numbers, but not for their suffering. Youkai lay on every futon in the infirmary. A few were seated against the walls and on the covered balcony that overlooked the village. He swiftly counted eighteen ill. Two healers moved among them, while another knelt close by, tending to a patient. He closed the dead demon's eyes and stood, bowing stiffly and walking with the slow gait of old age and exhaustion.

"My Lord, I fear that-" the healer stiffened, his eyes moving to the miko. He considered her with barely contained hostility. Sesshomaru was torn between an irritated sigh and a more efficient slash of his youki whip. Either would end such ill-advised behavior towards his guest. Instead, he did nothing, hardening his mask and staring at the demon who had worked in the castle infirmary since Sesshomaru was a pup. "Have you brought sustenance for the stricken, my Lord? I had not thought to try human meat, but perhaps-"

"Kento," the miko interrupted calmly as though no one had insinuated that she would be killed and eaten, "have fires built in the courtyard and burn anything these demons have come into contact with - bedding, clothing. Anything else that can be boiled, should. Utensils, pots, jewelry, anything. I need additional help as well, anyone who has survived the illness or shown immunity from it should be brought up here - not inside the building, of course - and-"

"You impertinent little human! How dare you order-"

"Gekien," Sesshomaru reprimanded. The old badger youkai turned red eyes on him and Sesshomaru had to bite back a growl. Allowances would be made, this once, given the healer's age and the extreme circumstances. "This Sesshomaru brings an honored guest to better direct your skills. She will command the infirmary." Gekien went pale, then his eyes flashed red. Sesshomaru contained a sigh. Perhaps he should not have so baldly put the miko in charge. He was not given a chance to consider how to soothe the healer, although it was doubtful he would have bothered to do so.

“Human whore!” Spittle flew from Gekien’s mouth and his hand raised to strike the miko. Sesshomaru was overtaken by a sudden surge of anger. “You shame this House, but you will not touch my patients!”

Faster than any eye watching could see, Sesshomaru stepped in front of the priestess and caught the clawed hand that descended toward her. His grip was iron, and he had to fight against a wellspring of absolute fury. *How dare he presume to touch what is mine?* Dokkasou dripped from his claws and burned away the flesh and meat down to the bones in Gekien’s wrist. The healer sank to the floor in agony. There was silence in the room, save Gekien’s wails, and Sesshomaru was aware of the gossip that would be given birth by his actions. He pushed down both his anger and the surge of youki that he had not realized he released. There were several exhalations of relief as the oppressing weight of his power lifted.

“You attack an honored guest of your Lord, Gekien.” Under normal circumstances, he would punish such an action immediately. Sesshomaru was uncomfortably aware that if he started, he would find it difficult to stop. There were others present who smelled of distrust and hatred, even under the scents of sickness and fear. He would not allow himself to slaughter those who merely *considered* action against the miko, simply because he was unable to control himself.

He stiffened, dropping his hold on Gekien, and stepped back. The miko bumped into him and he was forced again to endure her scent and the strange sensations it caused while battling with the realization that he had nearly lost control. It was unacceptable. For a moment, Sesshomaru wanted to turn and leave the miko to deal with things on her own. He did not wish to remain in her presence any longer than necessary. *Red wood. White blossoms.* Anxiety. Determination. “Remove him from This One’s sight, Kento. He will be dealt with later.” His eyes sought out the downcast face of the senior most healer remaining. “This One leaves the human in command.”

He turned and strode back outside, but was unable to avoid glancing at the miko as he passed. She was pale, but her blue eyes were hard with resolve. “Kento, the fires,” she commanded.

Even as he walked across the courtyard, he could hear her requesting a detailed report of the treatment and condition of each patient. The healers responded with hesitation at first, but growing confidence as they realized her competency. Sesshomaru ordered the first guard he passed to see to Gekien and continued on to his study. There was much to do, and no time to deal with unwanted thoughts. The list of things that needed to be contemplated in privacy during a more convenient time was rapidly growing. And he still smelled cherry wood and magnolia.

Chapter 5: I Have You

How dare he presume to touch what is mine? Sesshomaru closed his eyes and willed his headache away. The unbidden thought had circled around inside him throughout the night while he listened to reports and discussed strategy with his captain. He'd read through the papers that had piled up in his absence and endured the long list of queries that needed his attention. The business of the Western Lands had been interrupted by his trip to Edo, and he had worked well into the morning to bring things into order. His workload was more intense than usual, with the additional problems of containing and dealing with the illness, seeking out information on his enemies, and guarding against an increased threat of espionage. It had required his focus, but his attention was divided by the memory of the anger and instinctive response he had felt in the infirmary.

...touch what is mine. The miko was not his. And yet she was. *Cherry wood.* She did not belong to him, as the servants and soldiers of the castle did. As Rin did. But she was under his protection. She followed his orders. Sesshomaru allowed himself the smallest, briefest smile in the solitude of his study. As long as she agreed with his course of action she followed his orders. The West needed her to combat the disease, and she had agreed to come with him and work to save his people. She had traveled with him. She had saved Rin.

Sesshomaru relaxed a fraction at that thought. He had taken Rin as his ward, but she had become more than that. She was his *yojo*, his adopted daughter. She was his pack. Not just the larger, political use of the term that, for a daiyoukai, included so many personal servants, close advisors, strong allies, and military vassals. Rin was his family. He did not have many who could be included in that intimate group, usually reserved for children and spouses, and sometimes expanded to include siblings and parents.

Even if he brought his extended pack into one room, there would still be only four, including him. Another small smile flitted across Sesshomaru's face. Such an event might be humorous, in another time. Of course, putting his mother, Kimi, and Inuyasha into the same room would be disastrous for the room...and in all probability for his half-brother as well. He had admitted long ago, only to himself, that he did not outright kill Inuyasha because of the size of that pack. Inu were intended to have large families, and although Sesshomaru had never had any inclination to take a mate and sire pups of his own, he still acknowledged the instinctual need to provide for others - to have a pack.

It was why he had, eventually, come to think of Rin as a ward rather than an insufferably cheerful burr. And then as a daughter. It was why he had felt a moment of regret when Inuyasha had transformed Tessaiga and cut off his arm. Not for the loss of the arm, which was unfortunate, or of the Fang, which was galling and infuriating, but for the knowledge that he could have taken the sword if he had delivered a killing blow. He'd stayed his jaws, but it was a near thing. Constantly taunting the hanyou was amusing, and it vented some of the anger he still felt towards Inu no Tashio - but could not express to a dead man. By sparring with his half-brother and then fighting and traveling alongside him, Sesshomaru had begun to call him pack - at least to himself.

He wasn't planning on inviting the hanyou to sit on his council anytime soon, but he would regret Inuyasha's death if it were to occur. He was not even overly irritated by the knowledge that Inuyasha

would arrive at the castle shortly. He would be a nuisance until the miko put him in his place, and then he would be both irritating and amusing. Sesshomaru intended to put him to use on the training grounds. His half-brother's skills were still inferior to his own, but the pup had become a decent sparring partner and he would give a new challenge to many of the soldiers. Perhaps even to some of the officers.

The miko had been part of Inuyasha's unconventional pack for several years, but... *Magnolia*. Sesshomaru shook his head at the mild irritation that sparked by labeling her Inuyasha's. He did not have any possessive thoughts of the slayer woman or the monk who traveled with his sibling. The kit he would protect, but that was right as he was a child and his injury or death would pain Rin. No, he had claim to the miko because of what she meant to Rin. She had healed his daughter, given her life. That was significant, and worthy of a place in his political pack. Her many attributes, her strength, also made her an excellent addition to those who surrounded him and added to the status of the West.

He frowned, not bothering to conceal the emotion in the empty room. She was more than that, he knew. ...*what is mine*... He had overreacted to Gekien's words and actions, melting the respected healer's arm for an attempted strike - one that the miko could have dodged or purified if she chose, but he had not given her the opportunity to react. That instinct, that possessive, feral need to see her protected, respected, honored. Even to smell no other scent on her. *Sweet citrus. Spicy pepper*. He wanted to rip the turbulent emotions and confused thoughts from his body. He could not seem to find order in that chaos, to make straight, uncomplicated reasoning out of the winding, twisty contentment, heat, irritation, pride, amusement and almost...*delightful* surprises she created in him. And she-

He snapped his teeth in aggravation. *Where the hell is that scent coming from?* He surged off of his seat cushion and paced the room, ignoring the stiffness in his limbs. It was unbelievable that even the verbiage of his internal monologue had devolved into uncontrolled thought because of her, his nose steadily tantalized by her scent regardless of where he moved. He knew she was still in the infirmary, by the whispers of the servants and guards, and his own careful probing with his youki. Still, he was distracted by that scent. It was sweet and soothing and *frustrating*. He braced one hand against the wooden shelves that stored his scrolls and gave in for a moment to exhaustion, of body and of mind. His head ached and he felt an uncommon weariness in his muscles and joints. He leaned his forehead against his arm and willed himself to calm down and focus on the task at hand, taking a deep breath.

New. Sweet. A cherry tree freshly cut. White silken petals, barely open and heavy with dew. Satsuma oranges.

Sesshomaru raked his own claws down the shelf in a rare of display of anger. He strode from the study towards his chamber and private bath, berating himself for his complete and utter inattention to the obvious. He had held her for hours while she slept. His clothes were saturated with her scent. He shut the shoji screen behind him with a snap - surprising the servant who had scampered to attend his needs. He disrobed quickly and resolutely left the clothing in a pile on the floor for laundering. He would not allow her to distract him further.

“Thank you,” Rin said politely to the servant who set out a lunch tray for the children. Jaken had disappeared as soon as they arrived at the castle; Rin said he had to make certain the other servants hadn’t been slacking their duties while he was away. Shippo echoed her gratitude and waited until the screen shut and he could no longer hear anyone near them before he continued their conversation.

“And Sesshomaru gave you these rooms?” Shippo had been unable to sleep in the large chamber that had been set aside for Kagome and him. Without her there, the strangeness of the castle and the opulence of the room kept him awake. By the time it was truly dark, he had slipped out and, very conscious of Sesshomaru’s strict orders to not bother Kagome in the infirmary and to stay in the castle, he followed his nose to Rin’s room. He’d spent the night on the piled cushions intended for the table in her anteroom, comforted that he at least knew someone nearby. When she had woken, she’d greeted him happily and shared the breakfast her servant brought. They had played in the little garden outside until she grew tired, but Shippo still had many questions.

“Of course! Sesshomaru-sama takes very good care of Rin.” While she poured tea, Shippo glanced through the open screen to the raised futon, piled with expensive bedding, and the ornate lacquered cabinet that held her clothes. Usually, when he saw her traveling, she wore a simple orange checkered kimono. At the castle, she wore a much finer cloth, in solid orange with a white branch of blossoms at the shoulder. Intricate petals cascaded down towards the hem. Her hair, too, had been affected by the formality of the castle. Servants had smoothed it into a simple bun and an ornamented comb held it in place.

“But, I mean, you’re...” He hesitated. *He* didn’t care that Rin was human. Kagome was human, and she had saved him and treated him like her own son. He’d played with lots of human kids in Edo. But Shippo wasn’t naive. He knew that most demons found humans diverting, at best, and at worst thought of them as food or killing sport. Sesshomaru seemed to fit somewhere in between, disgusted by an ‘inferior’ species but not bothered to do anything about it. Sure, he let Rin follow him around, but he didn’t play with her or really acknowledge her.

“Human?” Rin asked sweetly. Her big brown eyes blinked and she smiled. Shippo knew he was blushing in shame.

“Yeah, I guess.” He wanted to fall through the floor, but she was being so nice about it.

“Sesshomaru-sama doesn’t really care about human or demon. He just doesn’t like creatures that have no honor, or that serve no purpose.” She puffed up with pride, and Shippo could tell she was repeating something she had heard her Lord say. “Rin is just a pup, but when Rin grows up she will have a purpose and she will bring honor to the West.”

“They call you yojosan,” he said quietly.

“Hn. Rin has been adopted by Sesshomaru-sama.” Her eyes got a far-away look and she radiated happiness. “It was the most wonderful, most amazing, most happy thing ever!” She dished out rice and meat and handed a bowl to Shippo.

“So he- he loves you?” Shippo bit his lip, wondering if he was asking something too personal. He knew from experience, searching for the shards, that adults did not often like personal questions. Rin wasn’t an adult - she certainly didn’t act like one - but by human standards she was getting close.

“Of course,” she said with absolute conviction. She settled onto her own cushion and pulled a bowl of food towards her. She waved her chopsticks in the air, “Sesshomaru-sama is not...not...” she frowned searching for the right words, “...huggy, like Kagome-san. But he loves Rin. He pats Rin’s head when Rin does a good job, and he lets Rin hug him sometimes when Rin is sad. Rin’s Lord will kill anyone who tries to take her away or harm her. He will not allow anyone to speak badly of Rin.” Her voice dropped into a conspiratorial whisper, “Rin thinks he might have even threatened everyone not to *think* badly of Rin.”

She winked at him, and Shippo felt all of his tension ease away. Despite her weird talk, which he thought she might have picked up from Sesshomaru, Rin was very much like Kagome. She loved without reservations and liked almost everyone. Even the people she didn’t like, Kouga came to mind, she didn’t want to see hurt or dead. If Sesshomaru could make Rin part of his family, then Shippo didn’t have to worry that the daiyoukai would hurt Kagome.

“Your secret plan-” Shippo was cut off by a loud shush. Rin’s eyes darted around comically, as if she expected spies to pop out of the silk hangings or from under the tatami mats.

“Demons have much better hearing, Shippo-kun,” she admonished.

“Really?” He pointed to his ears and laughed. Rin quickly joined in. “There isn’t anyone nearby, Rin, I promise.”

“Hn.” She nodded. “Rin thinks that it will work. Sesshomaru-sama needs to be distracted, so he doesn’t have time to think so much. But he can’t be rushed.”

“I don’t think you can do both of those things, Rin.” Shippo frowned and ate quietly for a few moments.

“Not Rin,” she said finally, setting down her empty bowl. Shippo took a second helping while she settled in to explain the finer points to him. “Kagome-san. She is so wonderful, she can do it all on her own. Rin and Shippo just need to help a tiny bit.” Shippo agreed that Kagome was the best, but he still wasn’t sure that Rin had really thought things through. “It will be perfect, Shippo-kun. You will see. And then Rin can have Sesshomaru-sama, *and* Kagome-san, *and* Shippo-kun! There will be pats *and* cuddles! Doesn’t Shippo-kun want Kagome-san, Rin, and Sesshomaru-sama?”

Shippo wasn’t sure what she meant about pats and cuddles, but he was definitely sure he liked the idea of Kagome having an easier life and more time to play with him. He wanted to be with Rin more, too. However, Sesshomaru...

“Keh,” he responded, non-committal, and settled in to finish his lunch and listen to Rin work out the details.

Kagome was exhausted. Unfortunately, she couldn't afford to do anything about it, her brain didn't even have time to worry about how her legs felt like jelly and her arms like wet noodles. Her back ached, her shoulders burned, and her eyes felt like they were being dragged down by lead weights. She didn't have time for any of that. She had to talk to Sesshomaru.

"If only I had a microscope," she muttered to herself. She had thought seriously about bringing one, she really had, but the only one with good magnification she could get her hands on with short notice had weighed a ton. She hadn't thought she would need it so badly.

"Kagome-isha, please, you must rest."

Kagome looked up blearily from the notes she had made to stare at the healer, the *isha*, who had gained seniority when Gekien was...dismissed. His black hair hung over his forehead and once he had warmed up to her, she'd found out he was a relative of Kento. A little over half of the demons at the castle were inuyoukai, if the patients and those who had reported to her summons for help were any indication. She smiled warmly and glanced over the infirmary.

Six more patients had come in since she had arrived. The spread of the disease was gaining speed. None had died, yet, but she knew it was only a matter of time. The inoculation she prepared from the scabbed over rashes of the sick could only be made so quickly. And then it had to be administered, and she only trusted herself to oversee a few she had personally trained to do so. Then there was the eradication of the virus within the castle and the surrounding town. And of course the villages that had been infected.

Despite the modern treatment methods to ease the symptoms of those already sick, they would still have to fight off the disease on their own if they were too far along for inoculation. She double-checked the figures she had written in her notes against the medical text from her era. Sometime around when she should have had lunch, she had given up on trying to hide her books and set them right out on the table. She was providing medical treatment that wouldn't be discovered for four hundred years, to *demons*, for a disease that the 'one eyed-dragon' daimyo would barely survive - and he hadn't even been born yet. Hiding her own knowledge seemed irrelevant.

More important was the virulence of the disease. The smallpox strain mentioned in her textbooks took twenty days to complete its cycle. Although the symptoms she had seen were congruent with the more deadly form of hemorrhagic smallpox, modern doctors reported that type in only two percent of cases. Every demon she had seen with the disease had developed bleeding under the skin and black colored pox, which should almost always be fatal. She would have guessed that it would affect fewer demons than humans, but according to Kento's reports, the opposite was true. And although the humans progressed faster, not a single demon that had been infected had survived. There was something inherently wrong with this epidemic.

She needed a microscope. And a couple thousand doses of *real* vaccine. And a ventilator, or five. And

saline bags. And an actual medical degree. Kagome sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. She needed a lot of things she couldn't have at the moment. The one thing she needed that was available, she hadn't had much luck with either.

"Thank you for worrying over me, Jun-san. Has a response to my request arrived yet?"

"No, Kagome-isha." His oddly silver eyes narrowed with concern. The two vertical blue lines on his forehead crinkled.

"Damn that man, and his ego. What the hell, Sesshomaru, *what the hell* could be more important than-" Kagome's impassioned tirade was cut off.

"Shhh, not so loud, Kagome-isha," he waved his hands and nodded to the few curious and shocked patients that looked their way. "You mustn't speak so about the Saidai Mao." He paused, and lowered his voice further, "My cousin said that he has not taken any meals, and only emerged from his study to bathe at midday. No requests for entry have been acknowledged since he returned to his study to continue working."

Kagome glanced at the rice paper shoji screens. They were dark. She frowned, she hadn't realized it was night already. "Is that usual?"

"It is not...*unusual*, Kagome-isha. But," he hesitated again, and Kagome found her impatience giving way to concern, "Sesshomaru-sama spent all morning with his advisors. He had additional meetings scheduled for this afternoon, but he turned down several and then stopped responding to requests altogether."

Kagome stood, removing the stained, long-sleeved apron that covered her wrinkled clothes. She ignored the way Jun averted his gaze - and the way many of the coherent patients did not - when her modern attire was revealed. She shoved her books and notes into her bag and marched toward the entrance, the healer trailing behind.

"You mustn't leave, Kagome-isha. Kento has said that the infirmary is guarded until Sesshomaru-sama escorts you out himself."

She stopped and turned narrow eyes on Jun. "He put me under house arrest?" *That arrogant, high-handed demonic...*

"No, no! It is for your safety, so that any who have not heard of your honorable station," his voice dropped to a low murmur, "or of Gekien's punishment, will not bother you. It is also a measure of the quarantine Kento said you requested."

Safety my ass, Kagome thought in fury. Her anger died a quick death when she remembered why she had decided to go see Sesshomaru, summons or not. "I can take care of myself, Jun-san. I'm stronger than I look." She pulled open the screen and stepped out, leaving the healer's skeptical expression behind. "Keep the treatment up until I return and make note of any changes." She shut the screen and was confronted by two rather large youkai. Both had a strange, ruffled hairdo that was reminiscent of a mohawk and stoic expressions.

“Kagome-isha,” they spoke in unison. They bowed shallowly and stood, one facing in, the other out, barring her way into the courtyard.

“Gentlemen,” she said sweetly, “thank you so much for your dedication to protecting the residents of the castle from this terrible sickness.” She bowed, deeply, and the one facing her seemed taken-aback by her show of respect. “As the one in charge of healing these peo- err, demons, I must report my progress to Sesshomaru-sama. Please summon someone to escort me, or direct me to his study?” She smiled, but her only response was a puzzled glance shared by the guards.

“We cannot allow you passage, Kagome-isha.” She could feel her temper beginning to get the better of her, and she knew that as tired as she was, she would have more trouble controlling her reiki if she got angry.

Whatever kind of youkai the guards were, they could obviously sense her changing mood, because they stiffened and both faced her, hands on their weapons. “Please return inside, most honored guest of the Saidai Mao.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Kento. His race across the courtyard had been nearly invisible in the darkness, and he left a breeze in his wake that stirred the hair of the guards and made Kagome’s plaid shirt billow behind her. “Kagome-isha,” he bowed deeply. “I have come to escort you to Sesshomaru-sama.” He turned to the guards without waiting for a response. “The guest of Sesshomaru-sama will return soon. None but the sick shall enter until that time.” He waved at her to walk in front of him, and they were several steps away from the courtyard before Kagome realized what had happened.

“Sesshomaru didn’t send for me, did he?”

“I am certain he would have, had he read your notes. Any of them. Or all nine.”

Kagome glanced over her shoulder, rolling her eyes and waiting for him to indicate which way to go. She found the formal practice of leading a more high-ranking individual by following them ridiculous. As was the notion that she was higher-ranking than the personal... *messenger? secretary? bodyguard? valet?* ...servant to the Highest Demon Lord.

“They were important,” she defended herself mildly, feeling a little silly, once she was no longer stuck in the infirmary, for troubling Sesshomaru so many times. Although, her concerns about the disease certainly weren’t silly. Nor was her reason for going to the daiyoukai without an invitation. “Your arrival was very lucky. I was just getting ready to go to Sesshomaru myself.”

“That would not have been wise, Kagome-isha. If Jun had not alerted me to the situation, the guards might have executed their duty and detained you. It would have been most embarrassing for you.” She couldn’t see his expression well in the dark, but she could hear the disapproval in his voice.

“They could have tried,” she corrected, “and it would have been embarrassing for *them*. So, how did Jun contact you so quickly?”

“The males in our line have alternative means of communication,” he answered shortly. “To your left,

Isha.” He didn’t seem willing to speak after that, and Kagome worried for a few minutes that she had broken some social rule. Those concerns were gradually replaced by thoughts of the illness. She needed to alert Sesshomaru. They would need help if they were going to save even half of the demons that were infected, and it would be another three weeks before the well would allow her to return to her time. The delay was unthinkable. A wave of sadness washed over her. So many would die.

“Kagome-isha?” She turned, pulled out of her thoughts by Kento. He was staring at her with a puzzled look. “Are you...unwell?”

“I’ll be fine - once I can speak with Sesshomaru,” she responded with a strained smile. “Perhaps it would be faster if you took the lead?” His hesitation was obvious, but finally he stepped in front of her and they began moving at a much quicker pace. She was almost trotting to keep up as they entered the main castle building and turned down a long corridor. There was only indirect lighting on their path and Kagome had to concentrate to keep from falling as they climbed numerous stairs.

“Jun said - he said Sess-ho-maru,” she gulped and pressed a stitch in her side, but did not dare stop the near-race through the castle. “He said Sesshomaru, uh, wasn’t answering anyone?”

“He should not have repeated that,” Kento said tightly. He picked up the pace and Kagome did her best not to groan as she had to break into a jog to keep up. “Sesshomaru-sama has much work to do. If he does not wish to be interrupted, we will respect that. You may request entry, but if he does not accede, you will return to your room, or to the infirmary.”

“But, isn’t- huh - why, wouldn’t- he- just- say- to leave - him - alone?” She was panting, and so worried about tripping on her own feet that she slammed into Kento’s back when he stopped suddenly.

“He would,” the demon conceded. He searched her face, which she knew was probably red and sweaty, but whatever else he found made him draw his brows together with concern. “You are worried for Sesshomaru-sama.” He hadn’t phrased it as a question, but Kagome confirmed it anyhow.

“Of course I am. He refused to be inoculated, the egotistical- oh!” They were off again, this time Kento practically carrying her across the floor in his speed. She didn’t even have time to protest his claws digging painfully into her upper arms before he stopped. The corridor widened before them into a cavernous space with cushions along two walls and a long, low table covered in neat stacks of paper and pots of ink. The table was centered in front of a pair of painted sliding doors.

Kagome was certain that the colored ink depictions of great dogs and intricate landscapes were magnificent, but she was distracted by the row of demons seated on either side of the doors. Servants knelt next to soldiers. What she guessed was an administrator, by his dress, sat next to a powerful military demon. That one was closest to the door, and his eyes bore into Kagome. She swallowed back a sound of surprise and turned to Kento, her mouth open in question.

“Sesshomaru-sama had many who waited to see him today.” He conceded another point at her raised brow, “And they worried as well.” He led her to the doors, and the demon there stood, his clothing rustling quietly against his sword. Thin, jagged black lines streaked up his jaw and neck and into his dark hair. His ponytail brushed against well-used armor.

“Take the human away, Kento-san.”

“She seeks audience with Sesshomaru-sama,” Kento bowed shallowly and the demon curled back his lip, baring his teeth.

“When Sesshomaru-sama allows entry, *you* may request her...audience.” Kagome didn’t like the way he drew out the word, as if it left a foul taste in his mouth. “Until then, she can-”

“*She* can do as she pleases, Captain-san,” Kagome bit out. “And she pleases to speak with Sesshomaru-sama.”

“What is the meaning of this insolence?” He bristled, and Kagome felt a stirring of youki from him. Several others in the room responded to his aggression, their youki rising as well.

“I am the honored guest of the West, and I will speak only to Sesshomaru-sama.” Kagome kept her back straight and her expression cold; she knew she couldn’t back down. At the same time, she was struggling to keep her reiki from responding to the threat the captain posed.

“*Honored?* You dare to presume that our Lord would hold you above others? That he would grant you favor when he has-”

“What is the harm in trying, Hisao-san?” Kento said smoothly. “Perhaps she will learn her place?” Kagome turned to give him a piece of her mind. *My place, indeed!* But the military demon snorted and waved her past him.

“Yes, yes, show us how the Saidai Mao values your counsel,” he mocked her.

Kagome had never been known for her even temper, and it had been a very, very long day. She was tired, dirty, sweaty from her run across the castle, and worried about the disease. On top of that, if Sesshomaru hadn’t accidentally dropped a bookshelf on himself, preventing speaking or moving, he was going to get an earful for ignoring her. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she remembered that she was supposed to be afraid of strange, powerful demons. Some far corner of her brain whispered that she was in an unfamiliar and formal setting that could be very, very dangerous. There were too many other emotions pressing for her attention to give fear a chance to take hold.

“Keh.” It was all she could do to snap her mouth shut before she said something she would probably regret later - and Sesshomaru would most definitely not be pleased if she spoke what was on her mind in that moment. Kagome strode past Hisao and rapped on the wooden frame of the shoji screen. “Sesshomaru-sama,” she called. Her knuckles felt warm. She could feel the pulse of an immense youki, barely contained within the room and fluctuating wildly. She frowned. That was unlike Sesshomaru. She raised her hand again and pressed it against the pristine paper.

“Oh, no, Isha,” called one of the servants, no doubt fearing she would leave smudges on the rice paper. Kagome ignored her. It *was* Sesshomaru inside, and he was alone as far as she could tell, but his energy was not normal.

“That is enough, woman,” Hisao taunted. “We see how far your honor-” He was interrupted by a blast

of youki.

Kagome stood stock still with her eyes closed while green light exploded into the room. Several of the demons behind her cried out. Even Hisao grunted under the heavy weight of his Lord's power. Kento fell to one knee, breathing heavily. A magical wind blew through the room, drying the sweat on Kagome's skin and blowing her clothing and ponytail out behind her. It washed over her, leaving the taste of cloves and the scent of damp earth and dark woods. The heat was intense, but not unpleasant. It was gone again as soon as it had come, leaving her shivering and the demons sighing in relief. *He might not like the interruption, but that was overkill, even for Sesshomaru.* She shivered again and squared her shoulders, grabbing onto the handle to tug the screen open.

"Kagome-isha," Kento called out at the same time that Hisao snarled and reached for her arm.

"Woman!"

Kagome ignored them both and hauled on the door. True to the perfection she was sure Sesshomaru demanded of his home, the screen slid silently and smoothly. It was designed to open with little effort, and Kagome's exuberance caused it to fly down the track and bounce back against the wall. Only Kento's quick movement stopped it from hitting her on its return trip.

In silence, Kagome stared at Sesshomaru. He was seated at the far end of the room, legs crossed underneath a low table spread with papers and scrolls. His head was bowed forward slightly, his hair cascaded over his shoulders to conceal his face. She would have believed he was deep in thought, if not for the claws he had embedded in the surface of the table.

"Sesshomaru-sama?" She spoke softly as she stepped into the room, barely ducking Hisao's restraining hand but unable to avoid the rake of his claws which drew lines of heat and dull pain across her shoulder. Another wave of youki blasted across the room. It lifted Sesshomaru's hair in its fury and threw Hisao back from the doorway. Kagome pushed on. She felt like she was moving through water; the air pressed against her and then gave, allowing her passage. "Sesshomaru," she whispered, knowing his ears would easily pick up the quiet word.

Other ears did as well. There were gasps of outrage and horror. Hisao, who had recovered his feet quickly, if not his pride, cursed her lack of respect and threatened to end the disgrace she brought to the Saidai Mao and the West. The youki pouring off Sesshomaru intensified. Hisao was forced into silence, struggling against his Lord's power. Others were pushed prostrate on the floor or managed to flee the outer room to avoid the near-agony caused by his energy.

Kagome could feel her reiki rising to the surface, and she tried to tamp it down. Fear blossomed as she imagined how harmful it could be to Sesshomaru in his...condition... if he was hit with purification. Unfortunately, fear often triggered her reiki outside of her will, and a few wisps of power escaped her before she could lock them down. They curled forward, invisible, but she could feel the way they swam across and through the ocean of Sesshomaru's youki. Seemingly finding a current, her holy energy gained speed and raced to the Western Lord. It hit him like a strong breeze, blowing his hair back from his face. His head lifted, and Kagome forgot all sense of self-preservation and rushed to him.

“Sesshomaru,” she cried. His eyes were completely red, but she had seen that before and it didn’t frighten her. The sour twist of terror squeezing her lungs and heart was brought on by the sickly clouds that glazed those red eyes. His pale, perfect skin was flushed pink, and on his hands... Kagome had her arm behind his shoulders and her free hand pressed against his cheek, trying to cool his fever. A rumble of warning started in his throat, but it silenced suddenly and he vibrated with repressed coughs. He did not turn to look at her, but stared straight ahead at the open door. “It’s okay, Sesshomaru, I’m here. I have my medicine,” she whispered to him.

She reached out gently with her reiki, trying to determine why he was losing control of his youki. Heat circled around his joints, pooling in his knees, hips, and shoulders. She imagined it would be almost impossible for him to straighten away from the table, much less walk. She stroked his cheek again, brushing down his marking to his lips, trying to get him to open so she could examine him. He bared his teeth slightly, but did not relent. She could sense the pain in his throat and mouth. “Shhh, let me help you.” He did not relax, and his claws dug into the table further.

“Kento-san,” she called quietly, “I need you to help me.” When the inuyoukai did not immediately respond she snapped, “Now, Kento.” She heard a hesitant footstep, and then nothing. “Your Lord needs you, move your ass,” she commanded in a furious whisper.

“I- I cannot, Isha. His youki-” She glanced away from Sesshomaru to see Kento doubled over, grasping at his chest. *Of course he would come in if he could, idiot. He wants to help his Lord.* Kagome wondered why it didn’t seem to bother her the way it did the demons, but she didn’t have time - Sesshomaru didn’t have time – for her thoughts to linger on it.

“Sorry, Kento-san,” she said quietly. She turned back to Sesshomaru and pressed both of her hands against his cheeks, moving her face to block his view of anything but her. “You have to let them in, Sesshomaru. They are loyal to you, they will help.” He was unresponsive, and Kagome dragged her fingertips down his stripes, gripping his jaw and finally drawing his eyes to focus on her. “I will save you, Sesshomaru, I swear it. Or I will die trying, but I need their help.”

She held her breath, and after a long moment he blinked. The thick youki around her eased, and there was a collective sigh of relief from the antechamber. Kento was at Sesshomaru’s opposite side in an instant. “We need to move him somewhere comfortable.” The press of curious, worried eyes behind her made her add, “And private.”

“Isha,” Kento started, and she turned to see what was wrong. The inu had wrapped both hands around Sesshomaru’s silk-clad wrist, but he was unable to dislodge the daiyoukai’s claws.

“You have to let go,” she whispered, easing back from Sesshomaru’s face to his side. She dropped one hand to his arm and smoothed along his sleeve to his hand. She did not flinch when her fingers met the flat bumps of the rash marring the smooth skin there, but she could feel a bottomless pit of sadness and anger threatening to overwhelm her. She slammed a mental door on those emotions and tucked her fingers between his thumb and first finger, holding his hand firmly. She slipped her other hand behind his neck and cupped the back of his head. “I’ve got you, Sesshomaru.” Her voice was so low, she doubted any other than the Lord and Kento could hear her. “Let go, I have you.”

Another vibration wracked his body and youki threatened to escape for a moment. Then his eyes slid closed and his muscles relaxed. His claws pulled from the wood with a horrible tearing sound and flying splinters. He sagged back, and Kagome barely had time to wedge her shoulder behind him to keep him from hitting the floor.

“Hisao, get something to carry him on,” she ordered. The captain did not respond to her, but sent servants racing to bring what she requested. The demon himself appeared next to her with a wide board, long enough for even Sesshomaru’s tall frame and fitted with rope handles at each end. Kento helped her lay him back and despite his bulk he slid easily, smooth silk on polished wood, to fit on the stretcher. Each male took one end and lifted the daiyoukai’s weight as though it were nothing.

Kagome walked beside them, throwing stern orders to the servants that trailed them. She sent them for hot and cool water, clean cloths, and anything else she could think of to get them away. She only tried to pull her hand back once, and she decided it was a positive sign that he had the strength to keep his grip firm. *Please let that be a good sign.*

Chapter 6: Misplaced Anger

“Help me disrobe him,” Kagome ordered.

“But, Isha, no, we must not-” The horrified look on the servant’s face made Kagome want to slap her. Sesshomaru had been unconscious since his collapse in his study, but his fever had grown noticeably higher in the twenty minutes or so it had taken them to carry him to his room and arrange him on the raised futon. Kagome had taken his vitals, although she still couldn’t get his mouth open, and she wasn’t encouraged. The servant might have had some sort of feminine hesitation, or perhaps she was properly aghast at the thought of a human touching her Lord, but Kagome did not have the patience to deal with either.

“Help or get out, but don’t question me again.” Her voice was cold, she knew, but it was the only way she could contain her emotions. Professional. Calm. In control. The demon girl sputtered, but she backed away, eyes wide and fearful. Kagome turned back to the task at hand when the shoji screen shut behind the servant. “Kento, I need your help.” Sesshomaru’s assistant knelt at the opposite end of the futon, carefully removing his Lord’s boots. Kagome went to work on his obi in silence, ordering her thoughts and running through the tasks ahead of her over and over.

“You shouldn’t be too harsh with her, Kagome-isha,” Kento spoke quietly as he set the boots and Chinese-style socks aside. He continued as though she had expressed interest. “It is not customary for Sesshomaru-sama to receive assistance with something so personal as disrobing. He is a very private individual. You do not know much of inuyoukai, do you? Most adults would find undressing in front of anyone outside of their close pack or a servant highly inappropriate. For a female, a human woman, to purposefully see the Saidai Mao in such a state-”

“Help me roll him,” she interrupted. Kento kept up a droning monologue regarding the nature and composition of packs and the hierarchy of inuyoukai society. Kagome found his babble comforting, it helped ease her anxiety and clear her mind. They managed to get his haori and kosode off, one arm at a time, but Kagome turned discretely to dig through her bag while Kento removed his pants. She worried that she would be too embarrassed to care for a naked Sesshomaru, but that concern disappeared the instant she turned back to him.

Flat, dark red, almost black, lesions coated his hands and feet, growing more sparse and widely spaced as they ascended his arms and legs. Only a small patch of the rash marred the pale flesh on his chest. His markings...she of course, had known that they were not only on his face. She had caught glimpses of his wrists on more than one occasion. Completely naked, the same jagged purple-red lines undercut his collarbones and wrapped around each hip and thigh.

At any other time, she would have been torn between stark admiration and acute mortification. Looking at the hard muscle and smooth skin, the exotic coloring...she felt sick. Nauseated that something so small as a virus could bring low the Killing Perfection. Grief-stricken that such beauty could be so quickly blighted. Furious that she had not forced him to take the inoculation. Furious that he could not see any way other than his own. Furious that she had only just begun to know him and he could – she could not bring herself to think the worst. “He needs to be washed and then kept warm. Get

the cloths ready.” She reached into her bag for the bifurcated needle and tiny bottle from the future. She ignored Kento’s sounds of concern, and filled the syringe with the last dose of real, modern vaccine she had. She smoothed one hand along the skin of his upper arm, holding his hand and forcing it smooth to make the muscle relax. Just as she had practiced in her nursing lab, she angled the needle and pressed down.

Snap.

Kagome stared at her hand in disbelief. She still held the syringe...with about a half-inch of metal attached to the end. The rest of the needle had broken off and pinged onto the wooden floor. A few precious drops of medicine dripped out and splattered onto Sesshomaru’s skin. *But it worked on Inuyasha, and Shippo...* Inuyasha was only half-demon, and Shippo was just a kit, still growing into his youkai power and strength. Sesshomaru was...he was the strongest, the highest of the Demon Lords. Dumbly, she wondered why she had ever thought that a steel rod, less than four millimeters thick, would be able to pierce his skin. She heard Kento calling her name, but the only coherent thought she could manage was: *Fuck.*

Kagome shook herself. She had been with Inuyasha too long if she sat around cursing instead of using her head to think of a solution. “Send someone to Jun-san; get me the inoculate we made earlier today. Two doses.” Kento left her to step outside, closing the door behind him. Kagome listened to him send someone for supplies and then give orders to the other servants who had gathered in the hall.

She stayed busy, methodically wiping Sesshomaru’s skin with hot water and then patting him dry. She was careful not to disturb the rash. She knew that it was more likely to scar if the lesions were broken, and she couldn’t imagine Sesshomaru not being...perfect. She was covering him with a silk sheet and several layers of bedding when Kento returned.

“Burn those,” she nodded to the clothes and shoes they had removed. Carefully, she picked up his mokomoko and curled it on the floor beside her. She would have to wash it again, and hope that would be enough to kill any viruses that might be living in the fur. Sesshomaru had been outraged - as outraged as he ever was, which meant he frowned, deeply - when she suggested boiling it while Rin was ill. She determined that if - when - he woke up she would tease him that she had gone ahead and done it. “I have to look at his throat. Help me open his mouth.”

Kento obliged, gripping Sesshomaru’s lower jaw and applying brute force. Kagome finally stopped him when she was afraid he would bruise the daiyoukai before it worked. She stroked Sesshomaru’s markings absently while she tried to think of a way to get him to relax his jaw. Kento had warned her that holding his nose would result in either bared fangs or a bite, maybe both. She ran her thumb across his lower lip, revealing the sharp canines.

“Just open a bit,” she whispered to herself. “I know it hurts, but I can make it better.” She turned back to her bag, prepared to use a straw to force crushed ibuprofen and water into his mouth, when Kento drew her attention. Sesshomaru’s eyes were open. They were more pink than red, but still glazed. He did not turn his head, but his gaze slid to hers. He considered her for a moment, then he opened his mouth – less than an inch. She smiled. “Good enough. Thank you, Sesshomaru-sama.” She grabbed her flashlight and tongue depressor, the former which shocked Kento, the latter displeased Sesshomaru. It was difficult to see past the wealth of white implements of death, but she had no trouble making out

the pox coating his tongue, inner cheeks, and so thick on the walls of his throat it was a miracle he could still breathe. "Thank goodness," she whispered, "Don't try to talk, Sesshomaru."

He gave her a look which clearly indicated that she was an idiot. "Right, of course you won't. I'm going to give you some medicine from my ti-" she glanced at Kento and hastily corrected, "from my home. I haven't treated a full-demon before, so I am going to double the amount I give Inuyasha. If that sounds okay, please blink." His eyes slowly closed and opened again, and she let out a relieved breath. "Alright. I know this is going to hurt, but you absolutely must swallow." She waited again for his blink and then poured a cup of hot tea. She crushed six pills inside a clean cloth and dumped the dust into the tea.

"Don't try to sit up on your own," she moved behind his head and ignored the insulted glare he gave her. She brushed his hair to one side and pulled his head into her lap, using one hand to help him lean up and the other to hold the cup. He tried to lift his own hands to take the tea from her, but the flare of his youki and the sharp widening of his eyes revealed how painful the motion was. "Next time, follow your doctor's orders," she chided. He took a few shallow breaths, and then she held the cup to his mouth. His slow, exaggerated swallows caused empathetic pangs of pain in her. He finally finished the drink and his head slumped back onto her lap.

"If you have another needle, he may be able to allow you to pierce his skin while he is awake," Kento suggested. Sesshomaru, struggling against sleep, clenched his jaw and turned his glare on his assistant.

"It doesn't matter," Kagome whispered. "That was my only needle. I'll have to use the inhaled inoculate." Sesshomaru stared at her, and she could feel a hot sting behind her eyes.

"Why must this...dead sickness...be forced into the blood?"

"The first treatments were breathed in as a powder, but they weren't even half as effective. They were still way better than nothing, but the liquid made in labs is more powerful, with fewer side effects."

"Hn."

Kagome knew he was remembering her explanation of smallpox and the treatment. She couldn't stop thinking about it. He was already sick, probably had been for several days but he hadn't said anything, having pushed his symptoms aside with his youki to focus on Rin and all of the demons and humans in the Western Lands that depended on him. The longer a patient went from contraction to inoculation, the less effective the medicine would be. He had already waited longer than he should have, and then she couldn't even give him the best she had. *If I fail him...*

Uncharacteristically - that word seemed to apply to Sesshomaru frequently since she had joined him - the corner of his mouth lifted in a tiny smile. She could feel the muscles in his neck and shoulders relaxing, and his eyes drifted half-closed. Kagome wanted to cry, but she could not. He was telling her he trusted her. He was telling her to do whatever she could, and that he knew it would be enough.

A knock brought his eyes wide open again and Hisao was at the door, summoning Kento. The inuyoukai returned with a pouch containing the inoculate Jun had sent up from the infirmary. She prepared the powder and again helped Sesshomaru to sit up. It took several tries, but he managed to

breathe in the entire dose before falling back to her lap.

“How long?” Kento asked quietly. He brushed back his loose bangs, revealing the worry that wrinkled the stripes on his forehead. Sesshomaru’s eyes closed, and his breathing, although still shallow, evened out.

“I am not sure. The first medicine I gave him will ease his discomfort in a few minutes, if the dosage was right. The inoculate...we have to wait and see.” She gently set his head on the futon and eased away to wring out a fresh cloth and apply it to his forehead. “Go ahead and go. There isn’t much else to do until it is time for another dose, and I can send someone to get you if there is any trouble.” She looked up to find Kento hesitating at the door. “I am sure that there is a lot of reassuring and organizing to do right now. Go.”

“Hisao-san will post a guard outside the door, just let him know if you need anything.” Kento placed his hand on the screen and then turned around, considering her. “You have done much for the Western Lands, and you did not have to.” He raised his hand to stem her interruption. “It is more than any of us would have expected from an outsider, especially a human. You are strong, Isha. You are wise and kind, and you are more than worthy of any honor bestowed by the Saidai Mao.” He bowed deeply, then turned and left. Kagome was very aware that he had meant every word - and that he intended for all those excellent demon ears outside to hear them.

“Did you hear that, Sesshomaru,” she asked in a low voice that would not carry. “Inuyoukai *can* admit when they are wrong.”

She brushed his bangs off his forehead, tracing the blue crescent there and letting her fingers trail through the fine strands of white. Her eyes caught the first indications of a flat oval spot, darker than the rest of his skin, at the corner of his mouth. She bit her lip and refused to give in to the salty sting in her eyes.

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Ryukostokken drummed his dark claws on the table before him and did his best to hold back his impatience. Instead of gutting the fool who struggled to pour tea for himself and his guest, he merely backhanded her. She slid several feet across the floor before crawling into a low bow of subservience. “Leave,” he growled. Ryukostokken dismissed her from his mind before the shoji screen had even closed, and turned to his guest.

The half-demon was a mercenary, a spy. Rightfully born in the wilds to keep his heritage a secret by his human mother and driven out of youkai villages in the North, the mixed blood had managed to survive a childhood fending for himself and had become a stealthy assassin and spy as a result. Ryukostokken appreciated how such skills could be used to further his own interests, but the whelp would have to be killed eventually. The Lord of the North could not allow such a stain on the honor of dragon youkai to continue indefinitely.

“Speak.”

“Of course, Ryukostokken-sama,” he replied. He unrolled a scroll and reported on the movement and station of various patrols, and the casualties from disease.

“You interrupt This One, you bring your filthy blood into the castle of the North for this! This is nothing!” Ryukostokken swept the map from the table, leaving gouges in the wood and destroying most of the paper in the process. “This Ryukostokken knows all of this.” He leaned over the low table, his eyes bleeding red and his fangs bared. “If you cannot bring new information, then you serve no purpose!”

The hanyou did not flinch, but bowed his head with respect. “Forgive me, I had one other report which may be of interest.”

“Get on with it!”

“The Saidai Mao has succumbed.”

Ryukostokken paused, and then a feral smile broke across his scarred face. “How sure are you?”

“An informant very close to the Western Lord saw the marks personally.”

Ryukostokken felt a burst of vindictive elation. He slammed his hand down on the table, breaking it in half. It would have crushed the spy’s legs if he had not moved quickly, but the Dragon Lord did not care. His goal had been to cripple the Western Lands, and hinder their allies. That the Killing Perfection himself would take ill...Ryukostokken laughed. The sound bounced around the stone room and sent chills down the spines of any close enough to hear it. *Perfection? Ha! The dog would be lucky to survive, and even then he would bear the same hideous scars that I do. No longer perfection. No longer first, highest, greatest.*

“You will personally tell This Ryukostokken if the pup’s condition changes,” he ordered. He dismissed the mercenary with a wave of his hand and turned to the massive windows that looked out on his lands. *Not Prince, but Emperor. Soon, soon.* His gloating was interrupted, and he scowled, wishing the half-blood would leave so that he could relish the impending demise of the dog.

“There is one other thing, my Lord.” He paused, and Ryukostokken finally turned and snarled to let the idiot know his patience was waning. “A human woman has been brought to the Western Castle to see the sick. She tends to Sesshomaru-sama.” The Dragon Lord considered that information. The inu pup had never shown much care for humans, with the exception of the strange child he took under his wing, but he did not force them out of his lands as he should have. Ryukostokken considered that perhaps the son had taken after his father more than any suspected. “My informant was...displeased by her arrival. She does not appear to be of high birth. Her manner and dress are most...informal.”

Informal... Ryukostokken laughed, great bellowing gales of laughter. He slammed his palm against the wall to support his weight, cracking the stone, and laughed until he had no breath. “This Ryukostokken sought to bring him low - but he already shames the West with the same perversions as his sire! Go, go, you have satisfied This One.” Long minutes after the spy had departed, the Dragon Lord was still smiling, but it was a twisted, malicious smile. “Sickness presses your lands, Sesshomaru, and you

inspire corruption from within,” he whispered. Ruykostokken knew that lesser youkai would overlook a lord’s relationship with a human, if the lord was feared and respected. *When Sesshomaru is unable to stop the disease that ravages them, the youkai of the West will turn on him. They will cease to turn a blind eye to his shameful rutting with a human woman. The whore will seal his fate.*

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“I can get us in, I know it,” Shippo-kun whispered.

Rin nodded her head absently, chewing on her lip and staring around the corner at the screens that opened onto Sesshomaru’s antechamber. She knew the two guards that had been posted there. They were brothers, rock demons, and two of the best fighters under Hisao-san’s command. She had always liked them, but they did not look like they would be indulgent of two disobedient children at the moment. “Rin isn’t sure,” she said quietly. She wanted to see Sesshomaru-sama, so badly, but-

“Don’t you want to check on him? It’s not like you’re going to get sick again.”

“Rin knows.” She straightened her obi and her hair and fussed with her sleeves. *Rin was so worried!* Kento-san had come and told them that Sesshomaru-sama was ill, but that Kagome-san was with him. That was good. Kagome-san made Rin all better, so she would fix Sesshomaru-sama too. But it had been almost five days. Five days and Kagome-san had not come out nor had Kento-san come back to tell them anything. The servants wouldn’t answer her questions, so she and Shippo-kun snuck around and eavesdropped.

They knew that Sesshomaru-sama had lost control when he became ill. The rumors claimed that he nearly killed some weaker youkai with his will alone. Shippo-kun overheard the cook saying that Kento-san had been knocked out by his power, and Hisao-san started bleeding from his eyes and nose! But Kagome-san... The whispers about her were awed, confused, and frightened. When the miko had first come to the castle, the demons said very mean things about her. Things about her being human, which Rin had heard before, and other things, things about honor and shame and...Rin blushed in anger and embarrassment at the memory of some of the words she had heard. Since Sesshomaru-sama had gotten sick, that had changed.

They said she had cut through their Lord’s youki like a sword through silk. They said his youki pulled her into the room, lighting her face and clothes, making her appear as a demon. They even said that Sesshomaru-sama had allowed her to touch his person. She whispered to him and his beast was calmed. She asked his youki to recede, and it did so. Some said she was a witch, come to charm the sickness from their Lord. Others said she was a mixed-blood princess, skilled in the arts of healing and herbs.

Rin bit her lip again. There was not a whisper of miko powers, and Shippo-kun warned her they shouldn’t say anything. Rin agreed; she knew it would be dangerous if the demons, already on edge about the disease, believed they could be purified at any moment. The servants and guards had stopped the worst talk about Kagome-san, and they usually shushed any who spoke of shame and the human

woman in the same breath. Still...

Only Kento-san and Hisao-san had entered his chambers, and Kagome-san had not come out. It had only taken her a day to make Rin feel better, and she was completely fine in less than a week. Sesshomaru-sama was still sick enough that he required a guard to keep lesser youkai away, just in case his power flared again. Rin also worried that the guard might be there to protect her Lord as well. If Sesshomaru-sama needed a bodyguard, he was very, very sick. She frowned. She had to know if her Lord needed her. And Shippo-kun was ready to jump out of his skin, he was so concerned for his adopted mother. She nodded, sharply.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

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Kagome was aware that someone was speaking, but it sounded muffled. For a moment, her heart stopped - *Sesshomaru!* She extended her reiki and found him, as he had been when she left his side only an hour or so ago. He was resting, as comfortably as she could make him. Kagome placed a hand over her racing heart and slumped back down onto the little futon that had been pulled into a corner of his antechamber. Her body felt numb, and what wasn’t numb, ached in a pulsing, dull way that spoke to days without more than a few minutes of sleep at a time. She let her eyes fall closed and listened with one ear to the conversation in the hallway.

“No, no,” one of the guards said.

“Sesshomaru-sama must rest,” finished the other.

A soft, high voice mumbled something she couldn’t make out, and then: “Kagome-isha has been working very hard. She is tired, Rin-yojosan.” *Rin?* She sat up on one elbow and frowned. She had asked Kento to check on the children, to let them know she would see them as soon as she could. There was a whine, a sound most unlike Rin - although Kagome couldn’t place what it reminded her of. A commotion ensued, and several voices spoke at once. The shoji slid open silently, and then slid shut again. Kagome raised one exhausted brow.

“Hello?” she called softly.

“Kagome-san!” The response was immediate and broke whatever had concealed the intruder. Rin burst out of nothingness, dropping a magical acorn and racing across the room to throw herself on Kagome. The wind knocked out of her, Kagome fell back to the futon and patted Rin’s heaving back. *What in the world would make the girl act such a way, and so sneaky?* Kagome sighed. *Shippo.* “Rin was so worried, Kagome-san! Kento-san said Sesshomaru-sama was sick, but no one came to tell us if he was better, and we couldn’t see you and it was so awful and Shippo-kun and Rin missed you and Rin just wants to be with Lord Sesshomaru!” Kagome’s heart broke at the little girl’s sobbing exclamations. Of course she was worried, Kagome should have thought of it and summoned the children to reassure them herself. She had just been so busy, and Sesshomaru needed her.

“Isha!” One of the guards appeared, his usual stoic expression transformed by a look of horror. In his arms lay Rin, limp and covered in spots. They were black as night, and covered her from head to bare feet. *That is going too far.* “Rin-yojosan?” The guard stared at the girl on the futon, arms wrapped around Kagome, then down at the same figure in his arms.

“Shippo,” she ordered. There was a loud pop, and the spotty Rin transformed into a red-haired kitsune. He jumped from the guard’s arms and raced to her side.

“Kagome-mama! I-”

“Do. Not. *Ever.* Do. That. Again.” Her eyes narrowed, and Shippo swallowed heavily. Kagome could see the tears welling in his eyes, but she forced herself to remain firm. “And you, Rin,” she turned to the girl. “I expect a certain amount of thoughtlessness from Shippo, but you...I am disappointed in you both. Sesshomaru is very sick, and everyone in the castle is worried. Tricking the guards to get in where you are not supposed to be? And faking an illness that has killed others? This behavior is appalling, both of you.” They hung their heads; whispered apologies fell into the silence.

She let it stretch for a few moments. “You will both apologize to Eiichi-san and Eiji-san, and then you will each write lines until your hands fall asleep. And this will never happen again, understood?” They both nodded, and stood with hands folded and heads bowed. “However,” she took a deep breath, and both children looked up with hopeful eyes, “I will allow you to see Sesshomaru for just a moment, Rin-chan. You may both return in the morning to see me, but next time *ask* the guards to let you in.” She waved the stunned guards outside.

Kagome stood, pushing her loose hair over her shoulder and thinking that she really needed a brush. And a bath. And about two days of sleep. She took Rin’s hand and led her to the screen that separated the antechamber from the sleeping room. “He looks very terrible,” she warned the girl quietly. “I gave him something to help him sleep, and you must be very quiet and not touch him.” Rin nodded fearfully, and Kagome slid open the door.

Sesshomaru lay on his back on the raised futon. She had been turning him to rinse off his skin, but he seemed to breathe easiest on his back with a folded blanket serving as a pillow. Rin’s hand squeezed hers painfully, but the girl did not make a sound. Kagome had become used to the sight, but she was sure that seeing the Western Lord in such a state for the first time was horrifying.

Not an inch of visible skin was left unmarked. Flat, black welts lay so thick it seemed that his flesh was pebbled like a lizard, instead of the smooth perfection it was meant to be. One eyelid had swollen shut, and Kagome had been forced to ask Kento to puncture his trachea with a sharp demon claw so that she could get air past the swollen tissues of the daiyoukai’s throat. His hair was pulled to the side. Kagome had brushed it and braided it to keep it out of the way. It was one of the few places she felt she could give him a comforting touch without disturbing the pox. Not that Sesshomaru probably would have asked for it, or even considered her touch comforting, if he were awake. She waited for a few moments, then gently pulled Rin backwards, closing the screen behind them.

“He looks...” Shippo trailed off. Kagome hadn’t realized the kit would want to see as well, but she supposed morbid curiosity combined with concern for Rin would prompt him to look. Kento entered the room, no doubt summoned by the commotion Shippo’s trick had caused, and stood quietly to the

side.

“It is bad. Shippo, Rin. I won’t lie to either of you, but I *am* doing everything I can to get Sesshomaru better.”

“Inuyasha could go through the well,” Shippo offered. “He could get more medicine.” He was obviously distressed to see such a powerful demon brought low. Kagome guessed that Rin’s suffering was a nail through his heart as well. The two children had grown close. She shook her head.

“Not for two more weeks, Shippo.”

The kitsune looked crestfallen, but Rin’s angry expression surprised Kagome. “Not everything,” she said.

“Rin,” Kagome began, sure the girl was hurting. Kagome had lost her own father; she knew what that felt like.

Rin cut her off. “You are not doing everything you can. You saved Rin, save Sesshomaru-sama too!”

Kagome stiffened, her heart crumbling inside. She glanced at Kento, worried that the conversation was about to reveal things she wasn’t sure the demons in the castle were ready to know. “You don’t know what you’re asking, Rin. It-”

“You don’t *want* to heal him!” Rin accused.

Kento sucked in a breath, Shippo’s mouth fell open in shock. Kagome was aware of the guards outside, who could probably hear everything, but Rin’s indictment cut deeply. “Sesshomaru is a youkai, Rin,” she tried to explain calmly. “What I did for you-”

“So? You fix Inuyasha-san all the time! You just like him better!”

“Inuyasha is only half-youkai so-”

“Shippo-kun is a full-demon, and you used your power to heal his arm. He told me!”

“Rin, it is more complicated than-”

“You are making it that way! Fix him! Fix Sesshomaru-sama!” Rin’s face was red and tears leaked out of her eyes. Her hands fisted at her sides and she choked back a sob. “Papa,” she mouthed. Kagome moved toward her, but Rin backpedaled, nearly tripping over her kimono. She threw open the screen and raced down the hallway.

“Go with her, Shippo,” Kagome said quietly. The kit nodded. He gave her one last quick squeeze, and then darted after the human girl.

“Isha,” Kento began after the screen had closed. Kagome shut her eyes against the question in his tone, against her failure to save the creature in the next room, against the tangible pain of a little girl who knew she was going to lose the person she loved most in the world.

“She was upset,” Kagome said woodenly, trying to cover the secret that Rin had all but shouted. “She

didn't know what she was saying."

"Your miko powers were strong enough to cure Rin's illness?"

Kagome's eyes popped open at Kento's calm question. "How did you-"

"At the spring, near the human village, Sesshomaru-sama called you 'miko'. Then I saw you in my Lord's study. Your reiki is very strong, but you keep it under remarkable control. I very much doubt anyone else even realized you were using it to soothe his instincts. His youki was lashing out at the disease and could have done a great deal of damage. I had no idea that priestess powers could mix so well with demon energy, without purification."

"I didn't-" Her mouth opened and closed a few times, before she could finish, "It wasn't on purpose."

"You intended to purify him, then?" Kento looked mildly curious, but not surprised or offended that a human miko had surreptitiously used her holy powers on his Lord.

Kagome rubbed a hand against her aching head. She didn't think she could hide her secret from Kento any longer. Even if she weren't nearly a zombie from lack of sleep and over-exertion, she couldn't match his superior senses. "Of course not. Sometimes my powers just...they just are. They do things, without my thinking about it. Until you brought it up, I couldn't have even said for certain if I had used my reiki in the study."

"You cured Rin-yojosan with it? You have used it to heal your kit?"

"I healed Rin, but, she's human," Kagome was pleading, fearful of where Kento was headed and begging him to see reason. "And Shippo I had to concentrate so hard on, and, and, he's mine! My powers know that he's mine to save and protect. And Rin is a defenseless child, even as hard as I had to concentrate, my power knew it was the right thing."

"Is saving Sesshomaru-sama not the right thing? Nine more have died since my Lord took ill, and the infirmary is bursting with new patients. The Western Lands are at a crux, Isha. We cannot defeat this disease. There is nothing you could do that would make this situation worse." He waved her off before she could object again, and Kagome deflated. She had thought about using her reiki - for more than just assessing Sesshomaru's condition. *But if I make a mistake...* "Come, I have ordered the bath made ready. You smell...human," he finished delicately.

He led her outside, through a chilly, secluded garden she had not even realized was there. A small addition was tacked onto the outer wall of Sesshomaru's sleeping quarters. Kento opened the door and steam billowed out. "Please leave your garments inside and they will be boiled and returned to you. Clean clothing is provided there." He gestured to a shelf with towels, scrubbing cloths and a neat pile of clothes. Kagome breathed in the warm, moist air and felt some of the tension in her ease. "Rest, relax. You will know what must be done, Shikon Priestess."

Kagome started at the use of the title, sure that Sesshomaru had not told anyone her identity, but the screen was already sliding closed. She shook herself and didn't waste any more time contemplating Kento's strange manner. She scrubbed her skin and hair for the first time in almost a week, and rinsed before stepping into the water. Kagome did her best to not think about Rin's tear stained face or

Shippo's worried frown. She even managed not to dwell on the patient sleeping a few feet away. Not even the growing embers of reiki inside her kept her from leaning her head back and falling asleep.

Chapter 7: Powerful Revelation

Kagome awoke with a startled gasp, her head dunking under the rapidly cooling water. She popped back up, sputtering, searching for whatever had woken her. A pulse of youki came her way again, and she nearly killed herself in her haste to get out of the bath and dry off. The thin kimono stuck to her damp skin and she was shivering too badly to do more than tie the obi in a simple knot. She ignored the provided socks and flew through the screen between the bath and Sesshomaru's sleeping chamber.

He still lay on his back, one eye swollen shut, the other open only far enough to reveal a sliver of red. The same color stained his upper lip and mouth. Thick, wet blood ran from his nose and the corner of his lips, trickling onto his bare shoulders and the white bedding. His youki flared again, and a gasp drew Kagome's horrified attention to the anteroom. The screen was parted slightly, and Kento knelt there, struggling for breath. Kagome didn't miss the dark spots on his hands, or the way his skin flushed with fever. Eiichi and Eiji stood behind him in the open doorway to the corridor. Eiichi also had signs of smallpox.

"He, he- is getting worse," Kento panted.

Kagome turned back to the daiyoukai, and suddenly, she knew what had to be done. "Kento, clear the castle."

"The - the whole castle, Isha?"

"Everyone in this building," she clarified. For the first time in days, Kagome felt a sense of true calm settle over her. The *right* thing. No matter how difficult it was, no matter how she struggled and suffered, Kagome *always* did the right thing. She would not allow fear to keep her from that path.

A shuffling sound indicated Kento's crawl away from another overwhelming surge of youki. Kagome stepped forward; Sesshomaru's power swirled around her and called to her. He needed her, whether he knew it or not. He needed her, and she would not let him suffer. She would not let him die. Another flare of energy blew back the sleeves of her kimono and lifted her wet hair into a maelstrom of heat. She stepped forward again, dimly aware of the other demons retreating, and Kento's whispered, "Thank you, Kagome-isha."

Kagome moved with purpose, and Sesshomaru's youki parted and pulled on her, calling her to him. His one open eye did not move, but his breath, raspy and shallow through the metal tube she had inserted in his neck, sped up. "Shhh," she whispered. "It's okay, Sesshomaru, I'm here." This time, she was conscious of her reiki. It had been growing, restless since she got into the bath, and she could feel her own power reaching out to meet his. Like a veil had been pulled from her eyes, she could see the currents of energy in the room. Green, turbulent waves of youki buffeted her and lashed against the confines the daiyoukai seemed to have placed on it. He filled the room with his power. It spilled over, outside the walls, and still more poured out of him, trying to find release.

Trying to find something to fight the enemy that was destroying his body.

Pink threads of reiki emerged from her fingertips. They twined and twisted languidly, tangling with the much larger, more aggressive youki. The holy lines seemed ridiculously fragile next to his

overwhelming strength. As she walked closer to him, her reiki pressed and prodded, slowly smoothing the turbulent waters of his power. She knew instinctively how to direct her energy, in a way she had never considered before. She knelt on the futon, and pink light wound around her and formed a thin blanket over the youki simmering in the room. His power did not retract, but it eased, calmed for the time being.

Kagome pulled his head into her lap, gently pulling his braid out to the side to make him as comfortable as possible. She smoothed her hands across his forehead, lightly touching the place where she knew his crescent should be, under the horrible rash of smallpox. She ghosted across his cheekbones and down his neck to swiftly remove the breathing tube. He stiffened, and blood oozed from the hole. “Shhh,” she repeated and he relaxed again. A damp cloth, cool but still effective, was folded near the bedding and Kagome used it to gently wipe the blood from his skin. She finally settled her hands on either side of his chest, her thumbs resting on his collarbones. Kagome called to her power again, leaving what she had already released to glide along his youki and summoning more than she ever had before - with greater control.

Her hands glowed pink and she leaned over his face, curtaining them both with her unbound hair. She stared into his good, red eye and whispered, feeling his hot, harsh breath on her face, “I’ve got you.”

ooo

Shippo and Rin sat on the steps of the castle, watching the building tension of every demon in the upper bailey. Kento sat near them, at a little table that had been brought outside. He kept records of all who had taken ill or died, where they lived and worked, whom they had come into contact with. He had another long scroll that noted the reassignments of servants and soldiers to keep the castle running and protected during the crisis.

Shippo was very aware that it wouldn’t be much longer before the list was useless. There wouldn’t be anyone left to fill in, or take an extra patrol, or even to care for the sick. The infirmary couldn’t hold their numbers. Futons and pallets had been strung out in the courtyard, the entire upper bailey becoming a quarantined sick room. Those who had not taken ill, or were not yet too sick to move, brought water or cool cloths, extra blankets, to those who lay suffering. The dead were wrapped and laid on pyres in a stone alcove of the high wall. The courtyard stank of burning flesh, and it would continue to do so. Shippo turned his eyes from the pallbearers who carried another victim to the next pyre, waiting to collect enough to start another funeral blaze.

Kento did not look well. His hand shook as he wrote, leaving inky splatters on the edge of his paper. He had to stop several times to cough, but he did not look up as Hisao approached. “I pierced Jun’s throat, as you told me *she* did, and it seems to be helping.” Shippo’s eyes widened. Rin had said Jun was a healer who would help Kagome, but apparently he was sick too.

“I know,” Kento responded quietly.

“She was supposed to help, but things have only gotten worse since that *human* arrived,” Hisao’s words were harsh, and Shippo bristled.

“I know,” Kento repeated, “but we need to give her more time to-”

“Get rid of her. Get her away from Lord Sesshomaru, or I will.”

“I have-”

Shippo didn’t give Kento a chance to finish, but jumped off the steps. His chest blazed with fury and angry tears stung his eyes. He refused to let them fall. “You can’t!”

His own voice was almost drowned out by Rin’s, “Don’t touch her!” Shippo turned to stare at the girl. Only the day previous she had practically accused Kagome of letting Sesshomaru die. She had calmed down since then, but Shippo was both stunned and pleased to see that she was still on Kagome’s side. “Kagome-san will save Sesshomaru-sama; Rin knows it!”

“You have to give her more time,” Shippo added. “Her medicine is good, but Sesshomaru-sama is very sick. You need to wait for-”

“I don’t need to wait for anything, *kit*,” Hisao growled and released a harsh lash of youki that threatened to push Shippo to his knees. He stubbornly pushed back with his own energy, taking the captain by surprise and forcing him back a step.

“If you want to hurt my mother, you’ll have to go through me!” Shippo knew he was no match for Hisao, even if the older demon was showing the first signs of the illness. He had to try. He readied his acorns and his top. Kagome would save Sesshomaru, he knew that. She was just so tired from helping everyone else. She needed time. *They have to give her time!*

As if the kami themselves had heard his silent plea, shouts of outrage and fear erupted below the wall. Hisao turned, only to come face to face with a flying ball of red and silver. “Oi!” Hisao was knocked back, right onto Kento’s table. The wood cracked and ink flew everywhere. “Back the fuck off, asshole! He’s just a kid.” Inuyasha turned to Shippo and Rin, one hand on Tessaiga’s hilt and an ear twitched towards Hisao’s prone form. His youki dipped and swirled around him. “What the hell is goin’ on here, runt?”

Shippo couldn’t stand it anymore, he flew towards Inuyasha and buried his face in the robe of the fire rat. Tears leaked out, no matter how hard he tried to hold them in, and he raced through the tale of Sesshomaru’s sickness and the growing numbers of dead at the castle. “And now they think Kagome isn’t trying hard enough. They want to get rid of her!”

Shippo was surprised when Rin joined him, tugging on Inuyasha’s sleeve and gaining his attention. “Rin thought so too, but Rin was wrong. Please Inuyasha-san, please help Kagome-san stay! We need her! Sesshomaru-sama needs her!” Rin was crying outright, but Shippo did his best to wipe off his tears before Inuyasha or the other males could see them.

The hanyou stood, stunned for a moment, and Shippo was suddenly aware of the silence in the courtyard. Everyone who wasn’t dead or close to it was staring at the half-demon who had entered so dramatically, leaped over the twenty-foot high wall, and knocked Captain Hisao on his back without a fight.

“Keh,” Inuyasha said finally. He picked up both children and set them back on the steps, placing himself in front of them. “As if Kagome would let that asshole die, she can’t even skin a rabbit without

feeling bad. ‘Sides, she knows the only one who gets to kill *my* fuckin’ brother is me!’ There was another ripple of outrage in the crowd, and several soldiers put their hands on their weapons. Hisao came to, and pushed himself out of the remains of Kento’s desk. “Oi, Shippo, who’s this asshole anyway? And when’d you get the second tail?” Shippo nearly broke his neck trying to look at his own tail and almost missed Inuyasha’s grumbled last words, “I leave you and that wench alone for a few days, and all hell breaks loose.”

ooo

Sesshomaru was tired. He wasn’t sure why. He was sitting comfortably, in a quiet, dark place. He didn’t think he had been exhausting himself. The last thing he remembered was working through the reports at his desk... *No*, he frowned. His head had been hurting. Then he was on his futon, and the miko was there. She’d smelled of bitter fear and salty sadness because she couldn’t give him her modern medicine. He’d needed it because...Sesshomaru’s eyes widened with realization, although it did nothing to illuminate the darkness around him.

He was ill. He had contracted the pox that threatened the Western Lands. She had offered to keep him from getting sick, and he had refused, believing that nothing made by human healers could possibly compare to his own powerful self. And perhaps, in the smallest corner of his mind, he had not wanted to appear weak in front of her.

He had been wrong.

That thought, something he had never admitted before, took him aback, and he almost missed the eerie glow that parted the darkness before him. A swirling white light coalesced in front of him, slowly taking shape into his demonic form. He admired himself in a detached way, noting that he had nearly grown to the size Inu no Tashio had achieved before his death. The beast lay down and put his head on his paws, as though he was defeated. That irritated Sesshomaru.

“Get up,” he commanded it in a strangely hollow voice.

The beast did not respond, but another wave of exhaustion overtook his humanoid form. Sesshomaru looked down at his own body, naked and bathed in the glow of his youki. His skin was covered in black pustules, blood dripping onto his torso. He put one hand to his nose and mouth, and it came away sticky. His fingers drifted down to his neck, and he traced the open wound there that allowed breath past the tightness in his throat. His throat...with that realization, all of the pain in his body came back to him. No longer merely tired, he wanted to roar from the blazing agony in his joints, the roiling acid in his belly, the aching tightness in his chest.

The beast stood and circled him. Two tails coiled around his smaller form as though trying to comfort and protect him. His youki dulled the pain, but he could still sense the disease, eating at his flesh and burning through his blood. Sesshomaru sank a deformed hand into his own fur and closed his eyes against the soft pink glow around him. Despair, an emotion he had never before experienced, welled up inside him. He had walked the path of conquest and sought complete perfection, absolute primacy for himself and the Western Lands. *That I am brought so low by illness is -*

Sesshomaru blinked. There was a pink light, a glow, warming the blackness around him. His beast noticed as well, lifting its head and sniffing at the air. Some sound whispered at his ears, but he could not make it out. His beast must have heard it, and appreciated it, for his tails thumped on the ground. “Stop that,” Sesshomaru rasped, “We are not a pup.”

The beast ignored him and wagged harder. The light intensified and brightened, almost blinding in its intensity. Sesshomaru lifted his face, and felt a warm, salty breeze against his skin. A whisper kissed his ears, *Let go, I have you*. The pain in his body exploded, rejecting that light and fueling a wracking, necrotic misery that clawed at his insides. His beast howled.

Sesshomaru reached out a shaking hand, for only the second time in his life, asking for assistance. Pink stars burst behind his eyes and the scent of sweet cherry wood and magnolia blossoms filled his nose even as the pain pulled him back into darkness.

ooo

Kagome could feel the breath in her lungs. *In. Out. In. Out.* She was conscious of the rough texture of Sesshomaru’s skin under her palms. *Pebbly. Don’t press too hard. Ugh, it burst and now it’s sticky.* Her left foot had fallen asleep and she was cold everywhere except where his head lay on her lap. *I should have grabbed the mokomoko.* All of those things ran through her mind, but they came and left like leaves on a breeze, never drawing her focus.

Her being was concentrating on what was happening in the millimeters between her skin and his. In that space her reiki pushed against him, cajoling his youki to gain access to his body. It had seemed like hours, or maybe only a few seconds, and then hot green energy licked up her arms and twined through her hair, securing her hands against him and giving her unspoken permission. Then the hard work began.

With Rin, it had been a matter of letting her reiki flow through the girl’s body. She had identified everything that was Rin, and then she searched for what did not belong. She’d imagined the virus to look like enlarged versions of the black dumbbell shape from her textbook. She then found the vaccine in Rin’s system and pushed it towards her own natural antibodies. A war had raged in Rin’s body, and Kagome became the general, issuing orders and ensuring none of the enemy escaped. She was behind the lines as well, healing damage in the wake of the disease and repairing antibodies to return to the battle. It had been a matter of will and energy and understanding of what she was fighting, and on what ground.

With Sesshomaru, she lost nearly all advantage. He had no potent vaccine in his system that prepared his antibodies to push out invading viruses. In fact, she wasn’t entirely sure demons *had* antibodies. Kagome lost any sensation of her physical body, hunched over Sesshomaru, as she labored to understand him. She needed to identify what was Sesshomaru, what belonged, before she could lay out a strategy. His body was strange to her, and yet familiar.

One heart. *Dub-lub. Dub-lub.* She had heard it through her stethoscope, but from inside him it was louder, more robust. It forced blood through his veins and she followed it.

His blood. *Red like mine*. It was strong and it knew she was inside him. It did not push against her, but considered her, flowing over her power, drowning her in a tide of thick, deep heat that coated her and she nearly suffocated as it explored her - while she explored him. When it withdrew, she was left gasping, but it revealed some of his secrets, showing her how a daiyoukai killed enemies within.

Two lungs. *In. Out. In. Out*. Just like her, but slower. He did not need as much air; he was more efficient. His tissues felt wet, his breath came with difficulty. Laying on the cells inside was the dust of the inoculate she had forced him to inhale. The dead virus was rejected by his body. It had done no good. She could identify just as easily as him that this - *this filth* - was not of Sesshomaru.

Liver and kidneys and stomach. *So empty*. He needed more food, so much more than she did. He needed sustenance of any sort, which he had been denied for days. More than that, he needed meat - proteins and fats, carbohydrates and amino acids. Blood. His stomach craved wet, hot liquid rich with iron and electrolytes.

She mapped his entire body. Traced his muscles and bones. Followed the flow of fluid in his spine. She knew him. Knew what made the body he inhabited youkai. Daiyoukai. Sesshomaru. The farther she pushed, the harder it became, like he was shrinking away from her. No. Like something was pulling him away, pushing an opaque barrier between them. Kagome caught a glimpse, just for a moment, of the tiny black virus that had caused so much devastation in the most powerful being she had ever known.

She narrowed her eyes. It had made a mistake. Sesshomaru was often aloof. He was stoic and egotistical and tight lipped. He was difficult to be comfortable with, harder to like, harder still to love. But he was not alone. She stood by him. There were others too. Others that wanted to be with him. Others that liked him. That loved him. Whatever instinct or fate or villain or cruel twist of virulent destiny had sent this smallpox to Sesshomaru, it had miscalculated. He could not be defeated, because he was not alone.

“I will not let you die, Sesshomaru.”

She wasn't sure if she really spoke or not, too deeply embedded inside him to recognize the signals of her own body as more than distant shadows. A darkness was closing over him, and Kagome could feel his youki withdrawing, being torn away and clutching at her to remain. “I've got you,” she ground out. She forced more power into her hands, pouring reiki into his body.

His youki bucked, flaring in response and racing back from the darkness to reach for her. Energy answered in her without conscious effort. A wellspring within her erupted and Kagome felt all at once torn apart and held tightly by the tremendous outpouring. Pink light blossomed in the room, blinding her to everything but Sesshomaru's face below her and the imagined sight of his being which she still held in her mind. An unnatural wind, holy power tasting like salt and ozone, swept around her, lifting her hair and pulling Sesshomaru's white strands free from his braid. The blackness still clawed at him, and Kagome could feel it reaching across his youki, climbing up the connection they shared to tug at her as well.

“Fight with me, Sesshomaru,” she cried softly. She could feel her own energy faltering, feel her concentration divided between pushing that invader from her own body and eradicating it from the daiyoukai. A small tendril of youki, a hot thread that seemed so thin it might snap at any moment,

unfurled against her skin. It slid along the wide vee made by her hastily thrown on yukata, glided over her collarbone, and slipped up and around her neck to caress her jaw. She held it to her with her reiki and a snarl was ripped from her throat. "Sesshomaru!" Kagome had never been so determined, so absolutely focused and she threw everything she was into Sesshomaru, willing that darkness to be banished from his perfection.

Then, she exploded with power.

ooo

"What the fuck do you mean, 'get out'? I ain't leaving without Kagome, and she sure as hell ain't leavin' until all these idiots are better." Inuyasha-san scowled at Hisao-san and gestured to the sick in the courtyard.

Rin blushed at his language, but she also felt a swell of pride and admiration. Sesshomaru-sama's brother was only a half-demon, but he still stood up to the most skilled fighter in the castle, aside from Sesshomaru-sama of course, and refused to back down. Kagome-san and Shippo-kun were his friends, and Inuyasha-san would do anything for his friends. She was certain he didn't even feel the tiniest bit afraid.

"You are not welcome here, hanyou. Leave or--"

"Not welcome?" Inuyasha snorted. "No shit. I'm not excited to be here either, but Kagome told me to come, and the asshole didn't object - not that he could have done anything about it. I'm here, and I ain't leaving. Unless you want to make me?" Inuyasha-san cracked his knuckles, and from behind him, Rin got a good view as his stance widened and he braced his feet for combat. "But I think you got a few things more important to deal with than havin' your ass handed to you."

"Let him be, Hisao-san," Kento-san interrupted. Rin smiled at Sesshomaru-sama's secretary. He looked tired, but he would talk sense into Hisao-san. "If Kagome-isha has not succeeded by morning, we will discuss this further."

"In the morning? She has been there long enough already. How will we even know if she is doing anything?" Hisao-san was close to losing his temper, his demon markings were growing more pronounced.

"Eiichi and Eiji stayed behind to guard Sesshomaru-sama. They will send word if there is any change." Kento-san paused, finally looking up from the disarrayed papers and ink he was failing to mop up. "Those men deserve recognition for their bravery. I understand there is a good chance she could injure them in the healing process." Hisao huffed, but turned away from Inuyasha to survey the courtyard.

Rin smiled and restrained herself from clapping her hands together. She turned to Shippo-kun to share the small victory, to find him still staring in awe at his two tails. "Two," he muttered. "When did I get two? This is- I have to- When Kagome sees--"

Rin giggled and secured him to her side in a hug. Shippo-kun was growing up, just like Rin was

growing up. Kagome-san would heal Sesshomaru-sama and they would all live at the castle and...Rin's smile fell. Rin would have to apologize to Kagome-san. She had not deserved the things that Rin had said, but Rin had been very sad. Still, she straightened her shoulders, Rin was of the West, and she would correct her error. Just as soon as she could.

"She really tryin' to use her powers on the asshole, runt?" Inuyasha-san asked Shippo-kun quietly. Rin grew nervous when she noticed Kento-san and Hisao-san listening to them.

"Yeah," Shippo-kun whispered. "She promised Rin she would do everything she could to save him." The kit swallowed hard, finally dropping his new tail and looking up at Inuyasha-san the way any frightened boy looked up to a mentor. "He looked really bad. Way worse than Rin did." Inuyasha-san considered that with a frown, and Rin's worry deepened. If Sesshomaru-sama's brother was worried about him, then...

"Keh," he shrugged and folded his arms across his chest. "She'll fix him up, no problem. If I'm lucky she'll at least purify him a little in the process. Bastard."

"Purify?" Hisao-san rounded on the hanyou and his expression was thunderous. "Sesshomaru-sama is being tended by a *miko*?" Hisao-san was not a soft-spoken demon at the best of times, and with his temper inflamed he fairly roared. Every eye in the courtyard - all those that were not already fixed on the newcomer - turned towards them in shock and terror.

Rin stepped up beside Inuyasha-san, grabbing hold of his hand and prepared to defend him and Kagome-san to any of Sesshomaru-sama's vassals. "Kagome-san is a good miko," she called out in a strong voice. "She would never hurt a demon...who didn't deserve it." Rin took another deep breath, knowing that her speech was not going as well as it could have. She squeezed Inuyasha-san's hand for courage. "Please, just listen to Rin. I-" She didn't get a chance to finish.

An explosion washed over the castle. An explosion without sound, or vibration, or pain. Pink light, so bright it was nearly white, blinded Rin and everyone else. A warm wind tugged at her hair, pulling loose strands from her neat bun to curl near her face. Her orange kimono fluttered and she could faintly smell the ocean. Then it was over and silence reigned. Except-

"Oi! What the fuck, wench! How come it's always me?" Inuyasha-san patted ineffectually at his reddened skin, and Rin let go of his hand to fan at the faint smoke rising from his hair. She frowned, wondering what had happened, what had gone wrong that Kagome-san had let out so much power.

"Kento," Hisao-san's shock was evident in his lack of an honorific. "Kento, your face..." He trailed off, and everyone stopped to stare at the secretary. His hair and clothes were in disarray from the same wind that had left behind the salty-warm scent in the air. Rin frowned deeper. Kento-san's face was the same pale mushroom color it had always been. His cheekbones were high and sharp, the smooth flesh of his forehead was marked only by three long blue lines.

The smooth flesh of his forehead.

Rin's gaze snapped to Hisao-san, then the demon on the closest pallet. From one to another her eyes drifted, and she quickly realized what the residents of the castle were joyfully, disbelievingly seeing. There was not a spot among them. Not a single demon had the marks of the disease. Their skin was smooth. Their eyes clear of fever. Some stood and tested their limbs - free of pain. Rin shrieked and

grabbed hands with both Inuyasha-san and Shippo-kun.

“She did it! Kagome-san did it!” With a strength she didn’t know she possessed Rin pulled the two boys behind her as she ran into the castle to find her Lord. “Sesshomaru-sama!” she shouted with elation. Her heart echoed the cry, *Papa!*

ooo

Sesshomaru blinked, but his vision didn’t clear. For a moment, he thought he was still in the blackness of his own mind, waiting for his beast to appear. Then his eyes adjusted, and he saw that it was not total darkness, but only a dim room, further shadowed by a veil of black...hair. He brushed one hand across his face, pushing the hair back. He became aware, all at once, of warm breath against his chin, a light weight on his chest, and the pleasing scent of cherry wood and magnolia blossoms. *Kagome.*

He looked down, not surprised so much at the stiffness of his muscles as at the lack of pain he felt. Her head and upper body lay on his torso, one hand brushed against the marking over his collarbone as he breathed. Her legs curled around his head. The cool pressure of her thighs against his skull soothed the last vestiges of a headache that felt as though it had raged for days.

He did not move immediately, struggling though vague memories of his illness. She had been there, he knew. Kento, as well, but always her. He recalled her soft voice speaking quietly, of nothing and everything. Sometimes telling him fantastical tales of the future which he could barely remember, other times asking questions about demons at the castle, his parents, and Inuyasha. She sang sometimes too. Nothing elaborate or with great skill, but softly and he remembered it calmed him.

Her hands on his skin; he reached one hand to hers where it lay on his chest. He surprised himself by not immediately removing it. By not wanting to remove it. She had washed him, cared for him, soothed him over and over again. And always she told him he would get better. He had to get better. She was with him. She had him. He traced his claws over the back of her hand and admired the silky feel of her. One layer of simple kimono - Sesshomaru wondered where she had gotten it and who had managed to convince her to wear such modest clothing - had been put on with no real skill. The obi was barely knotted, and the neckline gaped in a wide vee revealing the full curve of one breast and the slender column of her neck. *Beautiful.*

Sesshomaru closed his eyes and blew out a long breath. He had already admitted to himself that she was attractive, both in spirit and in flesh. There was nothing to be gained from further admiration of her form. *The full, milky-* He snapped his eyes to the ceiling, to keep them from being drawn back to that intriguing shadow between her breasts. Apparently he hadn’t sorted out his own thoughts as well as he needed to before he had taken ill. It was a nuisance. He shifted, prepared to wake her, thank her for her assistance - which he would do no matter how it pained him - and send her to her rooms. His muscles protested at the small movement, reminding him that although he may have been asleep, his body had not rested for some time.

The miko let out a pained sort of *mewl* as well. He frowned. She was foolish enough to ignore her own needs to care for another, even if they did not need it. He found his arm easing between them,

gripping her thighs and pulling her around to lay beside him. He wondered why he would do such a thing, but the *rightness* of it was too strong to ignore, especially in his exhausted state. He felt grateful. He had the suspicion that the miko might have saved his life. She deserved his respect. His thanks. She deserved a long, recuperating rest as a member of his pack. Sesshomaru didn't examine that thought closely either. There would be time later for such things. It was enough, in that moment, that he was no longer ill. She was beside him, smelling sweet and reassuring, and warm against his bare skin.

His bedding was in disarray, pushed down around his waist and exposing one leg. Her body trapped the coverings beneath her, and she shivered in the cool air. Sesshomaru found his mokomoko nearby, and it covered her from head to toe, leaving enough left over to drape over his chest as well. He closed his eyes, feeling a real, deep sleep pulling at him. Her breath puffed softly against his neck. She had one hand tucked against his side and the other stretched over his chest, fingertips grazing his marking. Her long hair covered his arm and trailed across the futon. Her top leg draped across his, her toes nestling between his calves. Her scent wrapped around him and a heavy blanket of spent power, youki and reiki, lay across the room. The corner of his mouth twitched slightly in a small smile.

He was right about her power. It was *almost* as great as his.

Chapter 8: The Priestess of the Demon

“Eiichi-san! Eiji-san! Rin is so happy!” Shippo worried that Rin was going to yank his arm right out of the socket, she was pulling so hard. He was eager to see Kagome and Sesshomaru too, but he wished the girl would let him get there on his own. Inuyasha had managed to pull away somewhere on the second staircase, and he followed behind, but Shippo was still firmly in her grasp. She laughed and waved at the two rock demons that stood in front of the screens to her Lord’s rooms. They were both pale and looked shaken. Eiji - at least, Shippo was pretty sure it was Eiji - was bent at the waist, hands on his knees. Eiichi leaned back against the wall, breathing heavily. Rin skidded to a stop in front of them and beamed. “Open up for Rin!”

“That might not be a good idea, Rin-yojosan,” Eiichi frowned and straightened away from the wall.

“There was a...disturbance,” Eiji finished, also standing and checking over his brother carefully for injuries.

“No kidding?” Shippo muttered. Eiichi shot him a disapproving glare, but Rin continued as though nothing had happened. Shippo sniffed. Kagome and Sesshomaru were definitely still in there, with a whole lot of spent power. They seemed okay though.

“Rin knows, wasn’t it wonderful?” She smiled brightly and hugged Shippo against her. Shippo wanted to roll his eyes. He was happy too, but he didn’t know why girls had to touch - *all the time*. It was embarrassing. The twins exchanged glances that clearly stated they thought Rin might be crazy.

“Keh. Of course it wasn’t for *them*, kid. They were right next to that ruckus. Even if it didn’t hurt, it had to be shocking as all hell.” Inuyasha strolled up behind them, and the twins snapped to attention. Shippo realized that they hadn’t sensed his presence. Inuyasha could be stealthy when he wanted, but the guards must have been pretty distracted to not smell him in the empty hallway. Shippo frowned. *How much stronger was the purification up here?* “She fry you a bit too?”

“This is the family’s quarters, no one is allowed here,” Eiichi threatened. “Who are you?”

“Ain’t you got a nose, stupid?” Inuyasha snorted derisively, “Or you castle boys spend so much time indoors you can’t scent out a bloodline?” Eiji sniffed discretely, and promptly sneezed, shaking his mohawk.

“Inuyasha-san is Sesshomaru-sama’s brother!” Rin finally let go of the kitsune to grab Inuyasha’s hand and pull him forward. Shippo took the opportunity to step out of arm’s reach and try to sneak past the guards.

Eiji answered the hanyou more diplomatically, “The holy power was more unexpected than painful. It was the youki that stunned us.” He paused for a moment, considering the newcomer. “It seems to have stifled our senses, temporarily.”

“But I think they are coming back,” Eiichi completed his brother’s thought and snagged the kitsune by the scruff. Shippo grimaced, then smiled as innocently as possible from his position, dangling from an irritated demon’s hand.

“Rin wants to see Sesshomaru-sama!” Shippo was grateful for the girl’s redirection, but the rock demon did not let him go. He crossed his arms and huffed. *You fool a youkai’s senses with one little illusion, and they get all peevy.* “Let’s go see Kagome-san together and tell her how well it worked! Don’t you want to thank her?” Rin asked them.

The guards shared a confused look, and Inuyasha rudely pointed out, “She healed you, idiots. She healed everybody in the whole fuckin’ place.”

“That is not a nice word, Inuyasha-san,” Rin reprimanded with a frown. Shippo was shocked to see the hanyou blush. Inuyasha never did that when anyone else told him to watch his mouth, not even Kagome. Of course, she usually followed it with a ‘sit’, but still... “Open the doors, please.”

“Perhaps we should wait-” Eiji said.

“For Kento-san,” Eiichi finished.

Shippo could see Rin was ready to get upset, but Inuyasha interceded. “If you’re worried they fried each other, or that they’ll blast whoever goes in, I’ll go. It’s not like I ain’t fought with either of them before.”

“This is...” Eiji paused, uncertain.

“You wouldn’t stand a chance,” Eiichi concluded. Inuyasha opened his mouth to argue, eyes blazing with stubbornness, but Rin beat him to it.

“Rin will go,” she announced. “Rin is human and can’t be purified, and Sesshomaru-sama would never hurt Rin.” Shippo wanted to go too, but at least if they let Rin in, the demon would set him down and they could finally find out about Kagome and Sesshomaru.

“If he’s sick, you don’t know that bastard won’t-” Inuyasha began. The little human girl rounded on him, one finger extended in warning.

“Do not call This One’s honored father such things.” Shippo’s mouth fell open at her perfect parody of the daiyoukai. Inuyasha must have been similarly stunned, because his eyes went wide and he actually backed up a step. Rin’s voice softened and she placed a small hand on the sleeve of the fire rat, “But it is sweet of you to worry about Rin, Inuyasha-san.”

She turned back to the guards and gave them a sugary smile. “Please open up, Eiji-san, Eiichi-san.” Wordlessly, the guards slid back the doors just enough for the child to slip through, then closed them behind her. Shippo stared at their shocked faces and felt a shiver run down his spine. *Girls are scary.*

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“Sesshomaru-sama?” The soft, high voice slipped through the deep sleep that had claimed him and the daiyoukai opened his eyes. The miko was still curled against him, and he breathed in her scent, searching out the source of his wakefulness at the same time. *Rin.* He turned his head fractionally, careful not to disturb the female using him for a pillow, and looked to the anteroom.

Rin stood, poised to move towards him, frozen between the open screens of his sleeping chamber. She had a healthy glow to her face and her hair was slightly disarrayed, as if she had been running and playing. He felt a deep satisfaction that his ward, his daughter, was well. Because of the miko. *Kagome*.

“Hn.” The single syllable caused her face to split with a grin that made his heart lighter and his own lips nearly twitched in response. She clapped her hands and gave a little squeal, racing towards the futon, and the miko twitched in her sleep, making an uncomfortable moaning sound. Sesshomaru frowned at the girl and used his eyes to gesture at the priestess beside him. Rin stilled immediately, managing to look both chastised and overjoyed at the same time. She leaned over carefully to study the sleeping face of the miko and then caught Sesshomaru’s gaze.

“Sorry, Sesshomaru-sama,” she whispered. Rin had been with Inuyoukai for several years. She had a respectable, quiet whisper. She crept closer, making almost no sound, and peered into Sesshomaru’s face. He allowed her inspection. He could smell the happiness and anxiety in her, the lingering fear. “Rin was so worried when she saw how ill you were.”

Sesshomaru held back a frown. He did not know who had made such an error in judgment to let the child near his sickbed, but they would be dealt with. She should not have been re-exposed to the disease, and certainly his time of minor inconvenience was not a thing for one who looked up to him to see. He corrected himself almost immediately, reminded of his long-standing habit of truthfulness, even to himself. The pox had been considerably more than a mere inconvenience. And many of those under his responsibility still suffered.

He glanced down at the miko. She had more than proved her worth, but as soon as she recovered, she would have to return to treating the others at the castle. He shifted to extract himself from the futon, despite the call of sleep and his protesting body, until Rin stopped him with a small hand on his shoulder.

“You must not wake Kagome-san, Sesshomaru-sama. She worked so hard to save you,” she paused, eyes downcast, “and after Rin was so mean to her. Rin said some not very nice things to Kagome-san. Rin is ashamed.” She glanced up and Sesshomaru raised a brow, inviting her to continue. “Rin told Kagome-san that she should use her miko power to heal you,” she whispered, pale with shame. “Kagome-san tried to tell Rin it was dangerous, but Rin would not listen. Then Kagome-san did it anyway! Rin was a bad girl, but Kagome-san is very good! Her miko power saved Sesshomaru-sama. It saved everyone!”

Sesshomaru frowned and listened with growing astonishment to the girl’s retelling of his healing, of the clearing of the castle and the many hours the miko worked to save him. To save a demon. *Him*. Then his cool mask slipped and his eyes widened when she described the eradication of the disease in the entire castle, or at least the upper bailey that she knew of, and finally told of how Inuyasha had arrived, and he and Shippo waited outside with the guards.

So... The miko had saved him. She had managed to use reiki, the opposite of youki, to cure not only him, but all, or at least most, of his people. He stared down at her head in wonder. Perhaps she was not *almost* his equal in power. *Perhaps...* He shook his head faintly. Those were thoughts for another day. He extended one arm and placed a hand lightly on Rin’s head. However crudely she had done it, his

daughter had convinced the miko to move past her fear and risk much - to gain everything. He was grateful.

“You should rest, Sesshomaru-sama. And Kagome-san, too; she worked so hard!”

“Hn,” he agreed. He slid his hand down her hair and cupped her cheek in a rare display of affection. Tears sparkled in her eyes, stinging his nose with salt, but he could also smell the bright melon of her happiness. “Apologize later,” he ordered, and she nodded solemnly. “Well done, my daughter.” Her face almost split in two with her grin and she hugged Sesshomaru’s arm tightly. He gently extracted his limb and waved her away, sleep tugging at him even more insistently than all of the information she had given him to think about.

“Make sure Kagome-san sleeps really well, Sesshomaru-sama,” Rin reminded him. His mouth twitched in a tired smile at her serious attitude. “I will have food brought and left in the anteroom when you are ready, but sleep first. No one will disturb you.” She grasped each of the shoji screens and slid them together. Just before they closed, she whispered one last thing, for his ears alone, “I love you, Papa.”

Sesshomaru stared at the ceiling and analyzed the strange, expanding feeling in his torso. His lungs and heart felt over-full, but not painful. *Light and filled with...* He closed his eyes and lightly stroked the miko’s hair, stirring up a small cloud of her scent. It was a good feeling. He would let it be for now, there was no need for further examination. His palm drifted over the woman’s shoulder, across her ribs and the dip of her waist, to settle on her hip. He let out a breath and relaxed back into sleep. *A very good feeling.*

ooo

Something smelled delicious. Kagome’s stomach rumbled but she did her best to ignore it and snuggled deeper into bed. There was creamed rice and fish. Her mouth watered, but she stubbornly refused to open her eyes. The bed was so warm, and she felt so good, she didn’t want to move. Her nose and belly were plotting against her. Soup, vegetables, and...cloves. *Cloves?* Kagome blinked in confusion, staring at pale dips and valleys. Her eyes followed a slash of dark magenta, and she looked up - only to come face-to-face with Sesshomaru. She squeaked, flailed, and nearly fell off of the raised futon.

“What- you- Sesshomaru,” she finished in a whisper. She knew her face must be red, and her cheeks were only getting hotter as she realized that he was naked. Her leg twitched where it had escaped the parted opening of her robe...and rubbed against hard muscle. Completely naked, hard muscle. She pushed herself away, and then realized her palm was directly over his nipple. Kagome snatched back her hand and squeaked again. Sesshomaru was staring at her. She closed her eyes in mortification. *Please, please, just part the earth now and take me to hell. It would be a huge favor to me.* Unfortunately, her closed lids turned out to be the perfect backdrop to replay everything she had seen in the five seconds she had been awake. *Sculpted muscle. Purple-red markings that angled exactly where she shouldn’t be looking. Slitted, golden eyes. Smooth, perfect skin that just made her want to-*

Kagome’s eyes snapped open and she sat up. Smooth, *perfect skin.* Her embarrassment completely forgotten, she ran her hands across his chest and shoulders. Her fingers skimmed his collarbones and

she seized the hand that lay on his stomach to examine the unblemished skin and deadly claws. Still gripping his hand with growing excitement, she turned back to his face. She traced his jaw and markings, brushing back his bangs to see his crescent, completely free of the pox. She bit her lip in anticipation and dragged her thumb across his lower lip, demanding entry. His mouth fell open slightly, and she didn't even hesitate, unconcerned with why the cold daiyoukai was allowing such intimacies with his person. His mouth was exactly what she hadn't dared to hope. Pink, healthy tissue on his cheeks and throat. A strong red tongue free of lesions. And, of course, sharp, deadly white fangs.

"Perfect," she breathed. She caught his gaze and smiled, and then was struck with the realization that she had just mauled the Killing Perfection. The *naked* Killing Perfection. She had, quite literally, felt up the Lord of the West and even rubbed his lips and... Her face burned and she opened her mouth, unable to say anything.

"Of course." She blinked. *What did he say?* "I would not be anything less." *Did Sesshomaru just call himself perfect? How much ego can one body hold?* "You are hungry. Food has been provided."

He did not move, so Kagome didn't either. She remembered deciding to use her reiki, she remembered the arduous process of pushing her power through his body. She remembered the heat of his youki, its embrace. She remembered that the disease had almost won; it had reached out to her and then – it was a blur. Her eyes raked over Sesshomaru again. She must have been successful, because he certainly didn't look sick. And he must have been grateful, because she had practically fondled him and she was still breathing. She fought back another wave of blushes and pushed those thoughts aside. He was healthy. She had not killed him. *Focus on the successes, Higurashi.*

"I, ah, how do you feel?"

"Well enough." He must have realized she wasn't satisfied because he continued. "Good. Healthy."

"Good. That's good." She nodded and smiled.

He quirked a brow. "Are you unwell, Miko?"

"No." She frowned and tried to analyze his expression. "I'm kind of sore, and I'm really hungry. I could probably go back to sleep, though."

"Which will it be, Miko?" She stared at him blankly and he explained, "Food, or will you continue trapping me here by sleeping on me?"

"Well- no, I-" she sputtered, struggling to get off of the bed and unwind the white fur that seemed hopelessly tangled around her. Sesshomaru sat up slowly, and Kagome managed to slam her eyes shut just in time to keep from seeing everything that had been under the bedding. "I didn't do it on purpose, you know!" She finally got the fur to release her legs and shoulder and tossed it in his general direction. The tail end must have caught in her obi, because it snagged her around the waist and she tripped, tumbling forward. Her eyes flew open and she caught a glimpse of pale skin and white fur before she slammed into his chest. "*Ooof!*" He secured her with one arm and ran his hands slowly down her arms and back.

"You are not injured," he stated. His breath was warm on her ear and Kagome felt a hot, and completely inappropriate, tingle slide down her spine.

“Nooope,” her voice sounded breathy, even to her ears, and she swallowed. “Just clumsy. And really, really hungry!” She wanted to slap herself for how idiotic she sounded. A low vibration thrummed through her chest and then he was gently standing her upright. The rest of the mokomoko released her waist and he stood, as decent as an insanely well-built demon could be in nothing but smooth muscle and a length of white fur.

“Then eat.” He leaned down, closing the distance between them, and whispered against the side of her neck. “We will speak later, when we have *fed*.” Something about the way he said a perfectly normal word had her breath hitching in her throat. “And we are properly dressed.”

Her eyes were wide and staring at the slope of his shoulder. She certainly agreed that conversation would be much easier, at least for her, if he was not mostly naked. One clawed hand lightly traced the collar of her kimono, and Kagome’s breath stopped. Then he tugged. Sharply. Her eyes went wide and he pulled back, letting her catch a glimpse of a lightning fast smile. Then he was gone in a trail of fur, silver hair, and smug youkai.

Kagome turned to the shoji screen, one hand clasping together her neckline where it must have been gaping indecently. She was sure he could have seen, well, a lot more than he should have. At least *he* hadn’t been embarrassed, she thought grumpily. She was humiliated enough for the both of them. She tucked her clothing back together as well as she could, trying to banish the waves of heat that she blamed entirely on a deserved blush. Sesshomaru was more than egotistical enough to not be bothered that others saw his naked body. *He certainly doesn’t have anything to be ashamed about.* Kagome groaned and tried to throw a muzzle on whatever dark and perverted part of her brain had that thought. She had been hanging out with Miroku too much.

She slid open the screen and inhaled the delightful aroma of breakfast. Happily plopping onto the cushions and piling her bowl with everything she could reach, she let out a moan of contentment. She had a dumpling in her mouth and pickles on her chopsticks when a belated thought occurred to her: *Did Sesshomaru speak in the first person?*

ooo

Sesshomaru set down his brush and stared at the pile of papers and scrolls he had worked though. It had been mid-morning when he woke, and he did not pause to eat once he’d entered his study, working steadily through the reports and lists of decisions and reviews he was required to make as Lord of the West. His industry was interrupted several times each hour. High ranking youkai begged entry to offer him wishes of good health. Servants and guards slowed as they walked past, waiting for a glimpse or sniff of his sudden recovery. He knew it was reassuring for them to see him, to ascertain for themselves that their Lord was strong and well and able to protect them and carry out his responsibilities. Still, it was irritating.

Even Kento was bothersome. He completed his duties with the same deferential efficiency as always, but he also...fussed. Trays of tea and food appeared as though by happy accident, and when Sesshomaru touched nothing they disappeared again, only to be replaced with more appealing or exotic

fare. His ink was refilled before he could use even half of it. The cushion at his desk was replaced with one more luxurious each time he stood to replace a scroll or pace while he read. His stomach felt like a cavernous tomb, his muscles trembled as though he had run across the length of Japan, and his eyelids would have drooped long ago if not for sheer determination. He desired nothing more than to finish what was required and return to his rooms. To *Kagome*.

He snapped his brush and threw a poisonous glare at Kento. His secretary paused in the act of placing a new stack of work on his left. "My Lord?" he asked politely.

"I'd step back if I were you, Kento-san," Hisao advised from the doorway. The captain slid the screen shut behind him, ignoring the fluttering anxiety of the administrator who was in charge of announcing visitors, and tossed a blast of youki over his shoulder. There was a yelp, followed by a retreating scurry, and Sesshomaru felt a vicarious wave of pleasure. There were many days when he wished he could do more than glare to send his retainers and servants running. Those were the days when he left to inspect his lands, rather than deal with the endless drone of paperwork and routine. Unfortunately, he could no more escape his duties than he could blast every youkai in the castle until they left him alone. He considered it for a moment. *Perhaps...* "If Sesshomaru-sama is half as ill as you are treating him, we are both in for another round of alpha-blows."

Sesshomaru suppressed a frown at the name of a childish game where young pups tested the strength of their youki and tried to push each other out of a circle. Much as he would like to forcefully ensure his solitude at times, he had not engaged in such antics since...ever, that he could recall. "This One would not bend so low."

"Really?" Hisao's raised brow sent a worm of unease wriggling in the daiyoukai's mind.

"My Lord was most...powerful in his battle against the disease," Kento said diplomatically. Hisao guffawed, and Sesshomaru waited impatiently for explanation. It was not long in coming, and he stared in disbelief as his captain described how he had oppressed everyone within sight - except the miko - with his youki. Hisao's voice grew somber as he spoke of how she had approached, unafraid and seemingly unaffected, and managed to soothe his instincts.

"I doubted your wisdom in bringing that woman here." Hisao lowered his head, smelling of apology and shame and something else Sesshomaru couldn't quite place. "I was wrong. No one else could have braved your youki to get to your side. When I discovered that she was a miko, I demanded she be removed from your rooms, my Lord. Removed from the castle." A wave of anger so strong he was sure both Kento and Hisao could smell it, despite his tight control, washed over him. He had melted the flesh from Gekien's arm for attempting to touch what was his. Hisao thought to take her away. Both youkai dropped to their knees before their Lord, fists on their thighs and eyes downcast. "I was worried she would injure you, hurt or kill other demons. I was wrong, Sesshomaru-sama. She is your savior. Our savior."

His anger receded and Sesshomaru considered those words. The miko had truly saved him. It was incomprehensible, and yet, strangely...expected. Right. He pieced together all that he had heard and remembered of his illness. Of her. Her power was immense, exceeded only by her capacity for compassion. And apparently, foolish behavior if she charged into a room filled with his youki without a thought. He was torn between amused exasperation and a delayed, irritating fear. He could have hurt

her.

He would *never* have hurt her.

“The most honored guest of this House,” Sesshomaru began, then he smiled. A tiny, wicked smile, “will be most pleased to hear your apology - personally.” Hisao looked pained but resigned, Kento looked entertained by his old friend’s humiliation. The miko would be embarrassed by such a display, but it would reinforce her place. Sesshomaru found himself almost eager to make certain that her station at the castle was secured, that his people respected her.

She had Rin and Shippo, children to love and coddle. She had creatures who needed her care and healing. She had safety and comfort at the castle. If she felt respected, perhaps she would...

Sesshomaru’s eyes widened a fraction of an inch as he realized what he had been considering all day, without knowing it. He wanted her to stay. She had come to treat the ill. By all accounts she had done so - with exemplary results. Since he’d left his rooms that morning he had been turning over things to keep her occupied in the West. At the castle. With *him*.

He had woken with a sense of peace and languid heat coiling in his belly in a most pleasant fashion. The scent of cherry wood and magnolias was heavy in the air. Her silky hair had brushed across his skin and her body was warm against him. He hadn’t been sure if it was because he was intimately familiar with it, or because she was still aroused from the storm of reiki she released, but he had been able to sense her power. Hidden from everyone...but him. It had thrummed inside her like a beast slumbering until it could be released. He’d reached out with his youki and tested it, and was rewarded with a tingle of response that sent gratifying ripples across his senses and tweaked his ear with gentle, teasing reproof that promised - *later*. For once, he did not question the source of his feelings or the nature of his attraction to the miko. He had simply enjoyed her nearness.

When she’d woken, her scent had stirred with another emotion which had taken him a moment to categorize. He had smelled it often enough on other females and been either disinterested or disgusted. Her hint of arousal was uniquely intoxicating, a warm cinnamon that seeped into his pores and had lit a slow fire in his blood. The scent had been tempered with excitement and growing wonder as she had examined him and realized he was no longer marked by illness. Her hands had traced over him in a way that only a mate should. But strangely, he was not affronted. On the contrary, he’d held himself motionless in fear that she would stop. That she would regain her usual modest sensibilities that were so at odds with her dress. She’d then taken her plump bottom lip between her teeth and Sesshomaru almost forgot right then why he had not simply taken the woman from Inuyasha the first time he had seen her and kept her for himself. Then her embarrassment had flared.

Even that was appreciated by his nose. Her emotions had flown by so quickly, his senses could barely keep up. Contentment, elation, arousal, embarrassment. He had wondered how she could feel so much...and what else she was capable of. He’d teased her, needled her, just to see her response. She did not disappoint. She’d gaped and fluttered. Blushed and gasped and frowned. He had known she needed food, perhaps even more than him and he’d wished briefly he could have taken the time to hunt down a stag, or a boar, or both. His mokomoko had slid along her skin and he was entranced by the dual sensation of her skin on his fur and sweet, spicy cinnamon in his nose. He had forced himself to leave her, to bathe and clear his head and let her deal with the pressing needs of a fragile human body.

He could not resist one final push, satisfied with an action that had both concealed what his eyes sought out from any others and sent a spike of peppery irritation through her.

Such thoughts had been in the back of his mind all day. As he managed the Western Lands he puzzled over what to do with her. He wanted her – for more than just her knowledge of the future. He was honest with himself, always, and that was an undeniable truth. She was strong and loyal. He had already accepted that she not only deserved a place in his pack, but would be an excellent addition to his House. To the West. She surprised him, which was difficult for anyone to do. She teased him and pushed him and tested him, and he had only tried to kill her that one time - and he hadn't really known her then. The miko had forgiven him as well, so that incident could be set aside. She was pleasant company. Even her incessant chatter was often soothing, in its own way. Certainly she was amusing. She was beautiful, intelligent, maternal.

He resettled his mokomoko, only listening with one ear to Hisao and Kento discuss the latest news of the castle. How family packs were coping with loss, how the residents were reacting to the revelation of a miko in their midst. Her scent rose from his fur and he breathed deeply.

He wanted her. He would have her. Human or not, she would add to the West. And if he was honest with himself, he did not care about that anymore. He wanted her not for what she could add to his House, his strength, his position. He wanted her for himself.

“-I had heard that too, but I did not realize the new title had spread so far.”

“You frown, Kento-san. Do you worry she will not be pleased?” Hisao asked. Sesshomaru snapped back to full attention.

“Kagome-isha is most deserving, but I am not certain the name will-”

“What name?” Both inuyoukai turned to him. He glared, demanding explanation. If any voiced slurs against her, he would make certain they regretted such foolish action.

“Many call her Kagome-sama,” Kento replied calmly. “Everyone in the castle is grateful for her eradication of the disease. They wish to show her high respect.”

Hisao snorted. “Respect. Damn near awe. Your servants are falling over themselves to attend her. Her former patients are clamoring to sing praises of her kindness and healing skill. My soldiers debate how strong her power would be in battle against our enemies. Every male in the castle speaks of her beauty.” Sesshomaru did not bother to quell the instinct to narrow his eyes and a low vibration pulsed across the room, dragging silence behind it.

Kento cleared his throat, “They all refer to her only in the most honored tones, my Lord. Kagome-isha, Kagome-ue, Kagome-sama-”

“Miko no Mao,” Hisao said with a smile. Sesshomaru considered his captain. The demon nodded. “I heard that one in the village late this afternoon and it has already spread up to the castle.”

“Hn.” Sesshomaru rose, ignoring the audible cracks of his stiff joints and the lingering soreness in his muscles. He handed a last scroll to Kento. “Prepare a report for This One by mid-day tomorrow. Hisao will assist you with news of the North.”

He left them behind and made his way to the stairs, gradually picking up speed. Her scent stirred in his fur again and a small smile lifted the corner of his mouth. *Kagome. Miko no Mao, indeed. Priestess of the Demon.*

Chapter 9: Breaking Down Walls

“Whadaya mean you’re stayin’?” Inuyasha’s eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms over his chest.

Kagome was too familiar with that pose. He was preparing for a long argument. She sighed. “I need to check on everyone here, Inuyasha. I still can’t believe I healed all of those people at once, and without purifying anyone!” Despite the pending argument, she couldn’t help how happy and proud she was of that. She would have never believed herself capable of something so powerful.

“Oi! Don’t forget about me, wench - and why are you always fryin’ *me* anyhow? Asshole didn’t even look singed,” he complained.

“Inuyasha-san,” Rin warned. The hanyou blushed and Kagome glanced over to the human girl who was helping Shippo lay out a futon on the floor. She wasn’t really a little girl anymore, especially not by the standards of the feudal era. Kagome guessed that she was around ten or eleven - although perhaps more. Her lifestyle before she met Sesshomaru was not conducive to healthy, normal growth. She could be small for her age. Kagome covered her mouth to hide a smile. Rin certainly had the presence of an adult when she wanted to. Inuyasha was put in his place with less effort and more success than Kagome had ever managed. Perhaps it was a skill the girl picked up from Sesshomaru.

“Keh,” he huffed in apology.

“I already said sorry for that, Inuyasha,” Kagome repeated for perhaps the fourth time. “I don’t know why it is so hard for me to keep my power from purifying you. Maybe my reiki just has trouble deciding if you are more human or youkai. Or maybe,” she considered a new thought, “maybe it just forgets you are there.”

“What?” His ears drooped, and Kagome felt awful.

“Not like that!” she reassured hastily. “I mean, you’re always with me, since my first day in this era. I think I am so used to you, I just expect you to be there. I don’t have to think about it, you’re just around when I need you.” She smiled, trying to tell him that she didn’t mean to slight him. She relaxed when he rolled his eyes and sat down, back against the wall. “I’m glad that Sango and Miroku decided to stay in Edo and make medicine for some of the infected villages in the East. I should go around to some of the Western villages as well. Sesshomaru said that the disease was in several - both human and youkai.”

“Don’t be thinkin’ you’re gonna do healing stuff tomorrow or anything. You still look like shit.”

“Gee, thanks Inuyasha,” Kagome said dryly. She *was* tired. Exhausted, really. She had eaten a late breakfast by herself, and after discovering Sesshomaru had disappeared, she’d made use of his bath and lain down on the futon in his antechamber to go back to sleep. She didn’t sleep well though, and was almost grateful when Shippo and Rin had arrived to wake her up. She had eaten lunch with Inuyasha and the children and spent most of the afternoon watching them color and listening to her hanyou friend describe all that had happened in the village since she had left.

It didn’t escape her notice that the rock brothers had discreetly followed her most of the day as well. Inuyasha had, of course, bluntly confronted them, saying that he was more than enough protection for

her. Eiichi was only saved from a physical fight by Eiji, who smoothed things over. The two were in the hall still, despite the late hour. She could tell from the twitching of Inuyasha's ears. Unfortunately, she couldn't sense them with her own reiki. At first she had worried that she had broken herself somehow, or used up all of her power. A brief meditation, just like Miroku had taught her, reassured her that her reiki was still there - just resting.

Resting sounded like an excellent idea. Shippo had begged with his huge eyes to stay in Rin's rooms, rather than on the other side of the castle in the guest quarters. Kagome had relented, unable to deny her little two-tails. She felt another burst of pride over his accomplishment. Shippo was still a bit stunned; he kept petting his own tails as if to reassure himself they were there. Kagome admitted that his illusion of the pox-stricken Rin had been very convincing, but despite the new tail she had extracted promises from the kit that he would not use his tricks to frighten innocent people, or demons, in the future. She studied him for a moment as he argued good-naturedly with Rin; he seemed to have grown a bit taller, too. She frowned, wondering how fast kitsune developed. Perhaps Sesshomaru could tell her later.

A blush returned to her cheeks. She hadn't seen him since the incident that morning, and she wasn't eager to do so until she could look him in the eye without picturing...everything else. Kagome had never thought she could be so attracted to the daiyoukai. He was beautiful, certainly, and well-built, obviously, but he was *Sesshomaru*. He was Inuyasha's cold, murderous older brother. He had tried to kill her once, although...he had been their ally for *years*. Well, almost two years. Or maybe closer to a year and a half.

He had even saved her a few times. She forgave him for the first misunderstanding. She would have been upset too, under the circumstances. He didn't even really fight with Inuyasha anymore, not since Naraku's defeat. It was more like...play fighting. Like Souta and his friends wrestling on the lawn. They pushed each other around to see who was strongest, but nobody was seriously hurt. She pictured Sesshomaru pinning Inuyasha in a headlock and giving him a noogie. *The daiyoukai's sleeves pushed up, his muscles tensed, his eyes glowing in triumph and his mouth-*

She shook herself. Maybe it would be better if she asked Kento what he knew about kitsune. It would certainly be safer. For her sanity. And her pride. Kagome pushed those thoughts away and washed her face and hands in the basin the servants had provided. She gave the children fresh water to do the same, and they all brushed their teeth as well. Even Inuyasha did so, although he grumbled about it. She made a mental note to bring back more toothbrushes the next time she went home. Inuyasha went through them at an alarming rate, and she hadn't seen Rin in months before the sickness came. The pink sparkly child's brush was looking bedraggled, and a bit juvenile for a girl who was nearly a teenager. She then brushed everyone's hair, drawing shy thanks from Rin and limp contentment from Shippo. Inuyasha refused, as usual, but she knew he would borrow her comb once everyone was asleep and take care of himself.

Kagome crawled into bed and Shippo cuddled up next to her. Rin lay down on her futon, close to the edge so she could look down at them, "Will you tell us a story, Kagome-sama?"

Kagome shook her head. She was a little uncomfortable by the girl's new title for her, but Rin had apologized sweetly and profusely for her outburst during Sesshomaru's illness. The girl insisted that the new title was deserved and continued to place Kagome on the same high level as her Lord. *Well,*

perhaps just a bit lower. Kagome smiled to herself and smothered a yawn. She tried to think of a short story, but she really *was* exhausted.

“Please, Kagome,” begged Shippo.

“Keh. Kagome’s tired, leave her alone, runt.”

Rin’s eyes grew huge and she turned them on the hanyou, “Inuyasha-san, Rin really needs a story.” Kagome wanted to grin. *That is a master at work.*

“Eh,” he gave in to her puppy-dog face, “I’ll tell one tonight.” Inuyasha rearranged himself to lean against the open shoji to the anteroom, the outer doors within view so he could protect them, and began, “My mother used to tell me this one. Long, long ago, there lived an old bamboo wood-cutter. He was very poor and sad also, for no child had Heaven sent to cheer his old age...” *

Kagome smiled as she drifted off to sleep, thankful that her friends were safe. Glad that Inuyasha was taking staying in his brother’s castle so well. Happy that Sesshomaru was healthy and that she had helped his people like she’d promised she would. She cuddled Shippo close and wondered when Sesshomaru would rest, and if he ever told bedtime stories to Rin. Sleep claimed her, and she dreamed of long silver hair and white fur.

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She wasn’t there.

Sesshomaru felt a moment of panic and unreasonable anger. When he had left, she had been eating and he was certain she would go back to sleep, she had smelled so tired. He had left strict instructions with the guards to keep her safe, and yet she was no longer in his rooms. Someone was going to explain why his expectations were not met. It would not be a pleasant conversation.

A servant had followed him into the anteroom and quietly began setting out a meal. Sesshomaru ignored the ravenous calls of his stomach and followed his nose back into the hallway. He turned one corner, heading towards the other end of the castle, and immediately found his quarry.

The guards stood in front of Rin’s rooms. They sensed his arrival and lowered their heads with respect, but did not move from their positions. He reached out with his senses and relaxed fractionally when he found Kagome, most likely sleeping considering her steady heartbeat and even breath, alongside Rin and Shippo. Distaste soured his relief. The hanyou was there as well, once again mixing his scent with the miko’s. He entered without a glance at the rock demons and found his half-brother, hand on the hilt of his sword, guarding the doorway into Rin’s sleeping room. His daughter was buried deep underneath her bedding, head covered as usual, only one arm poking out to flop onto the futon below her. Her fingers tangled in the kit’s red hair.

The miko was turned towards him, her pale face calm, her pink lips parted in a ghost of a smile. His youki smoothed out at the sight; he hadn’t realized it was agitated...until it no longer was. She wasn’t where he had left her, but she hadn’t gone far. The miko was safe, and he could make her aware of her new quarters later. No doubt the kit needed her reassuring presence after the unsettling days of illness and worry when he could not see her. The hanyou, on the other hand, had no acceptable reason for his presence.

Sesshomaru turned narrowed eyes on Inuyasha, who met him with an equally irritated expression. There was no need for the hanyou to be in Rin's rooms. And since Sesshomaru had decided he would keep the miko, there was no need for Inuyasha to be at the castle at all. He would not wake her; she was sleeping peacefully and needed the rest. The guards would watch over her - and this time they would alert him if she changed rooms. He still needed to eat, and Inuyasha needed to know how things would be. His chest rumbled in a low command that had Inuyasha straightening, eyes wide, and the kit twitching in his sleep. Sesshomaru gestured with a slight tilt of his head for the hanyou to follow him, then returned to his rooms. He paused only to give precise instructions to Eiji and Eiichi - and notify them of very personal consequences should they fail.

Inuyasha followed him back to his anteroom and leaned casually against the wall while Sesshomaru sat down to eat. The daiyoukai could have swallowed a wild boar whole, but he set a sedate pace as he served himself a bowl of meat and a cup of tea. He had almost finished his fourth helping when Inuyasha finally exploded. Sesshomaru was surprised; he hadn't expected the hanyou to have so much patience.

"What the fuck do you want, asshole?" His tone was disrespectful and nearing petulant, as usual, but he did not make any aggressive movements, which was unusual. Perhaps the pup was maturing. After almost a quarter millennium, not counting the time he had spent pinned to the God Tree, it was high time.

"This Sesshomaru informs you that the miko will no longer need your protection. She is staying in the West."

"No shit, she already told me." Inuyasha rolled his eyes and Sesshomaru paused. He hadn't expected his half-brother to take the news so well. Nor had he considered that Kagome might agree with his intention - and inform the hanyou. Sesshomaru would have secured her acquiescence shortly, but it was gratifying to know she had reached the same decision on her own. "Your rock guards are okay for here in the castle," Inuyasha continued, "but I'll stick around until Kagome is finished up and take her back to Edo. There ain't much to do there in the winter anyhow, and Kagome is slow as hell. If I don't carry her she'll-"

Sesshomaru was across the room before his chopsticks hit the table. One claw held his half-brother's sword hand immobile, the other gripped Inuyasha's throat. *No one takes what is mine.* He could feel his youki rising, tensing for a fight. The miko would stay in the Western Lands. And no other male would carry her, would touch her, ever again. His upper lip pulled back from his teeth and Inuyasha's eyes widened - before the hanyou scowled and punched Sesshomaru in the face.

"What's wrong with you, fucker? If you want to fight, then let's do this!" He lashed out with one foot that Sesshomaru didn't bother trying to dodge. He accepted the blow and responded by squeezing his brother's throat. Youki flared around him.

"She stays," he growled.

Inuyasha snarled, then hesitated. "You *want* her here?" His voice was a little garbled, but that was understandable with the claws wrapped around his neck. Sesshomaru's youki responded in the affirmative, lashing out and sending Inuyasha a firm message to put him in his place. "You didn't ask, didja?"

Sesshomaru bared his teeth and repeated his command, “She stays.” Inuyasha laughed. The sound was unsettling. Not just because it was inappropriate, given the situation, but without enough air it had a wheezing, high-pitched quality that hurt the daiyoukai’s ears. He let go of the hanyou and swiftly moved out of range. The laughter didn’t stop, but grew in intensity, until Inuyasha was rolling around on the floor. “What is the meaning of this?” His tone promised deadly intent, but his half-brother ignored it, grabbing his ribs and struggling for breath.

“You- you think-” Laughter overcame him again, and Sesshomaru briefly wondered if insanity ran in Izayoi’s family since it certainly didn’t come from the pup’s demon side. “Oh man, I can’t wait ‘til she hears this. Finally, someone else gets to know what it’s like to be on her bad side.” He managed to sit up against the wall, and his chuckles died down, but he was grinning.

Sesshomaru couldn’t repress a tiny frown. It was troubling that he seemed unable to control his own responses where the miko was concerned. First Gekien, then he threatened Hisao, then Inuyasha...although he had injured Inuyasha more grievously while *sparring*. However, he’d never lost his temper with the hanyou. For a moment, he had been acting completely on instinct. It was not a comfortable sensation, to lose himself to his emotions. He needed to consider the implications with calm logic. Unfortunately, there were more pressing matters ahead of him.

“You do not believe the miko will remain,” he stated. Inuyasha didn’t answer, but his eyes, so human and full of emotion, sparkled with gleeful malice. Sesshomaru was loathe to admit that he lacked knowledge of any sort, especially to his half-brother. Especially regarding the miko. However, he refused to accept defeat in his desire to have her, and if there was strategic advantage in what the hanyou knew... “Why?”

“You’re askin’ me? Oh, fuck no, this is gonna be *too* good! She’s gonna turn you out like a muddy pup and jump back down the well so fast you’ll swear she can fly.”

Insolence. Sesshomaru wanted to rip out the hanyou's tongue for taunting him. It would grow back...eventually. *Hn.* Perhaps there was another way to get information from the idiot. “She stayed with you.”

“I didn’t make her, you idiot. She stayed ‘cause she loves me.” The easy reply was not what Sesshomaru expected, or desired. Hot flames of rage seared his stomach and burned his blood. The miko *loved* the hanyou. A human sentiment, but he knew it was powerful. *Hers should not be given to Inuyasha.* Sesshomaru was not prepared for the rush of feeling that overcame him, and his control slipped for a moment. Inuyasha’s eyes widened, and the daiyoukai immediately lashed iron bands around his emotions - too late. Inuyasha sniffed dramatically, and his eyes narrowed. “Oh *hell* no.” He growled and crouched in a fighting position. “No fuckin’ way.”

“Hn.” Sesshomaru decided no response was wisest. Inuyasha’s nose wasn’t even half as sensitive as his own, but it was still just as good as most full inuyoukai. He would have smelled Sesshomaru. It only remained to be seen if the hanyou could accurately decipher the scent.

“You- you’re jealous? You *want* her? *You* think you have the *fuckin’* right to want *her*, you asshole!?”

Sesshomaru braced himself, and was hit by a snarling ball of red and silver. They crashed through the shoji screen and into his private garden. Snow was falling, and it blanketed the ground, softening their

impact and tingling the bare soles of Sesshomaru's feet. He grappled with his half-brother, trying to reign in his own instincts when he caught her scent on the hanyou. She had touched him, probably embraced him. Sesshomaru snapped his teeth and shoved, throwing Inuyasha away with a powerful thrust to crash into the rock walls of the secluded garden.

With surprising grace, and quick reflexes for a half-demon, Inuyasha flipped and hit feet first. He sprang off of the stone and launched himself again. "She's too good for you!" Sesshomaru was ready with extended claws.

Inuyasha saw the danger in time to change course, but not quick enough to completely avoid the deadly weapons. They raked across the side of his head and neck, drawing blood and snagging the threads of the fire rat. *How dare he*, Sesshomaru seethed. *How dare he try to keep her from me?* He charged and with lightning swiftness slammed his fist into the hanyou's gut and slashed his claws through the place where his face had been only moments before. His half-brother dodged the second attack, landing a blow of his own to Sesshomaru's lower back as he twisted and rolled away from the fight.

"You heartless sonofabitch, what makes you think you are even good enough to look at her like *that*?" His shouted accusations only made Sesshomaru angrier. He could feel his youki rising, even as he tried desperately to tie it down and curb the instincts screaming at him to kill, to destroy, to end the existence of one who was weaker than him. One who made claim to *her*. *Kagome*.

He darted forward, only to have Inuyasha feint. Sesshomaru's face split with a savage grin, seeing the ploy for what it was. He anticipated the movement and caught his brother with a blow to the chest, throwing him back into the bathhouse. Wood splintered and cracked and he circled, prowling, waiting for the hanyou that would touch what was his to rise and make a target of himself.

"She stays," he snarled. It was a promise, a vow, a pledge not to his half-brother, but to himself. He would not let her go. Inuyasha rose unsteadily, shaking his head and preparing to attack again. The miko was *his*, and she *would* be with him, at his side. There was no other choice, no other path. He would accept nothing less. He would do whatever it took to keep her, to make her stay, to see that this was where she belonged. With him. Dokkasou dripped from his claws. He would even cull his pack if it came to that.

"*What* are you doing?" Her voice cut through the haze of desperate rage that had nearly consumed him. He did not have to look over his shoulder to know she stood at the narrow tunnel that led to the larger family gardens and Rin's rooms. "Are you *trying* to kill him?"

Sesshomaru narrowed his eyes and prepared for her anger. He could smell it coming off of her in waves. Thick, heavy pepper burned his nose, followed by the sharp bite of her concern. She stomped forward and he did his best to smother everything inside him in a frozen lake of apathy. He would deal with it later. He would find a way to soothe her, to make her see reason. She would be angry for a time, but she would stay. He would find a way.

"Sit." The command plunged Inuyasha to the ground. Sesshomaru had the briefest impression of wide, shocked golden eyes, and then the beads of subjugation glowed and his half-brother was tasting the rich earth of his garden. He blinked, not sure what to think of that. *The miko defends me*. A sweet, warm blanket of pleasure wrapped around him - made even better by its unexpected nature.

Then, she ripped it away. “And you!” She rounded on him, eyes blazing with blue fury. “I just got you fixed up. What do you think you are doing antagonizing him? You are his *older* brother, act like it! There is no reason for you to constantly assert yourself! Grow up,” she snarled. He keenly felt the loss of that strange feeling of comfort and at the same time admired her ferocity. “I don’t know why I bother with either of you!” She threw up her hands and the daiyoukai realized exactly what she had done to him. IN the short two weeks since Rin had taken ill, she had stealthily slid her purity into the cold, empty place inside him that allowed him to stay apart from others. To not need others. He had to turn his face away, fearing even *his* mask would crumble under the heavy weight of his emotions. He closed his eyes, memorizing her delicious scent and trying to prepare words that would soothe her.

A soft, small hand cupped his cheek and his eyes flew open. She was there, in front of him, her face crumpled with worry. She still smelled of anger and concern and exhaustion. But there was also more, so many more complex scents and feelings that he could not sort them all out. “Are you all right?”

“Him!” Inuyasha shouted, outraged, as he finally freed himself of the spell, “What about me?”

She didn’t turn around, but her face tightened. “He has been very sick, and recently, thoroughly, purified. He shouldn’t be playing around with you right now!”

“Playing! What the fuck, wench! You think he was playing with that *poison*?” Inuyasha’s youki had risen sharply, stronger than it usually was. The shallow claw marks on his face were already mending, but Sesshomaru knew the hanyou would be sore for several hours.

“Unless you want to be eating dirt again you should watch what you say, Inuyasha.” Her voice was deadly calm, and her fingers were stiff with tension against his face. He was captivated by the authority she demanded. “Or maybe you would like to see what it feels like to have my reiki crawling around inside *you*? Hmmm?”

A wave of violently possessive rage nearly consumed him. She belonged to *him*. No other would feel her power, her *self*, in such an intimate way. Inuyasha’s pale face was reassuring. Clearly the miko had not gifted him with the same exclusive experience he had been privileged to. Or perhaps the hanyou was not strong enough to bear up under her power. *She is meant for me alone*. His youki flared in agreement.

“Ka-go-me,” Inuyasha said softly. It was almost a whimper.

“Inuyasha,” she said quietly, “You broke my bath.”

Sesshomaru would have laughed. If he were anyone else, in any other moment, he would have laughed at the expression of absolute horror and stark terror on the hanyou’s face as he realized the growing puddle he was standing in was formerly a bathhouse. A bathhouse that the fastidious Kagome had used and appreciated. She was *extremely* fond of her baths. Sesshomaru recalled that fact about her and filed it away for future reference. In the meantime, he was gratified to see Inuyasha’s ears flatten against his head.

“I didn’t mean to wake you up, Kagome,” he whispered by way of apology.

“Go watch over Shippo and Rin.” His half-brother clearly didn’t appreciate her imperious tone, but he slowly obeyed, shuffling towards the narrow path cut into the mountain and Rin’s rooms. “I am going

to make sure Sesshomaru is okay.” He would have denied that the hanyou could have injured him in any way, if not for Inuyasha’s immediate protest, and her swift denial. “He is my patient, Inuyasha. Get your ass. Out of my sight. Or you’ll be a patient too.”

She seized Sesshomaru’s hand before Inuyasha had even disappeared and started a determined march towards the destroyed shoji screens and his anterooms. The snow was falling thicker, catching on her waist-length hair and melting on the light material of her sleeping robe.

Sesshomaru contemplated many things while she pulled him into his sleeping quarters and directed him to the futon. Her sandals, hastily slipped on without socks, were discarded. She dug through the bag on his floor, her round bottom high in the air and covered only by thin silk, muttering, “Arrogant youkai, always have to prove something...Neanderthals...testosterone...brains of a flea...” She was strong and determined. *Magnolias and round curves*. She had her own mind and was not hesitant to protest his decisions or make her own thoughts known. It was part of the intricate puzzle that made her unique. That made her Kagome. *Cherry wood and enticing shadows*. He decided he would not want to keep her if it meant she would have to lose that part of herself. Perhaps the hanyou was marginally correct; perhaps he needed to strategize. She might need more than just a command. He might even have to present her with reasons. Maybe even...compromise.

She gave a triumphant shake that drew his eyes back to her curves. She had found what she was looking for and glided toward him. He sat patiently while she used her flash-light to look in his eyes and mouth. Before she could lift the end of her listening tubes, he removed his shirt, reassured and supremely satisfied by the thick scent of cinnamon she tried to smother. She pressed her hands against his chest and listened to his heart and he allowed himself a smug smile while she wasn’t looking.

He would plan an appropriate course of attack for this particular prey. She was cunning and rare, and worth the effort of a long and challenging chase. When she brought out her device to measure the heat of his body, he scooted backward, forcing her to kneel on the futon to put the stick in his mouth. His mokomoko secured itself around her while she counted, waiting for the stick to be ready. She was his. She would stay. She withdrew the stick and frowned when she read it.

“Too warm still, I think,” she muttered. He seized the stick and tossed it into her bag.

“My Isha decreed rest,” he replied. He used his youki to create a breeze that blew out the only lantern still lit in the sleeping room. Gilded by the flickering shadows made by the candles in the anteroom against the closed shoji screens, her skin glowed, her eyes wide with surprise and trust. She would stay, because *she* wanted to. He would make it so. He lay back onto the futon, pulling the bedding over them both. She squeaked in protest, but he ignored her sounds, focusing on what her scent told him instead. He smirked in the darkness, sensing success was very close indeed.

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Ryukostokken prowled through the snow that drifted across the battlements of his castle. It melted under his boots, leaving a trail of water that quickly re-froze into icy puddles. He had not heard from his spy in over a week, and he was growing restless without any new information. He had expected news sooner of the pup's worsening condition - if not his death. Ryukostokken breathed deeply of the frigid air. Winter was upon Japan. He could smell a hard, heavy storm moving south. It would lock the Western Lands in cold and make any defense they had managed to construct while battling the illness

easy to overcome. He blew out, sending a gust of steam and ash into the air.

The half-blood spy would return soon enough, and the waiting, while tedious, only meant that Sesshomaru's suffering was prolonged that much further. The Dragon Lord smiled. He relished the thought of striding across a battlefield littered with the dead of the West to meet the pup. Seeing his pride wracked, his legendary face ruined by scars, his forces decimated by casualties of the disease... it would be worth the wait. In the meantime, he would inspect his army. They were restless, but he would make his move soon. Once the West fell, all of Japan would be his. Ryukostokken jumped onto the wall and looked to the stone courtyard far below. He would crush them all below his heel.

A bellow of pent up rage, of anticipation, of triumph echoed in the Northern Castle, and those few who did not know the source felt the hairs on the backs of their necks raise. Those that recognized the voice of their Lord trembled in terror.

**The Bamboo-Cutter and the Moon-Child, a Japanese folktale from World of Tales .*

Chapter 10: What to Expect, When You're Expecting

Ryukostokken ignored the captain at his side, looking over the small bands of warriors arrayed before him. There were only a few in each group, but those dragon demons had been trained in stealth and assassination for decades. They would not fail him. Their destinations had been carefully chosen – the locations of Western informants and allies. The time to reveal himself was close. Snow was falling heavily in the North, and the storms would reach into the heart of Japan soon.

He smiled, baring his fangs and prowling across a low rise that looked out over the border of the Northern Lands. He had recruited spies to reveal the weaknesses of his enemy. He had spread disease to debilitate them. This would be his third move in the game he played against the pup. Sesshomaru had not even known he was under attack, but he would soon realize that there was a more powerful force working against him. Years of planning, of working to increase the size of his army by any means, would soon yield results. Ryukostokken felt a surge of greedy anticipation, imagining the skinny little pup, his pretty face ravaged by pox, lying weak in his castle with the dead bodies of his servants around him. He wondered if the human whore had survived, and felt almost gleeful adding her decaying body to the scene in his mind. The pup, just like his father, grieving over a weak human. *Pathetic. Perfect.*

“Send them out,” he commanded.

“At once, Ryukostokken-denkaue.” The captain, scarred as he was, issued orders to the men. Each band was sent out to a predesignated sector in the Eastern Lands. They would harass the population there, decimate villages that had survived the pox, disrupt trade routes, and gain information. Once the Eastern Lord was sufficiently occupied and crippled from disease and border incursions, then...then Sesshomaru would have one less ally. Then his soldiers would be able to sweep through the East to reach Lord Hirimoto in the South. He savored the impending taste of revenge.

Ryukostokken smiled and grabbed hold of the sightless wind youkai that served as his transport. She tossed a brown leaf into the air, increasing its size with her youki to carry them both. She bent the air currents without speaking to speed them to their destination. Long experience had taught her that the Northern Lord was not appreciative of youkai that were not dragons. Or females that did not know their place. She knew hers.

Ryukostokken stood behind the demoness and gripped her hair, drawing a sharp noise of pain. The wind witch knew her place, as did all in his domain. Once he regained all that rightfully belonged to him, he would remind other youkai why the dragon demons were the oldest, had survived the longest. They were the most powerful and they were made to rule all others. The humans too, those he did not slaughter or feed to his armies, would know their place. He was reminded again of the image of Sesshomaru - weak and struggling for life. Perhaps it would be better if his human woman had not died from the pox. Ryukostokken growled in excitement, his fist tightening and drawing another wince from the female.

He pictured the human at Sesshomaru's side, fearful as a great dragon approached to rip out the heart

of the pup. Everyone would know the place he allowed them, and even a human whose could retain a position in Ryukostokken's empire. He would show her where her kind belonged, and treat her to the power of a true daiyoukai while her Lord looked on. That would be best. Sesshomaru would be inflicted with the pain of knowing Ryukostokken had taken everything from him: his health, his beauty, his power, his title, his lands, and people. *Especially* his woman.

The dragon lord smiled, eager for all that would come.

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Kagome smiled weakly as another demon bowed before her. "Thank you, Miko-sama. Thank you." It had been going on for hours. At first she had been embarrassed and surprised, but after the initial five or six times, it had morphed into a sort of surreal acceptance. She thanked the lower level bird youkai with his beaky face and trailing head feathers and wished him continued good health. The bird beamed, and backed away, continuing to bow and offer thanks.

"I really wish they would stop that," Kagome sighed. She had started out that morning intending to visit Jun. Eiichi and Eiji trailed behind her, escorting her through a maze of corridors and shadowed gardens and into the infirmary. Jun's reaction should have been the first indicator that things were not as they had been at the Western Palace.

"Miko-sama," Jun left his place straightening pallets to bow low before her. "You honor me with your presence. What may I do to assist you?"

"Please, Jun-san," she tried to brush off the strange feeling his extreme respect gave her, "I have asked you to call me Kagome. Just Kagome."

"I could not, you must not sink so low, Miko-sama."

"At least not miko, then? You worked so hard alongside me, I feel we know each other well enough for names, Jun-san."

"Kagome-sama, then." He grinned, revealing the fangs of his inuyoukai heritage and settled into an easier discussion on the status of all of the former patients. She spent an hour with him, while the rock twins waited patiently outside, debating how her reiki worked and the possible implications for youki and holy power working in concert. She promised to return once she was confident she had rested enough so that they could run some experiments.

When she had stepped back out into the sunshine, she found Rin waiting with Kento. She had no doubt that Jun had alerted his cousin to her whereabouts. Kento offered to escort her wherever she wished to go, and no amount of protesting that two guards was already overdoing it seemed to make any difference. She had finally given in, unwilling to spoil the happy mood she woke up with. Kagome had decided that she would ask him to be her tour guide for the day, if Sesshomaru didn't need him.

“My Lord has other occupation this morning, Kagome-sama, leaving me at your service. Might I suggest the formal pavilion? It is surrounded by-” Rin had interrupted, eager to show her the village surrounding the castle walls. She had quickly agreed, as an entire village of demons - all living under the peace of the Western Lord - sounded very interesting.

Her issues had started before she even made it out of the courtyard. A pair of female servants approached them, wide-eyed and smiling behind their hands, and bowed low before Kagome, the Miko-sama. The guards at the gate went so far as to kneel in front of the ‘Miko-sama’. Kento explained that their families, both mates and two children between them, had been stricken with smallpox. Sesshomaru’s secretary seemed to be expecting the behavior; the rock brothers stoically ignored it. Rin smiled and greeted many of the demons they met. Kagome was the only one who was discomfited.

The bows and thanks only increased in frequency as they made their way through the outer courtyard. An apothecary approached with a shallow basket filled with herbs. He offered her his thanks for healing himself and his grandchild, and then humbly presented her the basket for her use. Kagome thanked him and offered him wishes for good health and prosperity, something her grandfather often said to tourists at the shrine. The demon - he had a vaguely monkey-like appearance with soft brown fur on his head and a beard that framed his face like a mane - begged her to stay a moment, and disappeared inside his shop. He returned a moment later with a much smaller, pink-faced version of himself. The child stood by shyly, gripping his grandfather’s robes.

“Miko-sama, if it pleases you, would you bless my grandson as well?” Kagome had never felt so honored and awkward before. Denying that she was special or skilled enough to bless anyone would only insult the demons, which was not something she wanted to do. She figured that a blessing was a blessing, and even if she didn’t have the kind of holy power that Miroku did, at the very least her words might make the apothecary feel better. It couldn’t hurt.

She knelt before the child and spoke as softly as she could, trying to remember some of the blessings she had written for the family shrine. “My name is Kagome, what’s yours?”

“Haruko,” he whispered.

“Haruko-kun, that is a very good name. Do you want to make medicine like your grandfather when you grow up?”

“Yeah.” He turned to look at her and gave her a small smile. She selected a flowering herb from the basket, one that represented good fortune, and held it out to the boy.

When he reached for it, she spoke, “*May you have future blessings of happiness in the path of your mind and heart.*” Kagome released his hands and stood, bowing slightly. “Thank you very much for the flowers, Chemist-san.” The apothecary’s mouth hung open and the child looked dazed, and a little bit awed. Rin took her arm and led her away as a small crowd gathered around the monkey demon.

“It is so nice that everyone likes Kagome-sama now!”

“Y-yeah,” Kagome responded, unsure if she really preferred stares and deep bows to being ignored. Although it was better than being called a loose woman. She sighed, trying to look on the bright side.

“Rin is excited to show you all of her favorite places. Rin does not get to come to the village very often, as Sesshomaru-sama or Kento-san must go with her, and they are very busy. Now that Kagome-sama lives here too, we can visit often!”

“Rin,” Kagome said, startled. She didn’t want to dim the girl’s excitement, but she also didn’t want to mislead her on how long she would be staying. After all, she was a guest, she didn’t live at the castle.

“I believe Rin would enjoy showing you the shops, Kagome-sama. The Western Lands are very prosperous. Sesshomaru-sama has brought fortune to us by securing trade with...” Kagome listened to Kento’s lesson on economics in feudal Japan, made far more interesting than the classes she had taken by descriptions of various demons and demonic items that played a role. Rin interjected with funny comments about how a certain trader or lord acted and whose goods were used at the castle itself. Throughout their walk, she was always conscious of the stares. By the time a bird-demon approached, she was the recipient of a loaf of sweet-smelling black bread, an evergreen wreath with blue berries, a strange cake of soap that had no scent, and a packet of tea. She was more grateful for the apothecary’s gift of the basket with each step.

“Here, Kagome-sama, this is Rin’s favorite shop!” Her delighted exclamations drew the attention of the shopkeeper - although she must have known they were approaching considering the whispers that ran ahead of them through the village. Despite the chilly weather and the light coating of snow on the ground, a tented stall was doing brisk business in front of a two story stone structure. It was one of the more impressive houses in the village.

Rin skipped ahead, and Kento explained, “Aki-san is a spider demon.” Kagome shivered a bit; her history with spider demons was not a good one. She squared her shoulders and smiled, determined not to let Naraku color her first impression of one of Sesshomaru’s people. “Her sisters and cousins have trading posts across Japan, and have married into the demon clans on the mainland. They procure the most exotic and unusual cloth, from human and demonic sources - and some others that they will not share the origin of. Sesshomaru-sama’s garments are all made from her wares.” He was proud of the demoness, she could tell from the warmth in his tone. Kento paused as they drew closer and lowered his voice, “I believe the Inu no Taisho made his last purchase of fire rat cloth from her as well.”

“Miko-sama,” Aki crossed her ankles and dipped into a graceful bow, hands clasped before her, “you honor me with your presence.” Kagome nodded, and something in her wanted to like the merchant immediately, despite her nature. Her skin was darker than most Japanese, a smooth caramel color that in the future Kagome would have said spoke to a blended heritage. Her hair was an inky blue-black and was bound with silk cord into a rope that fell to her waist. Her eyes were purple, and shone with iridescence that twitched with glimmers of green and gold. Her outer kimono matched her eyes, and the only decoration she used was a heavily embroidered obi that was covered in depictions of plants and animals too detailed for Kagome to examine without rudely staring.

“Aki-san made my kimono herself, Kagome-sama,” Rin said with a twirl. The green material was softer than even the finest cotton in the future, and thick enough to keep the human girl warm in the cold air. Tiny flowers trailed along the neckline and pooled at the hems, the white thread glittered with traces of gold that also limned the orange obi at her waist. It was a work of art. It also reminded Kagome of the thinness of her own kimono. Despite the heavy shawl a servant had procured for her that morning, it was still chilly. She shivered.

“It is beautiful, Rin.” She turned to Aki and gave her a small bow. “Your work is amazing, Aki-san. Anyone would be privileged to wear such fine garments. It is no wonder that Sesshomaru-sama is always so well attired.” The demoness was smiling, so Kagome ventured a small joke, “Although I do not envy how often you must replace them. White does not seem practical for one who walks through the forest.”

Aki’s smile grew wider and she replied, “Dirt would not harm my fabrics, Kagome-sama, they are demonic in nature.” Her eyes sparkled. “That forest path is also one of conquest - which results in an unfortunate amount of demon blood.”

Kagome laughed, “I’m sure it is difficult to get out of silk. I have a hard time cleaning my own clothes, although Sesshomaru-sama is significantly less messy than I am.”

“My Lord seeks perfection in all things,” Aki remarked. Kagome laughed again, and Aki joined in, both aware of how the diplomatic answer was not necessarily a compliment of Sesshomaru. A small crowd had gathered around the stall and kept a respectful distance back by Eiichi and Eiji. Kento stood ready to explain anything to her, while Rin looked through bolts of silks and more exotic material.

“May Shippo-kun have new clothes, Kagome-sama?” Rin held up a handful of blue cloth that shifted and warped the light; for a moment, Kagome wasn’t sure there was anything there at all. It was amazing and Shippo would love it, she knew. He needed new clothes too, he had definitely grown taller. She hesitated; it had to cost a fortune.

“I don’t-”

Kento interrupted her, “Please put this on our bill, Aki-san. Kagome-sama’s kitsune will come by to be measured.” Kagome was ready to protest, but Kento smiled and continued, “My Lord has directed that all your needs be met, Kagome-sama.”

“But this is really too-”

“You mustn’t insult a demon as old as me, Kagome-sama.” Aki smiled and produced a paper-wrapped package. “I have worked very hard to make clothes for you as Sesshomaru-sama ordered. I would be most offended if you refused them.” A grin revealed her small fangs, “And my Lord would be most...”

“Displeased?” Kagome finished weakly. Aki laughed and the miko tucked the package in with her

other gifts. It was too much; she really shouldn't...but then, Sesshomaru obviously knew what it cost. It wasn't like he couldn't afford it. *He is probably horrified that I'll wear my future clothes around the castle.* That thought comforted her, reminding her that Sesshomaru's intentions had nothing to do with her, personally. "Thank you, Aki-san." She bowed again, and considered the demoness. She didn't have any money, or anything really that she could give the merchant to show her appreciation. *Unless...* She bit her lip, hoping she wasn't making a mistake. "I have little to offer but my thanks, but I would give you and your shop a blessing, if you would receive it?"

"That is most generous, Kagome-sama, but as you can see I am already blessed with good fortune. Please, there are many others who would benefit more from your gift," Aki demurred.

Kagome nodded, worried she had overstepped, and would have turned away if not for Kento's hand hovering under her elbow. "You should take it, Aki-san," Kento said quietly. Kagome was surprised by the seriousness in his voice, and the warmth of familiarity.

The spider demoness stiffened. "That isn't-"

"Please." That single word stopped Aki's protests cold. Kagome stared between the inuyoukai and the beautiful cloth merchant, wondering what was going on.

"I will gratefully accept your blessing on my house. Follow me, Miko-sama, if you please." Kagome wasn't given the chance to tell her she could say the blessing outside, as Kento led her into the house behind Aki. Once the door had closed behind them, Aki continued, bluntly, "I am without child, Miko-sama. If you are willing and able, I would ask that you honor me with blessings of fertility." She threw a poisonous glance at Kento. "Although there are many that can claim the same misfortunate, who have less to comfort them."

"If there is a possibility, would you not want to try?" Kento did not actually move, but his youki stirred, and Kagome was caught in a strange position of seeing the pale blue energy of the inuyoukai brush against Aki and tease out a darker blue power that twined with his - almost like they were holding hands. She gasped and pressed a hand to her mouth, staring at them with wide eyes.

"You're a couple," she blurted. The youki almost instantly withdrew. "Oh, no, I didn't mean to surprise you, especially if it is a secret. Is it a secret? Is it because you are different kinds of demons, is that not good?" Her eyes narrowed. "Has Sesshomaru forbidden-"

"No," Kento said shortly.

Aki spoke at the same time in a startled tone, "Are you so familiar with our Lord?"

"Aki refuses to mate me, as she was not able to bear children with her first mate. He was a spider also, and it can be more difficult for demons of different backgrounds to have pups."

"Hatchlings," Aki corrected. She considered Kento critically. "You must really think she can help. You

would never share so much personal information otherwise.” She nodded and stepped forward, having reached her decision. “Please, Miko-sama, will you bless me?”

It was asking a lot, Kagome knew that. These were two people who were deeply in love, if their youki was any indication, and their most tightly held desire was children. *Children*. Her heart melted. She would do everything she could to make things right for them. She took Aki’s hands in her own, noting how smooth and soft her skin was, the strength of her muscles, the deceptive delicacy of her bones. Gently, she reached out for her reiki, giving it a nudge to wake it up. Her power was sleepy and responded sluggishly, but it came to her fingertips as she urged it along. She held it, right under her skin, and looked into Aki’s hesitant eyes.

“It is alright, my love,” Kento said softly to the demoness. “Do not be afraid.”

Kagome knew - she *knew* - that this was the right thing to do. She didn’t have to think about it, or even push her reiki out. It slid slowly from her fingers, drawing a small gasp of shock from Aki as the warmth wound around her wrists before sinking under the skin. Kagome was lost in a brief world of sensation and knowledge of Aki. It was not as all-consuming as her examination of Sesshomaru had been. She focused on that part of Aki that would carry a child, and was surprised, and somewhat comforted to see the similarities she shared with humans. It only took a few minutes, and Kagome was very glad she had finished her course on reproductive biology with high marks. She recognized the symptoms of polycystic ovaries, and with a soft, gradual application of reiki she burned away the cysts, pushing the fluid and tissue that impeded fertility back into the proper place and stimulating the ovaries.

As her power withdrew, the modern medical practitioner in her made her examine Kento as well. Her hand hovered over his groin, and Kento made sounds of discomfiture, but Aki ordered him to stand still. He shifted uneasily - until Kagome grew irritated with his impatience; movement made her work immensely more difficult, and resulted in her shocking him with a small burst of reiki. Kento yelped, but realized the wisdom of staying still quite quickly. She didn’t feel as bad about that as she should have. Problems conceiving were not only attributable to the woman, despite what feudal men would say about it. She considered what she found and applied her power before calling her reiki back to her and opening her eyes. Both demons were staring at her in shock.

“I did what I could, but it is only temporary. The effects will eventually go away; I’d say in a year or two, although possibly sooner. I am not very familiar with-” She pressed a hand to her head as a wave of dizziness hit her. Both Kento and Aki reached for her, but she waved them away. “I’ll be fine. Besides,” she grinned, knowing she was blushing but too happy with the results of her healing and the consequences for Kento and Aki to care, “I think you might have more important things to do than worry over me right now.”

Kento frowned. “Thank you, Kagome-sama, but if you are unwell, we should return to the castle. Sesshomaru-sama would be most displeased if anything happened to you.”

“I know,” she laughed shakily. “He’d hate to have to go to the trouble of finding another human

priestess.”

Aki opened her mouth, shaking her head, “You misunderstand, Miko-sama-”

“Kagome, please,” the miko insisted.

“Kagome-sama,” Aki relented, “My Lord does not-” She stopped abruptly as Kento appeared at her side, breathing deeply. “Ah, Kento-san?” The inuyoukai leaned closer, running his nose along her chin and neck, sniffing.

“You are entering heat,” his voice was husky and his youki trembled with restrained need. The sudden change in demeanor for the usually calm – even staid – secretary almost alarming.

“You can smell that?” Kagome immediately clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Heat,” Aki said in confusion. Then her hands flew to her belly, “It worked so soon?” Kento’s face was buried in the joint of her neck and shoulder, and Kagome backed up to the door. As interested as she was in youkai senses and mating rituals, the couple needed privacy. Her face was burning with embarrassment.

“Thank you, Kagome-sama, thank you.” There were tears in the spider demoness’ eyes and Kagome nodded with a smile and stepped out, closing the door behind her. Most of the crowd had dispersed, and those that were left seemed inclined to watch in curiosity rather than ask for a blessing or offer thanks. She asked Rin to help her close up the stall; clouds heavy with snow were piling up ominously in the sky. Kagome hated to think of the fine cloth being ruined. Eiji frowned, staring at her, and waved over a nearby shopkeeper to take care of it instead.

“We will return to the castle,” Eiichi stated.

“You look tired, Kagome-sama,” Eiji noted with a worried look. Kagome had to admit she was grateful for Rin’s arm to lean on as they walked back. The younger girl even carried the basket. A cold wind picked up as they walked, plastering Kagome’s kimono against her legs and making her shiver. She knew she was slowing them down, but she was just so *tired*. Fat, angry flakes began to fall and she stopped, waving the others on.

“Go on, I’ll catch up. I don’t want Rin to catch cold.” She was panting with effort, and she felt dizzy again, but she smiled so that they wouldn’t feel they had to stay. It really was getting bad out, and Rin had been sick so recently. The rock brothers shared a look and stepped forward, each taking the arm of one woman.

“Please permit us, Kagome-sama -” Eiji began.

“- to travel faster,” Eiichi continued.

Kagome nodded, relieved enough to be carried that she wasn't concerned with how undignified she would look riding on someone's back in a kimono. Rin clapped with glee and latched on to Eiichi's arm. Youki flared. There was a rumble, darkness settled over her, and Kagome felt as though her breath had been knocked out. Everything around her was warm and still and close. Then she was standing at the base of the stone steps of the castle, staring at Eiji as a cloud of dust settled around them. The courtyard under her feet rippled from the disturbance of their passage, and then settled back into place as though the brothers had not just reshaped earth and stone to tunnel under the village and castle walls.

"Rock demons!" Rin said happily, clearly excited about their mode of transportation.

Kagome pressed a hand to her head, willing her headache away and smiling wryly, "Rock demons, of course." Then she fainted.

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When Sesshomaru had awoken that morning, it was to a warm softness pressing against him and the scent of cherry wood and magnolias. He breathed deeply, refusing to open his eyes for a moment. *Kagome*. She was stretched on top of him, her head tucked against his chest and her arms wrapped around his waist. So much smaller than him, her feet dangled just below his knees, tucked between them and burrowing into him for warmth. It placed her flat stomach level with his groin, and the moment he noticed that, he also noticed how *right* she felt in his arms. Her breasts pressed against him, the thin robe doing little to conceal their shape and weight. His desire was aroused, and for a moment he considered waking her to a demonstration of why she would stay with him. Then he recalled Inuyasha's taunt, '*ya didn't ask her, didja?*'. He refused to admit any miscalculation to the hanyou, but he did recognize that knowledge born of longer acquaintance was a tactical advantage. Perhaps verbal discussion would be the best course of action. If it failed, he could always move on to demonstration.

She smelled relaxed, and he could tell she was still deeply asleep. Carefully, he shifted, sitting up and cradling the female against him. It was only just beginning to lighten outside, but without the bedding, the room was quite cold. Kagome shivered. *Walls are essential to heat retention. They will be repaired immediately to address the miko's comfort.* He found his mokomoko on the futon and it wrapped around her, alleviating her shivers and easing her back into deep slumber. He made certain she was completely covered, enjoying the way she rubbed her cheek against his skin, before he dressed and picked her up again. Sesshomaru carefully opened the screens to his anteroom. The remains of the wall looked worse in the light of dawn, and Sesshomaru stepped through the snow that had blown in during the night to move into the corridor. With a brief effort of youki, he summoned Eiichi and Eiji to the family quarters.

He slipped into Rin's rooms without waking her, to discover Inuyasha and Shippo already awake inside. Sesshomaru glared at the hanyou, warning him not to wake the miko, and deposited her in the futon with Rin. Reluctantly, he reclaimed his mokomoko. As much as he would have preferred her to remain secure in it, he needed it that morning. He closed the screens to the sleeping room and faced his half-brother and the kit.

“You kept her with you all fuckin’ night?” Inuyasha was vibrating with fury. Briefly, Sesshomaru considered letting him vent his frustration. He would enjoy a chance to beat his half-brother as well, for the crime of earning a piece of the miko that he had not yet claimed. He straightened his spine. She would be completely his soon enough, and in the meantime, he had more important matters to resolve. The miko would also be distressed if he irreparably damaged the hanyou.

“Utilizing reiki is exhausting for her,” he stated. It was the truth, which Inuyasha would smell. It simply hadn’t been the case the night before. Sesshomaru held back a smile. The female had been embarrassed and uncomfortable when he pulled her into his bed, but she relaxed much more quickly than he anticipated. It was an excellent sign of progress towards his ultimate goal.

“Keh. Still could have brought her back when she was done healin’ ya.” Inuyasha stuck his hands in his sleeves and nodded at the kit, who was staring at him, wide-eyed. “Come on, runt. Let’s see how well you get over the wall.”

“You are leaving the Western Palace?” Sesshomaru would not have normally asked, but he was genuinely surprised that Inuyasha would leave the miko alone with him. As for the kit, he regarded the woman as his mother.

“You wish,” the hanyou snorted.

“We’re going hunting,” the kit supplied helpfully. “Inuyasha has been teaching me tracking and stuff, but we haven’t had a lesson in a while.”

“No slacking.” Inuyasha jerked his head and stepped into the corridor, waiting for the others to join him before he shut the door. “Where’s your castle boys? I ain’t leavin’ Kagome here without protection.” The rock brothers arrived at that moment, silently taking their positions on either side of Rin’s door.

“I will join you,” Sesshomaru decreed. He instructed the guards to stay with the miko and strode away, not waiting for the younger demons to follow as he knew they would. He needed to hunt, and he wanted to stretch in his true form for the first time since he had gotten ill. He had intended to chase down prey in the forest by himself, but the opportunity to gauge the kit’s skill and education was fortuitous. The miko would stay with him, which would necessitate the young one staying as well. For the West, Sesshomaru would not allow him to grow without ensuring he was everything he could possibly be. His limits would have to be tested.

Sesshomaru would also be able to find another opportunity to gain illicit knowledge of the miko. Inuyasha *would* tell him what he wished to know, he would simply have to be more creative than usual to gain cooperation without the hanyou’s knowledge...or excessive physical damage. He needed only to leave instructions with Kento, then he could be about the business of ensuring the miko’s acquiescence.

Within the hour, he crossed the courtyard where Inuyasha and Shippo were waiting, and leapt over the wall. He transformed the moment he reached the treeline, sensing that the other two had fallen behind. They had been forced to run through the gates, as the kit was unable to scale the high, smooth wall. Inuyasha's speed would allow him to catch up if Sesshomaru waited for him, but the Lord needed to see to his own hunger before he could observe the hanyou and kit.

In his true form, he could consume the vast amounts necessary to fuel his youki. He left the hanyou and kitsune to transform. As always, the impending hunt both relaxed and stimulated him. He scented his prey, and circled it, staying downwind and moving silently. An inu in its true form, a predator, a hunter: it was how Sesshomaru was meant to be, and he relished it. He caught the stag within minutes, and rejoiced in the hot blood of the kill and his dominance over a weaker creature, even as he lamented that the prey had not been faster or stronger.

The hunt had been over too soon for his liking, but it had served its purpose. He devoured the meat quickly and moved deeper into the woods, gradually feeling his youki begin to replenish itself as the nutrients were absorbed quickly into his body. His adrenaline rose again and his senses focused as he followed the scent of his next prey. The boar provided a greater challenge, but Sesshomaru still ended the chase with the inevitable crunch of his jaw around the struggling beast. The kill satisfied the instincts that made him what he was, and the fatty meat increased his energy until it hummed contentedly beneath his fur.

He returned to his humanoid form to observe his half-brother with the kit. Inuyasha was a surprisingly good teacher. He gave praise where it was due, but the kit had to work hard for it, and Inuyasha was not afraid to point out his mistakes. He always followed it with suggestions, and the instruction showed. The kit was an excellent tracker and hunter, considering his age. He was a credit to the miko, and also, he admitted begrudgingly, to his half-brother.

After the kitsune had finished his lesson, Sesshomaru allowed them to watch the hunt continue. Inuyasha did not admit it, but the daiyoukai was also keenly aware of the pup's eyes on him. As he consumed his second boar, he came to the uncomfortable realization that Inuyasha had suffered from more than just ostracism after their sire's death. The hanyou knew almost nothing about inuyoukai, and what he did know was mostly conjecture based on hostile encounters between them. He had never shunned his half-brother, but nor did he seek him out upon hearing of Izayoi's death. It was...regrettable.

Several hours later, they arrived back at the castle and Sesshomaru set himself to succeed with several new responsibilities. He still needed to run the Western Lands and ensure their dominance for the next millennium, but he also needed to ascertain the damage inflicted by the illness and set about repairing it. There were rumors that needed to be tracked down and enemies that should be watched. He would set the kit to a course of education alongside Rin, as well as begin a more formal physical training course for the young demon. The added responsibility of providing his half-brother with some of what he had been denied still needed attention, but he would assess the hanyou's skills and move accordingly. And, of course, he would secure the miko.

A guard quietly updated him as to the whereabouts of Rin, the miko, and her guards while Inuyasha and Shippo trailed behind him. Sesshomaru approved of Kento's decision to allow her into the village. In the unlikely event that anyone there should still hold ill feelings towards a human woman, the rock brothers would deal with them and the threat would be revealed. The tour would accustom her to the benefits of living at the Western Palace, and provide ample proof to his people that he regarded her highly and that she deserved their respect.

He found that his youki sought her out almost instinctively, without his conscious thought. She seemed happy enough, although a bit uncomfortable from the weather. Her new clothing had been commissioned, but he would remember to order additional garments. He turned his thoughts to Inuyasha, although the miko's warm, pink presence was constantly at the edge of his senses.

"Hisao." The captain left the soldiers he was training and approached his small group. "The kit will be training with the other children." A bear demon was summoned and he disappeared with a fascinated kitsune in tow, taking him to the smaller training area set aside for the youth of the castle to spend a few hours each day learning to harness their power. "This One has brought another in need of much discipline. You will test his skills personally."

"Heh! Shippo is just a kid! He can't fight this guy!" Inuyasha scowled at Sesshomaru, then fixed his glare on the captain. "Pick on someone your own size."

"Hn. That he shall do." Sesshomaru left Hisao to his duty. Training had always been a strength of the inuyoukai captain, and he had no doubt that one of his longest serving vassals would know Inuyasha's skills as well as he did before the day was through.

He returned to his study, taking up the endless paperwork of his position and checking on the projects he had ordered Kento to have begun. His thoughts continually returned to the miko. She had tended to him the previous night, ignoring his brother. Her friend and companion whom she *loved*. Sesshomaru allowed himself a frown in the privacy of his study. The miko had cared for his well-being first, before the hanyou. Even as she admonished Sesshomaru's behavior, she'd checked for injuries to his person. She had found nothing alarming, and yet still she insisted that he had to rest. She worried for him. It was not all that he desired, it was not even a small fraction of what he needed the miko to feel for him before she would stay.

It was apparent to him, after much consideration on a full belly, that she would have to be convinced. Inuyasha had implied that he would have to *ask* her to stay. Regardless of her feelings or the logic of remaining in the Western Lands, the human woman was nothing if not argumentative and willful. If she was not consulted, or made to feel she was consulted, she would act against his wishes out of anger and contrariness. That would not be acceptable. Sesshomaru recalled the impression he had of her even before she had cured the illness. She followed his lead as long as she agreed with his course. He *would* lead her to his side, to a permanent place at the Western Palace, so it remained that he would have to bring her into agreement with that goal. Thankfully, he was an excellent negotiator. He pushed aside his work, striving again for honesty with himself. He was an excellent strategist. The chase had already begun, he had only to position her to run to him.

Satisfied with his conclusions, Sesshomaru idly checked on the thrum of reiki against his senses as he returned to his desk. She seemed weary, which was not unexpected after a long walk through the town. He paused, she was more than tired - exhausted. Her reiki, which had still been resting that morning but was recovering nicely from the healing, was nearly sapped. He focused his senses on her more intently. She wasn't just weary, she was nearing illness.

Youki, familiar to him, flared in the village and surged underground. Sesshomaru moved without thought, racing towards the courtyard. He arrived seconds behind the rock brothers, just in time to see Eiichi emerge from the stones with Rin, right behind Eiji.

Rin laughed, "Rock demons!"

"Rock demons, of course." The miko rubbed at her head, and Sesshomaru felt a pull of anxiety. He was at her side just in time to catch her as she collapsed. He swung her against his chest, cradling her close and wrapping his mokomoko around her. Her skin was freezing.

"Kagome-sama!" Rin cried.

"This One will speak to you later," he said to the guards, "regarding your incompetence." He did not snarl at them. He did not tear their heads from their shoulders. He was aware of a frown drawing down the corners of his mouth - as were the rock brothers. They were supposed to be protecting the miko, and yet she was not as he had left her. Her condition did not reflect well on the West; it spoke poorly of the respect and security she had received. Sesshomaru did not appreciate having his word, his promise of safety and prosperity, broken. The brothers were not alone in their charge to guard her; their failure would belong to their superiors as well: Sesshomaru, Hisao, and Kento. *Kento*, his jaw clenched. His errant secretary had much to answer for as well.

"Come Rin." His daughter followed him at a near run as he sped through the castle. Servants, staff, and soldiers alike stayed out of his way as he climbed to the family quarters. He paused at the corridor, remembering the condition of his rooms, and turned instead to Rin's chamber. He tucked the miko into the futon and turned to his daughter as she arrived. She set down a basket and slid shut the screens that led to the anteroom, promising him privacy and offering to secure tea and food.

He stared at the miko, willing his heart rate to slow. She was not in danger. He knew that. He breathed deeply of her scent. *New cherry wood. Magnolia blossoms.* Exhaustion. Happiness. Contentment. Worry. So many other emotions lingered that he could not place them all. Alone with her, he gave in to his instincts and buried his face in her loose hair. She had overexerted herself, nothing more.

He reached out with his youki. Her reiki was curled deep inside her, nearly as insensate as the female herself. She had only just begun to recover from the immense outpouring of power she used to heal him, and she had obviously called on her holy energy again. His jaw clenched. He would find out what she had done, what had seemed so important she had risked her own well-being. He knew there was nothing that could satisfy him that she had acted appropriately. He would have to guard her much

closer, since she could not be trusted with her own safety if there was another she judged who needed her assistance. Unfortunately, Kagome seemed to think everyone needed and was deserving of her help. *Kagome.*

He breathed deeply again and gave in to the urge to lay down beside her. In the nest of bedding he rubbed his face against her cheek, leaving his scent on her, and secured his mokomoko around her. She was his. He would have her. So another responsibility was added to his shoulders. He would secure her acquiescence, and he would keep her safe, even from her own foolishness. She was his. *Miko no Mao.*

Chapter 11: Tails

Blood. It was everywhere.

He should have been accustomed to the scent, after long weeks of smelling it spread across his lands. The human settlements in the north had been stricken first, and he had ignored the reports of death and refugees fleeing south. Humans took ill and died constantly. He allowed them to reside in his lands, as long as they did not attack youkai villages, but he could not be concerned with their troubles. The epidemics of such a short-lived species were not issues that he could waste time on. Then came reports that youkai were falling ill. He dismissed them. Demons did not get sick. That was common knowledge. Any who said otherwise were fools or liars. Then came reports of death, but still he dismissed them. The very idea that a youkai could succumb to a human illness and then die from it was ridiculous.

The first refugee had arrived at his palace a week ago: a wolf demon from one of the tribes on his northern border. His entire pack had been massacred. A message was sent to the largest wolf tribe to attend to their cousin and consult on the issue with him, but they had arrived too late. The stricken wolf had died.

He crawled to the shoji screen and opened it, his body weight tumbling over the threshold. He fell down the two shallow steps into his anteroom, and breathed heavily for a moment as his strength continued to wane. He lifted a hand to brush the sweat from his brow, only to find it covered in thick, sticky red liquid. His nose had been dulled to the scent over so many weeks, or perhaps he was too badly injured to use his own senses.

The anteroom was bathed in blood. Several inches deep, it beat against him, rippling out from a disturbance. He followed them to their source. A body had been pinned to the wall with long, thin blades. The skin was flayed from the meat, organs and even bones exposed in some places. Torture. He felt a deep pull of sympathy for the unrecognizable youkai that had bled out onto the floor. He frowned in confusion, his eyes growing hazy. There was too much liquid for one body.

“Kuren,” called a weak voice. His head turned unsteadily and he watched a ravaged stump inch out of his bed chamber. It thumped on the floor, leeching blood, trailed by the sleeve of a silk kimono that might have once been blue. *Thump. Drag. Thump. Drag.*

A head came into view. Although he would not have recognized it as such if it weren't for the blue hair; the ends dragged across the wet floor, soaking up red liquid and dyeing the pale strands the dark shade of ink. *The face.* He sucked in a deep breath, not even noticing the way it caused his own injuries to worsen. The stark white bone of the skull was visible under the hairline. Where the eyes should have been, ichor trailed down exposed cheekbones. Only strips of tissue and tendons clung to the bone, hanging down to the jaw and occasionally splattering against the wooden floor.

“Kuren,” the voice cried again, quieter this time. He stared, horrified, at the broken fangs and

desecrated flesh of his mate. Her kimono was in tatters, her naked body exposed where it had not been cut, ripped, and chewed away. In horror, he slowly looked back at the demon that had been pinned to the wall. The only identifying feature that remained was a single, silver eye.

“My mate. My daughter.” His whispered keening cry was not heard by either female. His mate collapsed, even demonic healing abilities unable to repair the damage caused by such brutal torment. *My only child.* He stared at his daughter’s sightless eye. It was the last thing he saw as claws pierced his chest, seizing his heart and withdrawing. The body of the bird youkai slumped forward, splashing blood against the steps.

The Eastern Lord was dead.

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Once again finding his thoughts straying from his work, Sesshomaru closed his eyes and tried to banish the miko from his mind. She was resting peacefully, he knew. Eiji and Eiichi were guarding her, and after he had discussed their previous failure with them, they would not allow her to come into harm’s way again. Shippo and Rin had been with her all afternoon and throughout the night. One or the other would let him know if she became distressed or woke. Hisao had just come to his study from the morning training, which meant that Inuyasha would be returning to Rin’s rooms soon. As distasteful as he found the idea of the hanyou watching over his miko, he could not be there every moment, and Inuyasha had proven fairly effective in keeping her safe. If nothing else, the sound of his subjugation would act as an alarm system.

Sesshomaru had stayed with her for several hours after she collapsed. He’d wrapped his youki around her soul as his mokomoko wrapped around her body. He’d listened to her even breathing and steady heart and breathed in her scent. He had stayed so long because he could not make himself leave. That was...unexpected.

He had already come to terms with his desire for the miko, for her presence as well as her body. He was not prepared to be so shaken by the threat to her physical well-being. He was *concerned*. Sesshomaru had cultivated his naturally distant personality so that he felt concern for very few. He did not have friends, but allies, vassals, and servants. Even for his pack he had never experienced that feeling. Until Rin.

The miko, the fragile human woman whose life could so easily be taken, lay sleeping and while he knew the source of her condition, he had no treatment. His concern was disproportionate to the short time he had spent with her, the newfound intimacy of their connection, and the nature of her species.

He supposed time could be ignored, for the depth of the experiences they had shared was far greater than any he had known with demons that had lived at the castle his entire life. That was logical.

Intimacy. Although he had every intention of experiencing her in all possible ways, it was reasonable

that having their power entwined as it must have been while she healed him had furthered their connection in ways that some physical intimacies would never accomplish. Those thoughts firmly in his mind, he determined it was the nature of *her* that must have brought on the uncommon feeling.

Human. Weak. Delicate.

She was delicate; her skin tender and bones small. The size of her body and the ease with which she could be injured. *Weakness...* In many ways, she was weak. His own strength, even that of a lesser youkai, was many times greater than hers. But she had a spiritual power that outshone any but his own youki and a strength of character that was beyond compare. She was human. Her life would be so short as to be almost unnoticeable by demon-kind. She would die.

That undeniable fact echoed in his head, drowning out everything else. No matter how well he protected her, how powerful her own reiki, it was the nature of humans to age and die. She was young, and healthy compared to most humans he had seen, but she would still only have another...*forty, fifty, perhaps sixty years of life?* That was intolerable. He would not allow it.

Sesshomaru could not be distracted over the crawl of time and how it affected *his* miko. He had other matters that needed to be attended to. So, he added another responsibility to his growing list. He would find a way to make her youth and life last as his did. She was his; he would not concede defeat, he would not lose what belonged to him, to something as inconsequential as *time*.

"...Kento-san has been located," Hisao continued with his report. Sesshomaru turned his cold gaze back to the captain.

"Why is he not before This One?" Kento *would* explain his actions. He would detail the circumstances under which the miko had become so...fatigued. Then he would provide justification for why his failure did not warrant extreme consequences. Sesshomaru doubted he would be successful.

"He was...occupied." Hisao's amusement was easily discerned in his scent. The daiyoukai's irritation must have been palatable as well, because the captain elaborated. "It seems Aki-san has gone into heat. I thought it best not to enter her home until Kento-san is...satisfied with the results." Sesshomaru considered the information. He was well aware that Kento had been courting Aki. It would have been difficult to ignore, it was the longest chase he had ever had the misfortune to observe.

"Five hundred years." Sesshomaru well remembered the day Kento had first met Aki. He himself had only recently become old enough to consider pursuing a mate. Kento was a few decades older, and once Aki moved to the village and set up her shop, he did not look at another demoness. The chase had been amusing at first, as Aki was significantly older and more experienced, then tedious as it dragged on with no apparent conclusion, and finally it became part of the status quo. Sesshomaru had never asked why Aki declined the mating, although she seemed receptive enough to Kento's attention. He had not really cared. In the way of most males, as long as Kento was content to pursue a female that would not bond with him, that was his business. Now, Sesshomaru found himself curious as to what had changed.

“Indeed,” Hisao agreed. “It does make you wonder. The idiot has spent half a century chasing after her kimono, with nothing more to show for it than a scent mark, and then one brief visit from Kagome-sama and-”

“The miko was with her?”

“Yes, Aki-san’s shop was her last stop in the village. Eiji reported that she picked up the things you ordered for her, and Rin selected some cloth for the kit. Then she and Kento went inside with Aki. Eiichi said that Kagome-sama offered to bless the house, and Aki refused, but Kento insisted.”

The house. Sesshomaru was filled with so many thoughts and emotions, he wasn’t sure what to focus on. *Perhaps the miko has contaminated me with her feelings.* She should not have overexerted herself with a simple blessing. Something more had happened in Aki’s home, and Sesshomaru was simultaneously exasperated with the miko for her inability to stay out of the problems of others, and irritated with himself that he had not realized that she would not be able to resist if she was asked for help. Kento would answer to him, painfully, if the miko was unduly harmed in the inuyoukai’s quest for a mate. As for the miko...clearly she needed to better understand her own limitations. He would explain them to her.

Sesshomaru felt a stirring of his youki. She was awake. He stood, prepared to go to her again, but the foolish administrator who announced guests chose that moment to open the screens. One of his scouts had returned. He seethed with barely contained impatience, but reseated himself and prepared to listen to another report. If the scout from the East did not have anything of value to discuss, Sesshomaru would leave him for Hisao. The East had been a long-standing, albeit conservative, ally for years. There was little that could be of interest in news from the East. He would listen briefly, to confirm his suspicions, then he could go to the miko. The thought soothed his restless youki as the scout began his report.

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Kagome wanted to go back to sleep. She tugged the blanket over her head and snuggled down into the futon, hoping that everything would just go away and let her rest. Quiet voices invaded the sanctuary of her blanket cave. She couldn’t make out the words, but she knew the speakers. Inuyasha, Shippo and Rin were nearby.

She frowned, hazy memories of walking back from the village niggling at her brain. *When did I get back to the castle? And whose futon is this?* That thought made her sit up straight. The chilly air finished the job her friends’ noisiness had started and she knew she wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep. She tried to find a positive attitude. She was in Rin’s room, so at least she hadn’t fallen asleep on Sesshomaru again. Not that the experience hadn’t been memorable. Satisfying. Delicious.

She shook her head. Thinking about Sesshomaru was way too much work, and too confusing, so soon

after waking up. Her stomach felt cavernous and her bladder was full, so she threw back the covers and quick-stepped across the cold floor to use the facilities and wash up. She briefly wondered why everything was so chilly, but the demands of her belly forced her to ignore her concern and wrap up in the first thing she grabbed off of the futon. She had it around her shoulders before she realized it was Sesshomaru's mokomoko. *Why would-?*

Inuyasha interrupted her thoughts by throwing open the screens. "About time you woke up, wench." His words were harsh, but she could see the wrinkles of concern at the corners of his mouth and eyes.

"How long was I asleep?" She followed her nose into the anteroom and found Rin and Shippo were just finishing their breakfast. Kagome happily collapsed onto a cushion and accepted a cup of tea and a bowl of miso.

"We left Aki-san's just before midday, yesterday," Rin said cheerfully. "I am so glad you are feeling better, Kagome-sama. Sesshomaru-sama and I were so worried about you!"

"Eighteen hours?" Kagome murmured to herself in surprise while Inuyasha huffed,

"And what about Shippo and me? We were just laughin' it up while she was konked out?"

"Of course not, Inuyasha-san," Rin soothed. "We all know how worried you were, right, Shippo-kun?" Shippo nodded vigorously, snuggling up to Kagome for a one-armed hug. Inuyasha was left in the embarrassing position of admitting he was concerned or letting Sesshomaru take the credit for caring for his friend. Rin didn't give him a chance to respond. "Sesshomaru-sama caught you when you fainted, Kagome-sama. It was so dramatic!" Kagome blinked, her mouth full of rice and fish, at the strange phrasing of the girl. *Dramatic? Like a white knight?* That image made her smile around her food. White, certainly. Knight, very believable. *Her* white knight - Sesshomaru was more likely to smile at Inuyasha than sweep her off her feet to ride into the sunset on his...steed. Kagome tried not to laugh at the daydream of Ah-Un trotting along with an armor-clad Sesshomaru on his back while Rin continued, "My Lord made sure you were all tucked in and safe. You were so cold, Kagome-sama! Rin worried you might get sick. Wasn't it nice of Sesshomaru-sama to leave mokomoko-san to keep you warm?"

"Fu-" Inuyasha glanced at Rin's tiny frown and cleaned up his language. "I, er, it's no wonder you smell like that bast- ah, that guy. Take that thing off and get a bath already." Kagome smiled and took another huge bite of fish. She was really enjoying how easily Rin handled the foul-mouthed hanyou.

"Nah," she said as soon as she had swallowed. In all honesty, it seemed a little strange to use what she had always assumed was like a stole of office as a blanket or coat, but if stuffy Sesshomaru thought it was okay, then there couldn't be anything weird about it. If it irritated Inuyasha...she used her free hand to snuggle the fur against her cheek, just to watch his face twist in disgust. It smelled like woodsy cologne and cloves, and the fur was incredibly soft. It just had too many positive attributes to get rid of it. So what if it was Sesshomaru's stole or cape or whatever? It smelled great, was super warm, and ticked off her friend immensely. The mokomoko was definitely a keeper. "I like it, although I do need

a bath. Too bad somebody broke mine.” She refused to meet his puppy-dog eyes and concentrated on her second bowl of miso. She was starving!

“We can go to the springs, Kagome-sama. That is where Rin and the others that live in the castle bathe.”

“You have hot springs?” Kagome wanted to hug the child. A nice, hot soak sounded heavenly. Her muscles were sore for some strange reason, and she was still a little cold, despite the heavy fur.

“And why is it freezing in here?”

“Er, I’ll go let the castle boys know we’ll be going downstairs.” Inuyasha disappeared before she could blink.

“Coward,” Shippo sneered. He turned green eyes up at Kagome and grinned. “I guess he and Sesshomaru had a fight and broke the wall down. There were carpenters at the castle all day yesterday fixing stuff.”

“They should be done today, or maybe tomorrow,” Rin supplied helpfully. “Rin’s Lord decided to make a few changes since he had to rebuild anyhow.” She gathered everything they would need for baths into a basket and smiled at Kagome. “Whenever you are ready, Kagome-sama.”

Kagome set down her bowl, surprised to find that she had finished two helpings of miso, three of rice and two whole fish. She was comfortable, but she still felt like she could eat more. She justified it by telling herself she had missed lunch and supper the day before. She took the mokomoko with her, knowing the rest of the castle would probably be chilly as well, and reminding herself that she hadn’t had a chance to scrub it after Sesshomaru had gotten sick. Shippo kept up a running commentary on his lessons at the training grounds and Inuyasha’s sparring matches with Hisao. Kagome was surprised and pleased that Sesshomaru had taken the time to find something to occupy his half-brother while he was at the Western Palace. Rin described the springs and how the castle had been built overtop of them. Eiichi and Eiji followed silently.

Kagome saw few servants as they made their way. Those that caught her eye, bowed deeply and murmured their respect, ‘Miko-sama’ they said. As she passed, she caught whispers of something else, but her human ears weren’t keen enough to understand it.

“What is that they’re saying,” she asked Shippo.

“Miko no Mao,” he replied with a smile. “Everybody is really happy that you didn’t purify them, Kagome.”

“Me too.” She was dazed, not comprehending why they would give her such a title. She had only done what needed to be done to save Sesshomaru. The rest had been an *accident*. She didn’t deserve such respect; she was just doing what needed to be done, what any person would do if they saw someone in pain - everything they could. She didn’t have the power, nobility, or skill of command that Sesshomaru

possessed. Those thoughts were banished the moment she entered the baths.

“Oh!” She covered her cheeks with her hands, unable to speak for a moment. They were *huge*. Perhaps three-fourths of the footprint of the castle above, the springs were split into several smaller pools. Smooth boulders, manicured gardens and gentle waterfalls separated them. Rin pointed out the women’s bath and a sheltered alcove for changing in privacy. The largest pool was designated for men, and Kagome was mildly shocked to see a few of the soldiers were making use of the hot water. Rin and Shippo led her down a set of narrow, stone stairs and then up again and past a waterfall to a more secluded area. A pool approximately forty feet long backed into the rough-hewn wall of the mountain. Tumbled rocks divided the pool into two equal halves. Shippo abandoned her to race to the far side, where she could hear Inuyasha scolding him to pile his clothes further away from the water.

“One moment, Kagome-sama,” Eiichi bowed low.

“If you please, Kagome-sama,” Eiji echoed his brother’s motions. He stayed at her back while the other rock demon circled the baths and even disappeared momentarily into the rock floor before reappearing with a satisfied expression. “The area is secure, Kagome-sama. We will wait in the passage,” he pointed back the way they had come. “Please call out if you need anything.”

The rock demons disappeared along the ledge that led into the main chamber. Rin grabbed her hand and tugged her into a niche in the wall, concealed by a strategic fall of vines. They left their clothes in neat stacks there, although Kagome needed Rin’s help to unwind the stubborn mokomoko. After collecting scrubbing cloths and Kagome’s new soap, they carefully followed the leafy passage at a shallow decline towards the water. Kagome left the fur lying on the shore and waded in with the younger girl.

The water was absolute bliss. Pleasantly hot where they entered, it cooled quickly towards the front and grew hotter closer to the cave where the water seemed to be coming from. Smooth outcroppings protruded around the edge, strategically providing places to rest soaps and combs. Kagome and Rin played for nearly an hour - swimming and talking, before they got down to the business of washing each other’s backs and hair. Kagome was entranced by the soap from the village. To her nose, it smelled like nothing so much as white copy paper. Rin claimed it was expensive and extravagant. The girls hadn’t been using it for more than a few minutes when a head poked over the rocks.

“Hey! That smells great!”

“Ack!” Kagome slipped on an underwater ledge and nearly drowned herself.

“Knock it off, runt,” Inuyasha’s furry ears appeared above them as well - although they swiveled convulsively, his face was firmly turned away.

“Inuyasha-saaan!” Rin wailed, sinking below the water. Kagome barely managed not to smile at the girl’s embarrassment. She was used to being ‘accidentally’ found while bathing. She had been more startled than worried. After all, Miroku was nowhere nearby and she had a host of demon soldiers

between her and anything that wanted to eat her. Rin, however, was probably very unused to such interruptions. Although, she had bathed with Shippo when they were traveling together. Kagome supposed at twelve it felt very different to have an adult nearly peeping at her.

She appraised the wet white hair that barely crested the division between the two pools. She had never really thought of Inuyasha as a man - or adult demon, or rather, hanyou. He had been a girlish love interest, a boy who seemed to be her own age, and then later he was her friend. To Rin, though, he was probably just the right age to form a crush on. *What is it about girls wanting someone like their father?* Well, they looked enough alike, but Kagome knew that beyond extreme overprotectiveness and a highly developed sense of honor, there wasn't much else the brothers had in common.

"It's okay, Rin-chan, Inuyasha knows better than to look." Kagome silently mouthed the 's' word and Rin let out a tremulous smile.

"Oi, what is that smell?" The hanyou tipped his head, trying to get a better sniff without actually seeing them. "It's like you, but not, and there's..." his voice trailed off.

"Oooo, I know!" Shippo was almost bursting with pride, his nose twitching. "It is you and Rin-chan! You smell just like you, but more! How did you get rid of all of the other smells?"

"I don't-" Kagome started.

"Kagome-sama has special soap," Rin said quietly. She was still chin-deep in the water, but her blush was fading. "Demons make it specially for sensitive noses, like inu and kitsune. It gets you clean so that only your scent is left."

"Left," Inuyasha snorted, "more like you're shouting 'Here I am' to every hungry thing in a ten mile radius." His head sank back down, but his grumpy tirade continued, "Not to mention the perverts."

"Perverts?" Rin looked sweetly confused.

"Uh-huh," Shippo nodded solemnly. "They already like the way you smell, but the males will go crazy for it now." He frowned and turned to Kagome, "Maybe we should go back to our rooms?"

"Let's get going!" Inuyasha's shouted reply got Rin swimming back to their clothes.

"I can't go yet, Inuyasha. I have a few things to get clean." She smiled at Shippo and waved him away, but she spoke to the hanyou who no doubt was ready to argue, "If we smell as good as you say," she rolled her eyes at the idea since no one could see it, "then you should take Rin back. Remember, I've traveled with Miroku for years. I'm used to fending off perverts; I'll be fine with Eiji-san and Eiichi-san guarding the path."

She really did still have work to do. Resolute, she made her way to the mokomoko and dragged it into the water while Rin dried off and got dressed. She would have thought it would sink as the fur soaked

up the water, but whatever held it all together was buoyant enough that it floated just below the surface. Her only complaint was that the thing seemed to wrap around her every time she moved. Grabbing her bar of soap she started scrubbing, but every time she worked up a good lather the thing twisted in some current she couldn't feel and tightened around her.

Kagome had just worked a good length free from her legs, leaving the other end to wrap around her chest and shoulders, when Rin called out that she was ready. Shippo and Inuyasha strolled out around the edge, ready to escort the girl out of the springs. The hanyou kept his eyes firmly away from the water, but Shippo stop to wave and call out a goodbye. The little kit paused, staring at her struggle with the fur, and a smile split his face.

"I didn't notice that Sesshomaru-sama got his second tail, too! That's great!"

Kagome froze, and Inuyasha turned around so fast she worried he would get whiplash. She looked down at the thick white fur in her hands. The end she was holding did, indeed, split into two long, fluffy sections. She didn't think it had been like that when they traveled together. Nor had it been quite so big. She recalled that when Sesshomaru wore it they trailed from his waist to drag a bit on the floor. *That didn't mean...surely not...*

"That's his *tail*?" Inuyasha's voice was one part incredulous and two parts furious.

"Well sure," Shippo frowned. "You really don't know anything about inuyoukai, do you?"

"How the fuck would I know!" Inuyasha exploded, actually wading into the water until the hems of his pants were in danger of getting wet. "Get that fuckin' thing off ya, wench, before I rip it to shreds!"

"No, no Inuyasha-san!" Rin grabbed his arm, tugging in a vain effort to pull him away. "You mustn't hurt mokomoko-san! Sesshomaru-sama lent it to Kagome-sama to keep her warm, he was only afraid she would get sick."

Kagome noticed the telling glance between Shippo and Rin, as well as the way the fur tightened around her, the...tails...sinking below the water again to wrap around her hips. One end even managed to slide between her legs and twine down to her ankle. The feeling of silky wet fur on her inner thigh was scandalous, made even more so by the knowledge that *this* was *Sesshomaru*. He hadn't given her a dynamic piece of youkai clothing. He gave her a part of himself. She blinked. Twice. That was actually...kind of sweet. Sesshomaru was intensely private and did not spare the time of day for anyone he felt was beneath him. Which was pretty much everyone. If he had used his own...body - she felt her face burning hotter at the idea - to keep her warm, that was...weird. Sweet and nice and thoughtful in a way she would have never thought he could be, but also weird.

And a little pervy. The mokomoko twitched and the second tail drifted through the water and slipped across her bare bottom. It felt suspiciously like a furry groping. Her eyes narrowed. "Go ahead, Inuyasha," she said firmly. "I do have to finish this, and then I think I will need to speak with his *Lordship*." Inuyasha's eyes widened and he was clearly torn between glee that his brother might be

about to taste miko wrath, and the desire to save his friend from unwanted advances. “Go,” she ordered softly.

Her friends disappeared down the path and Kagome took a deep breath before she went back to work on the fur. As if *it* knew that *she* knew, it gave up any pretense of ‘accidental’ entanglement. It allowed her to wash it, but only in small sections, and only by squeezing and rubbing it into languid relaxation before it would release whatever part of her it had secured itself around.

“Oh, he better look sooo innocent when I ask about this, or I swear by all that is holy, I will...” She kept up her muttering, finally sitting back in a shallow portion of the springs. She was completely covered from thigh to armpit in wet white fur, and the tails alternately wrapped around her legs or hung freely in the water while she scrubbed the last two feet with firm strokes. Her fingers were thrust into the pelt, kneading the underlying...skin...while she cupped water in her other hand to rinse out the soap. “He isn’t like that,” she tried to convince herself in a flat whisper. “He isn’t like *this*.”

A swirl of youki-made breeze and white silk interrupted her. She was startled for a moment when Sesshomaru appeared in the vine covered passage, next to her bundle of clothes. He looked beautiful. There was no other word for it. That wasn’t to imply he was effeminate. Even without his armor, which he never wore inside the castle, his masculinity would never be in question. His short kimono fit snugly over broad shoulders and a strong chest. His long legs and wide stance gave her the inappropriate urge to bring him a pair of jeans from her era. His hair was glorious, as always. His mouth was wide and softer looking than any part of Sesshomaru should be.

His eyes widened fractionally, practically a gasp for the daiyoukai, and Kagome remembered where she was, and what she was *not* wearing. She made a strangled sound and clutched the end of the mokomoko to her chest. The rest tightened around her in response - and then Kagome realized she was covering herself from his view - with *him*. Her face burned hot enough to bring tears to her eyes, and she had to close them to avoid crying. “Holy crap,” she whispered.

Chapter 12: Take His Pleasure

“Holy crap,” the miko whispered. Milky skin, flushed with heat and embarrassment. Dark hair slick with water. His fur against her body. He had ignored the sensations in his tail since he had left it with her, so the only thing that surfaced to his consciousness was a distant feeling of soft warmth. Then his mokomoko was wet, which was startling and mildly irritating, enough to draw his focus to her, but not to force him to seek her out.

But perhaps something had changed within his mokomoko. Although it still contained a portion of his youki when it was separated from him, his tails were usually without anything more than faint instincts and extremely limited movement. She had done something to it, he was sure, because he was quite suddenly unable to ignore his tails, as if she was touching him directly. He had been tortured by the sensation of her fingers kneading his mokomoko, until, finally, he was able to leave his study and follow his nose and youki to her location. By the time he reached the entrance to the springs, he was moving too quickly to be seen. And the squeezing, stroking caresses continued to grow in his perception. He arrived at the private springs set aside for his pack just as she thrust her fingers into his fur. The slender digits massaged his muscle, and he had to bite back a groan of pleasure.

She stared at him with wide blue eyes and he could do nothing but stare back. She was glorious. Beautiful, desirable, powerful. A temptress. She called to him as a male. She called to the youki of his true self – a beast of instinct. She gripped his mokomoko and he felt a throb of heat move through him.

Sesshomaru had developed a strategy to convince her to stay. The first directive would be to discuss things with her. However, there was no reason he could not achieve two objectives with one course of action. They were certainly secluded enough for a private conversation. The daiyoukai held back a smirk and untied the knot of his obi.

“Wha- what are you doing?”

Her voice rose to an almost painful pitch, but her delicious blush made up for it. The rosy color extended not only over her cheeks, but down her neck and onto the tops of her breasts. He wondered if she was more embarrassed than usual, or if the color was always so...rampant, and he had not noticed due to her clothing. The scent of turnips was crisp, but the rest of her scent was incredibly strong. He breathed deeply. *Freshly cut cherry wood. Magnolia blossoms.* The steam carried her scent, as water always did, but it was also cleaner, less layered with other things. There was no trace of Inuyasha, or even the kit. No lingering scents of the food she had eaten, the places she had been, the people she had been near. Her scent was purely *her*, and his body reacted accordingly.

He draped his obi precisely over a rock, to keep it from wrinkling, and moved his hands to the narrow ribbons closing his short kimono. “Disrobing,” he replied in a flat voice. It was difficult, even for him, to contain a smirk when her face contorted. She appeared...speechless. The miko was extremely verbal. He made a note of the actions that had caused her current condition so that it could be repeated in the future.

She sputtered, and her scent fluctuated, still as clear and strong as when he had arrived. Embarrassment, anxiety and...he folded his white kimono carefully over the rock and loosened his shirt. *Cinnamon*. He did not bother to hold back a small smile. She was still upset, her maidenly anxiety was a reminder that despite how long she had traveled with his half-brother and the implications of her clothing, she was untouched. She was aroused by him, and embarrassed by her arousal. That could be advantageous; it was certainly pleasing. His shirt followed his kimono, and he stepped out of his boots.

“Here? Right Now? Er, I mean, why?” Her voice was faint, but her eyes remained fixated on his hands as he moved to the ties of his pants. He congratulated himself on sending the guards further along the path, their senses out of range of the little spring.

“I do not wish to bathe in my clothes, Miko. Is that customary in your time?” His thumbs hooked under the waistband and her eyes squeezed shut.

“Nooo, nope, no not at all.” She was moving into deeper water, eyes firmly closed and both her blush and arousal in evidence. “I’ll just, ah, I’ll leave you to it, then. You probably want your privacy. I mean, who doesn’t, right? Bath time is private time, I always say! No need to...” He was amused by the return of her babbling. Unfortunately, she was getting dangerously close to the deeper part of the spring. He shed the rest of his clothes and swiftly took to the water, cupping her elbow just as her feet would have followed the sudden dip in the floor and carried her head under.

“Whoa!” Her arms flailed wildly, and even with his excellent reflexes he was unable to avoid her blunt human nails grazing his chin or her bare feet colliding with his legs. Her eyes flew open, and he stared into the blue depths. He could feel his body, his power, responding to her. She was so near, and her scent...

He pulled his head back sharply, finding that he had bent as though to press his nose to her neck. That was not part of the current stage of the plan. “Soap,” he requested. She blinked at him, breathing heavily, and then gestured to a plain cake and extra scrubbing cloth waiting nearby. He steered her towards a ledge that would keep her from drowning, and also force her to go past him to reach her clothes. Taking up the soap, he schooled his features into a calm mask and steered his own thoughts back to the task at hand. *Sweet, sweet honeyed blossoms...* It was difficult. “I have received reports of incursions on villages in the East and a few of my own in the far north of my land. I must travel to see to these incidents.” He did not elaborate on the details of the reports as he began to wash. There was no need for her to have such images in her mind.

“Incursions?”

“It means-”

“I know what it means,” she snapped. He turned his back on her blazing expression to hide his own smile. She was far too easy to bait. He enjoyed it. Both the fury of her response, and the way she

straightened her spine, allowing the water to settle dangerously low around her attributes. "I'm surprised anyone would attack with the illness there. Didn't you say it started in the north? I know it had been moving from north to south towards Edo." He could hear the frown in her voice, "I suppose bandits might try to prey on towns that are already weakened."

He approved of her firm grasp of all that she had learned thus far. She was indeed intelligent. "It is possible," he acknowledged. He began scrubbing his body, pleased to be able to do so despite the disrepair of his bathhouse. A self-satisfied smirk twitched at his lips. He would not have to clean his mokomoko for some time. The miko had been quite thorough. "While I ascertain the meaning of these attacks, I will also patrol my own lands and take measure of how much damage this pox has done."

"I will go with you," her conviction caused his head to turn. He was about to refute her foolish statement, a quiet growl of denial even escaped him, but he recalled Inuyasha's warning about *telling* the miko, rather than *asking* her.

"I am reluctant to risk your life or health on such a task," he said instead. "You are still weak from use of your reiki, and your scent is tired."

"I'll be fine," she shrugged, and the movement did delightful things to the water level around her breasts. He noted with interest that her blush faded as she focused on their conversation. "I've been tired before, and there may be people who need me. I can't let you go alone when I might be able to save some of them."

"And if we are attacked?"

"I have no doubt that anyone foolish enough to attack the Saidai Mao would swiftly regret it," she said dryly. Her eyes sparkled, and Sesshomaru felt another surge of lust. She trusted his skill to protect her, as she should. The miko would be his soon. He only had to deal with a few minor issues, then he could focus all of his concentration on her. "Besides, an attack wouldn't be all bad, would it? Then you would know for certain what or who was causing them."

"Hn." He couldn't refute her logic. He could leave her behind, where she could be guarded by his entire castle...and he would be distracted by concern for her every moment that he was unable to smell her, to sense her, to see her with his own eyes. Perhaps her ideas and suggestions merited consideration. It cost him nothing but a few moments of his time to listen, and he had the added benefit of watching her while he did so. It was an acceptable exchange. "If I allowed it, there would be conditions." She leaned forward eagerly, doubtless anticipating his capitulation. Sesshomaru inhaled her excitement and clamped down on his own. There would be time for that later. "You will not leave my sight. You will follow my commands." She nodded at each order and clasped her hands between her breasts. He *almost* groaned. "You will not attempt to use your reiki without my permission."

Her face stiffened. "Excuse me?" Her voice was frosty, and Sesshomaru had to remind himself that he had the upper hand. He had already considered her hesitation, and had formed a strategy to combat it.

“You overexerted yourself when you healed me - and the castle. While I am grateful for your assistance, I believe it sapped your strength. You exercised your powers for Aki too soon afterwards, and you passed out. I am not willing to risk your health again.” He refrained from mentioning that he did not trust her judgment to manage her own health.

“But Aki and Kento really needed help! I-” She cut herself off and bit her lip.

“Perhaps if you tell me the nature of your interaction with Aki I would better understand.”

“It was very personal,” she said primly.

Sesshomaru raised a brow, *indeed*? “Kento is my secretary, and I have known both he and Aki longer than my half-brother has offended me with his presence. If you do not wish to tell me, that is your prerogative, but I will be discussing it with Kento when he returns.”

“So he still hasn’t- I mean they’re- that is...” She fumbled, blushing, and Sesshomaru was intrigued to know that she obviously had a strong inclination as to what Kento was doing in Aki’s house. She tugged absently on his mokomoko, and Sesshomaru felt an answering pull inside himself. “Aki asked me to give her a fertility blessing. You know she and Kento are an item? Er, I mean, they are together?” Her words were strange, but he nodded to show her he understood her meaning. “Okay, well I guess she wouldn’t, um, mate him because she didn’t think she could have children, er, hatchlings.”

“Pups,” he corrected, fascinated that she had managed to get so much personal information out of the tightlipped Kento and wily Aki.

“Yeah, so I tried to figure out if there really was a problem, and it turns out that I am pretty sure she has polycystic ovaries, so I sort of fixed that, although I doubt it will be permanent. And then, just to be sure, I checked Kento-”

He couldn’t help himself. He growled, stalking closer to her. “You examined Kento’s virility?”

“Uh, yeah? With my power?” For some reason, that did not assuage his irritation or still a surge of possessiveness. “And he had some issues too, so I took care of that, I think, and when I was done he got all *sniffy* and said she was in heat, and I can guess what that means, so I left.” She was speaking so fast towards the end that her words nearly ran together, but Sesshomaru had no trouble understanding. He had more difficulty not shaking her, or, more likely, grabbing her to him and impressing on her the importance of never touching another male again. Even with her power. Especially as it related to *virility*. His fingers snaked around her upper arms and he pulled her closer, so that they were nearly touching. Her eyes widened, her breath quickened, her scent spiked. “It was really strange, actually. It is pretty rare for a couple to both have genetic markers for sub- or infertility. I would think that demons-”

“*Kagome*,” he ground out, “cease speaking.” He pressed his lips to hers and was enveloped in the sensation of *her*. Soft full lips. Her scent, in his nose and lungs and settling on his skin where they

touched. Sounds. A smothered gasp, a quiet sigh. The flutter of her hands under the water and then her gentle touch on his shoulder and neck. His tongue darted out and he licked the seam of her lips. She tasted as she smelled. Sweet. Strong. Perfect.

He wanted to devour her. He wanted to cover her with his scent. To take her. His last vestige of logical thought was protesting, *Not yet!* But his youki quickly stomped it out to make way for his libido. She parted her lips and a bolt of lightning seared him straight to his core, igniting his blood and calling to his beast to rise. His tongue took advantage and delved deeply, caressing the velvety walls of her cheeks, learning the feel of her blunt human teeth and the roof of her mouth. After a moment, her own tongue responded, hesitantly reaching out to trace the rounded side of one of his fangs.

He pulled away with a sharp movement, holding her at arm's length and breathing heavily. Her eyes were wide with surprise, her mouth was slightly parted and swollen from his attention. He wanted her. Unknowingly, he tightened his grip until she squeaked with discomfort, and he immediately relented. She was more, better, everything that he had thought she would be. He would have her again. All of her. But he did not have the time at the moment. Sesshomaru bit back a snarl of frustration. His duties were always tedious, but never before had he considered throwing them aside to deal with his own needs. He could not. But he wanted to.

"Sesshomaru?" she asked hesitantly. The embarrassment and worry were returning to her scent, and he wished to bring back the spicy taste of cinnamon, before he had to leave her and attend to the West. He leaned in close again, bringing his lips within a breath of hers. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her chest rose and fell quickly, giving him tantalizing glimpses of what was beneath the water. His mokomoko wound and rubbed against her skin in places he had not yet had the pleasure of exploring, but he promised himself he would soon.

"Dress and return to Rin's rooms, Miko. We will discuss the terms of our departure after dinner." He flicked his tongue over her full lower lip and was rewarded with a tiny sound of pleasure and a rush of cinnamon. He was back in the alcove and partly dressed before she realized he had taken his mokomoko with him. He glanced back, and lost his cool facade for a moment when he realized he could now see quite easily through the clean, clear water of the springs.

She folded her arms over her chest and glared through a heavy blush. He forced his eyes away and swallowed. "You may borrow this one," he gestured with his mokomoko and a gust of youki wind blew across the springs, sapping the water from his hair and leaving his fur fluffier than it should be. "But you must repair it as you did before with your oils." He laid it out across the rocks near her new clothing and finished tying his obi. "And Miko," he glanced over his shoulder to catch her staring at him, somewhat lower than his face, with a look that he could not categorize. He allowed himself a smirk. He did not need to know her expression, he knew her scent. "Miko," he repeated and her eyes snapped to his, "do not repeat your vigor with my tail, or I will be forced to leave my work to continue your education on the consequences of such actions."

He turned and left, speeding his passage with youki. He did not wish to leave her, but the rest of the morning, and the long afternoon ahead, would be made more tolerable by the glare of outraged

indignation that accompanied her scent of cinnamon and pepper. He looked forward to dinner.

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“Arrogant, egotistical...thinks he can just...I should have...next time he...” Kagome stopped her angry, muttered tirade abruptly. Next time. She finished toweling off more slowly and sat down to comb and oil her hair; her skin needed moisture too. She wasn’t sure if she wanted a ‘next time’. She shook her head, there was no point in trying to fool herself, of course she wanted a next time. She was nineteen, and the only kisses she had ever received were from a youki-crazed Inuyasha and fumbling Hojo. Inuyasha hadn’t really kissed her back, so she wasn’t sure that even counted. And Hojo had missed her lips in his nervous excitement and hit her cheek, not that she regretted it. His hands were clammy on her arms and his breath smelled like butter popcorn: it was not a turn-on.

Sesshomaru, on the other hand...her face heated up at the memory. He was, well, *perfect* came to mind, but that seemed trite. He was tall, handsome, completely ripped, and broody in a sort of ruthless businessman meets disapproving literature professor way. She might have had more interest in attending university if professors actually looked like Sesshomaru. On top of that, he was an amazing kisser. Obviously, she didn’t have a lot of personal experience to compare it to, but from everything she had read and heard from her modern friends, the inability to form a coherent thought and weak knees - weak everything - was a strong indication of an excellent make-out session.

She frowned, fumbling with her package of new clothes. *Could a single kiss and a - a lick constitute a make-out session?* She wasn’t sure. Whatever she labeled it, it was something she definitely wanted to have a ‘next time’. Even though it was Sesshomaru. The reminder that she had been *naked* kissing Inuyasha’s *naked* older, sometimes murderous, cold brother did nothing to dampen her desire. Which was strange and yet, did not cause concern. *He wasn’t all that cold with me.*

Then he had to go and ruin it. Irritation built again, and all of her fuzzy, melty feelings were pushed aside to make room for indignation. She was perfectly ready to stay in the springs and kiss him until she got pruney, and then he opened his big, fat - *firm, talented* - mouth. Not that his voice wasn’t nice to listen to. It was deep, low, and when he said her name it sent shivers-

Kagome shook herself and glared at the mokomoko. It sat in a fluffy pile on a nearby rock, looking completely innocent. “You’re *worse* than a cursed hand,” she snarled at it. She was blushing, she knew, but she held on tightly to her anger. He let her think he was giving her basically a blanket, and it was his tails! He had felt it whenever she touched it. Her hand flew to her mouth and her eyes widened in horror. She had been *stroking* it. “Kill me now,” she whispered. If she had made those same motions to any part of his body that was attached-

She groaned and leaned forward to bury her burning face in her clothes. And stopped abruptly. The plain wrapping had fallen open, to reveal the most beautiful material she had ever seen. Kagome checked to make certain there was no oil left on her hands before holding it up.

She gasped in pleased wonder. Aki had outdone herself. The outer kimono was cherry red across the right sleeve and chest. Beginning at the shoulder seam, the cloth was scattered with white magnolia blossoms that caught the light and reflected it with a silver sheen. She held it closer to her eyes. The silver was actually tiny dewdrops that had been stitched onto the petals. No human hands, or even machines, could have made such an intricate design. The flowers blew across the chest, growing in number until they were dense enough to make a field of white. The remainder of the kimono was a solid, snowy color. The obi was wide, and dark blue. It was accompanied by a simple blue kimono and white silk under kimono. *He commissioned this for me?* The sweet, melty feeling returned and no matter how many times Kagome reminded herself that he had tricked her with the mokomoko, that the cost of the garments were probably nothing to him, she couldn't work back into her earlier outrage.

She quickly French-braided her hair and tucked the ends up to keep any oil from brushing against the kimono. She dressed carefully, lamenting for the first time that she was unable to manage more than a simple knot with the obi. Even that she had to tie in the front and swivel around to the back. Sandals had also been provided, and she slipped them on and gathered everything up in her basket. Except the mokomoko.

She stared at it, not really mad, but still irritated. It twitched a little, as if it knew she was watching it. It seemed to have a mind of its own - or at least a brain stem - and its only thoughts were perverted. Okay, maybe also protective. She recalled the way it wrapped around her tighter whenever she tried to remove it. And maybe also a bit possessive. Still, it didn't deserve to be - she blushed - stroked and oiled. If Sesshomaru knew people saw his tails looking so ludicrously, adorably fluffy, he might think twice about leaving it to maul her.

She nodded to herself and poked the pile of fur. "Listen up, Fluffy," She did her best to sound stern, hoping the mokomoko would respond to authority like a puppy would. "I'm going to carry you around-" The thing shifted and slithered up her finger to latch around her wrist. She quickly clamped her other hand over it to stop its advance. "If you so much as twitch inappropriately, I will take you through the well and let Grandpa use you as a floor mop - got it?"

She wasn't sure it could really understand her, but it curled around her hand and went passively limp. She wrapped it around her upper arms, but found that the end would drag on the ground. She didn't want it to get dirty again. Kagome looped it around her waist and commanded, "Stay." It squeezed gently. "But no funny business." Satisfied that it would obey, she walked carefully back down the path towards Eiji and Eiichi. She only tripped once, and she caught herself against the wall before either demon could see her complete lack of grace. She considered it a successful morning.

She might have revised that thought if she had known how many stares she would get as she walked slowly back through the castle. In the traditional kimono, her pace seemed painfully slow, and it gave every demon they passed the opportunity to stare, whisper, and bow low as she walked past. Some looked awed, others afraid, and a few offended. The longer it took, the worse it seemed to get.

A group of soldiers, most she had not seen before, passed and stopped to ogle. One even approached her, holding out his hands for hers and bowing low. "Miko-sama," he said smoothly, "I am humbled by

your-”

“Kagome-sama is quite busy,” Eiji interrupted smoothly, stepping in front of her and preventing the soldier from taking her hands.

She gripped her basket tighter as Eiichi continued with less finesse than his brother, his mohawk vibrating with irritation, “And her hands are already occupied.”

“Such a beautiful female,” he sniffed discreetly and Kagome felt her face flame, “should not have to carry such burdens.” He glanced meaningfully at the mokomoko and her embarrassment grew.

“Not all things that are carried are burdensome, pup,” said Eiji. The group of soldiers behind the newcomer had taken a keen interest in the conversation. Kagome felt her irritation slowly taking over. Were they seriously talking about her as if she wasn’t even there?

“Indeed, some things are worth carrying.” The soldier’s eyes roved over her body and Kagome felt something snap.

“Eyes up here, buddy,” she spit out between gritted teeth, pointing to her own face. “What I carry I do because that is *my* desire - and none of your business. And don’t think for a minute that I want someone else to fight my battles for me. If I need help, I’ll ask, and I am most definitely not asking *you*.” She called her reiki to light her outstretched hand with a little purification. It hurt, *great kami*, it hurt more than the time she broke her leg, or when Inuyasha had dropped her out of that tree, or even when a moth youkai had thrown her into a cliff. But her power came and flared bright pink, causing the pushy demon to back up with stammered apologies. His friends stared in awe and then broke out into snickers and taunts for the one who had been so thoroughly put in his place. Eiji and Eiichi swept her along the corridor and out of sight before she made them stop so she could lean against the wall and gasp for breath.

“Are you alright, Kagome-sama?” Eiichi asked with concern.

“Perhaps we should take you to Sesshomaru-sama,” Eiji suggested.

Kagome growled. The daiyoukai had been right about straining her reiki. She was willing to admit that, but she sure as hell wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of *telling* him so if she didn’t have to. Still, she wanted to lie down with a cool cloth on her head and take a nap. “I’ll be fine. I just want to get back to the rooms and rest for a bit.” The rock brothers moved her as quickly as she was able, which was pretty slow, and took her to an unfamiliar portion of the castle. “Where-”

“Construction and repairs have made the family quarters uncomfortably cold for humans,” Eiji answered her unfinished question.

“And too loud for inu ears,” Eiichi added dryly.

Shippo and Rin were waiting inside with crayons and paper spread across a low table. She found a comfortable spot to sit and admire their work until lunch came. Jaken led a pair of female servants bearing more trays than Kagome thought would even fit on the table. He groused and squawked at the children for making a mess, and then ordered the females around, straightening and bringing in additional bedding and furnishings while they ate. The two sleeping rooms and the anteroom were cozy and ready for everyone's temporary residence while the hole in the wall was fixed. Privately, she wondered how long it would take to repair a single wall. She mentally shrugged, thinking perhaps the damage had been structural.

Kagome finished her third helping and forced herself to stop; she wasn't quite full, but her strange appetite would make it difficult to fit into her clothes if she wasn't careful. Jaken bowed low and whisked the dishes and servants away. Rin got out her brushes and ink and Shippo promised to show her his kanji if she would show him how to use the traditional writing implements. Kagome lay down on a simple futon, the screens open to the anteroom so that she could watch the children.

She felt like she did nothing but sleep and eat since she had healed Sesshomaru. *And kiss. And touch all that pale skin.* Her thoughts were treacherous. Her eyes fluttered closed and she wondered what Sesshomaru was doing, and how much it would bother him to have her oil his tails. Thoroughly.

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Rin and Shippo began plotting as soon as Kagome was laying down out of earshot. "Sesshomaru-sama has been very distracted," Rin clapped her hands with glee. "Kagome-sama has done a very good job being herself. My Lord is already wanting to spend time with her. Sesshomaru-sama misses her when they are apart, I can tell."

"Yeah, everybody can tell that," Shippo rolled his eyes. "It is a good thing Sesshomaru smells okay, 'cause I can't get near my mother without breathing in him too."

"That is very good," Rin nodded excitedly. "Inuyoukai only scent mark things that belong to them. So Sesshomaru-sama must want Kagome-sama to stay."

"Well, okay, maybe," Shippo admitted reluctantly. "Although it isn't like a scent mark is permanent. He could just want her to stay for a while - like, until the sickness is all taken care of, or something. For all we know, he's going to kick us out as soon as everyone in the West is better."

"No, no," Rin shook her head and began preparing her ink. "Sesshomaru-sama gave her his mokomoko-san."

"You said she was cold." Shippo stared at his friend, uncomprehending. Sure, it was weird that Sesshomaru let Kagome wear his tails around, but Shippo didn't know any other demons that could detach part of themselves like that, and most inuyoukai couldn't manage it either. He figured that it wasn't a big deal, or Sesshomaru wouldn't have done it. Besides, apparently it had to be washed, and

while Shippo wouldn't let anyone he didn't really trust touch *his* tails, the daiyoukai was probably powerful enough that even his *fur* could defend itself.

"She was," Rin nodded and smiled widely, "but Rin has lots of blankets and furs to keep Kagome-sama warm. Sesshomaru-sama has only let Rin use mokomoko-san twice, and she had never been allowed to *wear* it."

"Are you..." Shippo had a sinking feeling, "that doesn't bother you, does it?"

Rin considered him for a moment, before answering seriously, "Rin wishes sometimes that Sesshomaru-sama would hold her, and mokomoko-san is very good at cuddling. But if Sesshomaru-sama keeps Kagome-sama, then Rin will get lots and lots of hugs and cuddles!"

Shippo could see the logic in that. It made a weird sort of Rin-sense: like flowers plus Jaken equals happiness. Strange, but her math seemed to work. "I'll take your word for it. So Sesshomaru is following the plan. He likes Kagome." Shippo frowned, "Now we just have to worry about Mama."

Rin gasped. "Kagome-sama doesn't like Sesshomaru-sama?" Her voice was horrified.

"Nooo," Shippo drew out the word. "Not exactly. She likes him well enough, I just can't tell if she *likes* him." Rin frowned, and Shippo struggled to explain. It was weird trying to tell a girl, but Rin hadn't lived nearly as long as he had, and she didn't remember how her parents had been together, so she probably didn't have a lot of experience with adult stuff. He doubted Sesshomaru spent a lot of time telling Rin about feelings and where babies came from. "When adults like each other, like *that*..." he backed up. "Humans fall in love, they love each other right?"

Rin nodded. "Rin loves Sesshomaru-sama and Kagome-sama and Shippo-kun."

"Well, thanks. I love you too, Rin-chan. But this is a different kind of love, the kind that makes babies." Rin's eyes widened comically, and Shippo smiled.

"Sesshomaru-sama and Kagome-sama will have babies?"

"Well, they'd call 'em pups. Or maybe, well, they'd be hanyou, I guess, so..." He trailed off and considered her surprised expression. "That is what you wanted, right? For Kagome and Sesshomaru to get mated, er, married?"

"Yes!" Rin squealed, and then covered her mouth with both hands when Shippo cringed. They both glanced at Kagome. Luckily, she appeared to have fallen asleep. "Rin wants Kagome-sama and Sesshomaru-sama to be together forever." Her voice dropped a few levels so that she was almost whispering, "If Shippo-kun doesn't mind too much, Rin would like Kagome-sama to be her mother too."

Shippo hesitated for a moment. Kagome was his. He had lost a lot: his parents, his home. But Kagome

was his. Except...she told him lots of times that the more she loved, the more she had to give. So he supposed that meant that if she started to love Sesshomaru and Rin, that she would have more love for him too. *Huh*. That was like... Kagome-sense. Weird, but right. "I bet Kagome would really like that, Rin. I would too, if you don't mind being my little sister?"

"Rin would be your big sister, silly! Rin is much taller!"

Shippo laughed, "But I'm older." Rin's eyes widened when Shippo told her how much older. He grinned and continued, "So I know Kagome likes Sesshomaru, but it's hard to tell if she loves him. And Kagome won't stay forever unless she does love him."

"How will we know?"

"Well," Shippo dredged up every memory he had of Kagome while she was in love with Inuyasha, and Sango after she had agreed to marry Miroku. *Well, maybe Sango and Miroku are a bad example.* "She'll want to be with him, even if he is mean or grumpy. Kagome will stare at him when she thinks he's not looking. She'll be really worried about him if he's hurt or sick, and she'll get *scary* mad if anyone calls him names or tries to hurt him. Oh," Shippo remembered one last thing, "and sometimes she'll smell kind of like..." His voice faded away and he turned to stare through the open shoji screen. Kagome was asleep, wrapped in Sesshomaru's tails, with a small smile on her face.

His eyes widened in realization, "Like that."

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"No!" Ryukostokken snarled in fury and threw the first thing he touched. An intricate carved table, replacement for the one he had gouged with his claws, flew across the room. The spy neatly sidestepped and the furniture crashed into the wall, breaking into kindling.

He could feel his youki building, tearing and clawing at his form and ready for release. His fangs lengthened and his claws sharpened. Heat bled into his eyes. *The pup lives!* It was an outrage, it was disastrous, it was unbelievable. Only a few of his own, whom he had given medicine from the far west of the mainland to ease through the disease, had survived. All of them, every single one, were deformed in some way for that victory: scars, blindness, aching joints, reduced youki, stunted growth and malformed limbs. And yet he was to believe that the pup, the weak, arrogant teat that had stolen what should have been his...the cowardly pretender to power who rode on his father's ill-gotten laurels...that *Sesshomaru* had survived unscathed... It must be a lie. Blood-red eyes turned on the spy and a deep sound of promised pain echoed in the room.

"The human woman has healing powers. She cured the Western Lord." Ryukostokken paused, his violent temper checked by the revelation of another source for his enemy's health. "They call her the Miko no Mao," his spy said.

Ryukostokken roared, this time the silk hangings in his reception room receiving his wrath. Great, sharp implements of death shredded millennium-old works of art. The dogs were doing it *again*! Like the spineless worms they were, they slipped out of the noose that fate should have tightened around their necks long ago. Sesshomaru could not have beaten his disease on his own inferior strength, so he had enlisted another. The human woman. The whore.

The dragon lord braced himself against the stone ledge of the window and stared out at the thickly falling snow. He had been planning his revenge since his father had been sealed. He had fled his enemies, but returned to Japan with a new weapon, a disease that no youkai could combat without his assistance. And foreign dragons to supplement his army. His own body had been deformed, and he had to sit back after the bastard of Inu no Tashio killed his sire so that he could enact his plan. He refused to be thwarted by a worthless human female. Although...perhaps not worthless. The spy was detailing that his informant had seen her collapse. Sesshomaru had raced to her aid, protecting her with his own fur and youki. A tiny whisper of inspiration brought a smile of vile hope to Ryukostokken's face. The spy halted in his report.

"Ryukostokken-denkaue?"

The dragon lord turned his new strategy over in his mind, searching for errors and looking for faults. He found none. No miko would be strong enough to kill him, and no miko would have willingly entered the service of a youkai. If she hadn't managed to fend off the advances of the sniveling pup then Ryukostokken had nothing to be concerned about. He had heard more than once that miko lost their power once their purity was gone. The smile widened, until his fangs were bared in a fierce grin. Thin tendrils of smoke curled from his mouth and nose. Illness had proved that Sesshomaru was not untouchable. The pup's concern for the human displayed another chink in his armor. The dog would cower and beg at his feet, and after Ryukostokken had claimed all that Sesshomaru held with pride, the greater demon would gut him.

"Bring the female," he ordered. Malice dripped from his words and his eyes glittered with dark intent, "This one will *have* the Miko no Mao." Her suffering at his hands would be a welcome enjoyment, a far better distraction than the wind demoness or those dragon females he allowed at the castle. Even better, the sensitive nose of the dog would know that she had been taken. He laughed at the sweet duality. His pleasure, Sesshomaru's pain.

Chapter 13: Know Your Alpha

Kagome had woken extremely well-rested from her nap to find that she was left with only minor aches from her recent attempt to use her powers. She meditated, and discovered, to her relief, that there wasn't anything wrong with her reiki, but it was exhausted. She guessed that it might have taken a week or so for her to regenerate all of the energy she spent healing Sesshomaru and the rest of the castle if she had left her powers alone. Her session with Aki and Kento had probably pushed that time back considerably. And then the demonstration for the soldier, *well...that was just stupid*. Her temper had a habit of getting her into trouble, and she had no one to blame but herself. She wasn't sure how long it would take her reiki to get better, but she wasn't in any pain, and she could tell it was recuperating, so she swore to keep her energy to herself and got up to play with the children.

They read for a while and Kagome was surprised to find that neither Shippo nor Rin fit well in her lap anymore. Rin was a bit more expected, but the kit must have grown at least an inch since they had arrived at the castle, maybe more. She supposed she should be grateful that he was getting new clothes at Sesshomaru's expense, but mostly she just felt nostalgic that he was growing up so quickly.

By late-afternoon they were getting restless, so Kagome suggested an outing. She changed into her modern clothes and Eiichi and Eiji escorted them to a courtyard sheltered from the wind. They built snowmen and had an impressive fort started when Inuyasha arrived from the training grounds. They quickly drew sides, Rin and the hanyou against Shippo and Kagome, and had a snowball fight that occasionally took innocent bystanders. Eiichi was a good sport. Eiji was not.

Happily tired and starving, they returned to their temporary lodgings and had a boisterous and lengthy supper. Kagome even convinced the rock brothers to take turns eating with them. Jaken and the servants returned to clear away the dishes and Inuyasha relaxed on the floor while Rin and Shippo took turns reading with a fairy-tale book from Kagome's time.

She had waited patiently though supper. And then impatiently during the first story. He had said they would discuss the trip over dinner. Over *dinner*. As in, while they were eating. She knew he was busy; he was a lord, for crying out loud, he probably had a million things to do. Still, even lords should have breaks for things like eating, sleeping, and satisfying the curiosity of an anxious miko.

His mokomoko pooled in her lap and she found herself absently petting it. She stopped and blushed as soon as she realized what she was doing, and then considered it. He had said she should oil the fur in exchange for using it. While she had her doubts that he was being strictly selfless with that offer, it would be rude not to take care of it. After all, it had kept her warm all day, even in the snow. Kagome smiled a devilish smile, her cheeks heating even redder. And if she had to really work to get the oil rubbed in, well then, there wasn't anything wrong with that. She was just doing what he had asked her to do. If it bothered him, if she was being too *thorough*, then he could come tell her that.

Satisfied with the twisted logic that absolved her of any ulterior motives, she grabbed her oil and a blanket to protect her new kimono. Starting at the...not tail end, she poured a small amount of leave-in

conditioning oil into her hands and rubbed them together. Then she went to work.

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Sesshomaru was growing impatient. He had read all of the details of Kento's report on the North, and had come to the conclusion that the dragon lord was systematically targeting villages where Sesshomaru had informants and amassing information. To what end, he was not yet certain, except that it would be, at best, irritating to him. Since Ryukostokken had returned to Japan, he had stayed firmly within his own borders. There were daiyoukai, even other lords, who had urged Sesshomaru to wipe the dragons out, as they had tried to do to the Western Lands when the Inu no Tashio was killed. Sesshomaru had not seen the logic. The war that raged between the demons and humans when Izayoi was murdered, then revived and fled with her hanyou child, had taken immense tolls on both sides. It was over before Ryukostokken returned, but moving against him, even with the reduced resources and army of the North, was unwise.

The rebuilding of that time was followed by another war, this time with rogue demons from the mainland. The South had been decimated, as they had borne the brunt of the attacks, but the invaders had been beaten back. Sesshomaru led his own forces, the only army that contained mixed demon ranks, to victory after victory. He saw no reason not to capitalize on the strengths of those that would fight for him. A mortal blow did the same damage from a panther as a badger, and two fighters with different styles could make each other stronger. He had even asked Inuyasha to join him, but the hanyou had bitterly declined. It was that war that had earned him the title Saidai Mao. Through all of that, all of the years, the North had remained silent. Even humans rarely ventured into the lands still quietly patrolled by dragons. None ever came out. There had been rumors that Ryukostokken slowly culled all of the non-dragon youkai from his domain, but it did not affect the West, or any of the other demon lords.

Even if the portents regarding the dragons turned out to be worse than his scouts and advisors feared, he still believed he had made the right decision. Not that he would hesitate to ever cut down an enemy that might cause problems in the future. No, it had simply been the wrong time before. Japan had been divided by wars and distrust. He could have eliminated the dragons, but the cost to his lands would have been too high. It was one of the reasons he preferred to patrol his lands without assistance. Any that he did battle with alone, were alone. There were no armies to consider. No innocent villages to protect. No alliances or trade routes or economic consequences. If he had to strike against the North now, he would do so, but it was not a pleasing prospect. Killing, that he had no issues with. He even enjoyed it on occasion, especially when the opponent was honorable and challenging. Ferreting out the dragons and eliminating them would be tiresome, bloody work that had little honor or personal meaning. It would be business. The business of the West. Of Japan.

The annoying administrator that oversaw the outer chambers slunk into the study again, this time with fresh paper. Sesshomaru restrained the urge to lash the obsequious demon with his youki. Thankfully, Hisao was much more short-tempered. He physically booted the intruder and returned to his place next to Kento.

“We should send an emissary to the wolf-pack,” Hisao suggested.

“Kouga-san’s wolves?”

“Who else, Kento-san?” Hisao made a disgusted sound. “He is the only one who has any control over the wolf-youkai. Damn things are more animal than demon most of the time.”

Kento sighed and added a few marks to his list. “There are not many who could bring us information on the East, and fewer still who could bring the chaos there into any sort of order. If Lord Kuren has been assassinated by an outside force, then another daiyoukai may be afraid to step into his role. It will be a near impossible task to make the demons there fall into line. They will be wild and uncontrolled.”

Hisao snorted, “They were wild and uncontrolled before. There is a reason why Kouga-san has so much authority in the East, and why Inuyasha was able to carve out his own little human territory. Kuren never did anything without spending at least twenty years contemplating the consequences, and even then he rarely acted. The male was a coward and a bureaucrat. It is too bad his father died without another heir.”

“Spineless bureaucrats are sometimes the only government we get, Hisao-san. It was better than nothing. With Kuren dead, the demons will be in a panic. They’ll attack humans and other youkai alike, without stopping to consider anything. The wolf packs will hold the mountains well enough, and Edo and the surrounding forests and village will stand as one under Inuyasha, but I estimate that everything from here,” Kento pointed at the map before them with the handle of his brush, “to here will fall to chaos within a year.”

“What hasn’t already been lost to the disease. Kagome-sama said that many of the human villages as close as two-days walk from Edo had the illness. Assuming her quarantine worked, everything north of here,” Hisao drew a light crease with the back of his claw, “will have been stricken. We’ll have to send someone who won’t startle the humans if we want any good information. After a plague they always get anxious about outsiders, especially demons.”

“Inuyasha will go to the East to gather information and calm any panic,” Sesshomaru declared tonelessly. He named another which would be sent with a message for Kouga. They had been over all of this before. He had questioned the scout from the East regarding the fall of Kuren, and then listened as Hisao and Kento went over his information again. After he was dismissed, other reports were heard and similarly dissected. There was nothing that further study would tell them about the situation. Sesshomaru was ready to be done with it. Reviewing each piece of information three times was tiresome; it was enough to make him wish that Kento had stayed in Aki’s bed so that there was one less opinion to listen to. The inuyoukai had not apologized for his absence, nor for requesting Kagome’s assistance. In a certain light, Sesshomaru could understand. After five hundred years of waiting, Kento had a chance at the mate he had been chasing and a pack of his own. It was understandable that he would seize the opportunity. However, he should have consulted his Lord before asking Sesshomaru’s miko to use her skills. The consequences would be determined later. If Kento was lucky,

Sesshomaru would be in a better mood then.

He had felt her reiki pulse once earlier in the day, but it quieted almost immediately. His youki sensed no danger, although it urged him to go to her regardless. He shackled his instincts and threw himself into his work. The sooner he finished, the sooner he could see to the miko. He could feel the muscle in his jaw tightening, and he was supremely aware that darkness had fallen. He could smell supper faintly, being served to the soldiers and, no doubt, to Kagome and the others as well. Sesshomaru had told her they would speak over dinner. He did not appreciate being made to go back on his word.

“Inuyasha,” Kento said in the same flat voice.

“Your brother,” Hisao stated with a quirked brow.

“Half-brother,” Sesshomaru corrected. He could see that they disagreed, and he did not want to take the time for them to come around to the correct solution on their own. He held back a sigh of frustration. “He made contact with most of the human and youkai villages in the East during the search for the shards of the Shikon. He is trusted and respected by many of the humans there, and strong enough to deal with the lesser youkai that may try to take advantage of the situation.”

“Strong enough,” Hisao snorted, “he has barely held his own with me on the training grounds, and he lacks any sort of technique!”

“He is untutored,” Sesshomaru corrected. His nostrils flared and he hoped that the two other dogs would sense his irritation. He did not want to be in his study at that moment, in fact, had a much more desirable place to be, and pointing out the finer qualities of his father’s bastard hanyou was not improving his mood. “A hanyou less than half your age with no formal training has bested you once and held his ground all other times. This one believes his strength will suffice.”

When Hisao did not object again, he continued, “His well-known animosity with This One will serve him well should our conjectures about our enemy be proven correct. They are more likely to share plans with a potential ally against This One than with a youkai known to serve the West.”

“What of diplomacy?” Kento ventured quietly. “If any are left of Kuren’s vassals, they will be difficult to steer from misdirected revenge. Will Inuyasha be able to harness them to a greater goal? Will he be able to ally with Kouga-san and any other strong demon packs in the East?”

“Yes,” Sesshomaru said simply. A tingle ran down his spine and he sat up straighter. The feeling was muffled, but he was aware of a firm kneading of the tight muscles in his neck and shoulders. A rumble of pleasure started to build in his chest. He cut it off abruptly before Kento and Hisao could be alerted to the sound.

“Inuyasha can be...compelling.” Warm caresses worked across the skin of his back, brushing, flexing, stroking. He forced himself to focus. “When he wants to be. In addition, the miko’s other companions will no doubt accompany him.” Sesshomaru sucked in a breath and held it. As if she was seated behind

him, he could feel the miko's hands massaging from the base of his hair to the tops of his hips. She made long, pulling motions that were designed to ease the tension from him. They had that effect, and also the unintended consequence, he was sure, of making him desire her hands on the rest of his body. *I explicitly told her not to touch mokomoko in such a way.*

"The monk and slayer," he let out his breath when the sensation eased, "have much experience with such matters. The monk, in particular, is a skilled diplomat. Even you, Kento, would be-" Her hands returned and Sesshomaru had to snap his mouth shut or risk growling in a way that neither Hisao nor Kento would appreciate.

"My Lord?" Kento ventured.

"We will discuss it with the hanyou in the morning. This One is finished here," he spoke tightly and left via the shoji screens that led outside. He wished to waste no time avoiding servants or administrators, he had a miko that needed reprimanding. Immediately.

He used his cloud to speed up to the third floor guest quarters and let himself down on the wide walkway outside her rooms in a few short seconds. He slid open the shoji screen and quickly surveyed the chamber. Rin had been reading, but the scroll was forgotten when he entered. She greeted him with a smile and a happy 'Sesshomaru-sama!' but did not rise from her cushioned spot. On one side of her lay the kitsune, his head lolling against her knee and his mouth open in a quiet snore. On the other side sat Inuyasha. In the moment it had taken him to recognize Sesshomaru's scent and youki, his hand had gripped Tessaiga and his muscles tensed to stand. Sesshomaru's eyes narrowed, but he gave his half-brother a nod and Inuyasha returned it.

Her scent was still strong and lightly seasoned with cinnamon; the miko sat in the doorway to the sleeping chamber she had claimed as her own. He could smell her scent on the futon. She wore the kimono he had commissioned for her, and he felt a surge of pride in seeing her in his colors, in garments he had designed and purchased for her use. Her hair was held back in a strange style, and although he preferred it free, and spread across his chest, she looked beautiful. Mokomoko lay across her lap, the majority of it showed signs that she had completed oiling it - which he had already guessed. She held one of his tails in her hands, a guilty look on her face.

"Miko," his voice was low, but he found he could not control that. He could barely suppress the growl that threatened to escape. It took an immense amount of will to reign in his youki and control his scent. Unfortunately, he was not quick enough to avoid his half-brother's nose.

"Ya gotta be fuckin' kiddin' me," Inuyasha muttered in disgust. There was a sniff behind Sesshomaru, and the hanyou stood. He would have continued, but Rin interrupted him.

"Inuyasha-san." She had a disappointed, warning note in her voice, "Bad words."

"Keh. I'll be outside." He stalked over to the shoji screen and slid them shut behind him as he joined the rock brothers. Sesshomaru considered the situation. Due to the construction, the family quarters,

both his and Rin's, were far too cold for humans. He had relocated the females to a guest suite, but he had not considered that the kit would stay where his mother was. Inuyasha, too, was overly protective of the miko. He would become argumentative if she was taken out of range of his senses. Useless for the hanyou, of course, but he did not wish to deal with another hole in his walls. It did necessitate alterations to his plans for informing the miko that he would not tolerate her disobedience. *Willful* disobedience, if her guilty expression and scent were correct.

"Rin, prepare for bed." He picked up the sleeping kit and held him close, ready to tuck him into the miko's futon.

"Sesshomaru-sama?" Her voice halted his progress. "May Shippo-kun sleep in Rin's room? We already moved a futon," she gestured to the nest on the floor near her own mound of bedding. Her voice dropped to a whisper, "Shippo-kun and Rin do not want to be alone in this new room. It is different."

"Hn." He changed directions, and the miko was quick to stand and follow him to tuck her adopted son in. She stood by silently while he lifted the blankets and settled the kitsune into place. He secured the bedding around him. Pups and children needed to be kept warm at night; he assumed the same was true for kits. A strand of his hair had gotten caught in the little demon's claws. He carefully extracted it and stood, to find the miko staring at him with an odd expression. Her scent was...confused. Not only were there too many emotions filtering through his nose, but there was also a strong thread of the muddled, bland taste of her puzzlement.

"May Rin hug Sesshomaru-sama?"

"Hn." His daughter wrapped her arms around his waist, and Sesshomaru noted that she had grown again. He placed one hand on her head, patting her hair and calculating that at her current rate she would be fully-grown in another year or two. Shorter than the miko, perhaps, but still a respectable height for a human female. He let his claws slip through her loose hair, scent-marking her. "Sleep."

She obliged, happily crawling into her futon and wishing the adults good night. It occurred to him that perhaps the miko might learn to follow commands better if she spent more time with Rin. He waited in the anteroom while she kissed both children and shut the screens. "This one will speak with the hanyou. You will wait." He made his gaze as cold as possible to show her that a serious discussion was forthcoming. It did not affect her.

"Your mokomoko," she said calmly. Her voice was steady, but her scent was a riot of emotion and her cheeks were pink. He wondered, again, how far her blush extended. She held out the fur, and his traitorous tail twined around her arm as he took it.

At his touch, it relaxed and merged with him again. It was disconcerting, but as long as no others saw how mokomoko clung to her, he would not prevent it from the display. He had already admitted that he preferred her touch, even her company. The lesser part of himself would share the inclination. Her scent was deeply worked into the fur, along with the mild, pleasant odor of her oils. He had covered her with his own scent, but he was not certain how he felt about being equally marked by the miko.

“You will wait,” he repeated, and left to seek out the hanyou.

The rock demons were still stationed in the corridor, and Sesshomaru dismissed them, ignoring the sidelong glances to his tails. Inuyasha was slouched against the opposite wall, one foot on the floor and his arms crossed defiantly. *Always eager for a fight.* The daiyoukai refrained from shaking his head in exasperation. “In the morning, you will go to the East and investigate reports of attacks on the villages there. You will determine how the Eastern Lord, Kuren, has been assassinated and if any of his House live. Speak with any allies you or your group has in the East. Prepare them for further attacks. Remind them that you will stand against their enemies. You will return before the new moon and report to This One.”

“Keh. Like I’m gonna take orders from you, asshole.”

“Kuren is dead. It is probable his pack and vassals are as well.” Inuyasha only scowled, so Sesshomaru reigned in his impatience and explained. Slowly. “The miko reported that the sickness was widespread in the East. This One has obtained reports of attacks on youkai villages there. The demons are unorganized and have no leader. The humans are ill and frightened.” His half-brother smelled confused as well as angry. Sesshomaru wanted to sigh. “You are more familiar with humans than This One. What will frightened villagers do when confronted with youkai refugees fleeing illness and attacks?”

“Fuckin’ hell,” Inuyasha muttered. *Finally, he comprehends.* Leading another to the correct conclusions was tedious. “They’ll kill every demon they see. And the demons will strike back. It’ll be a fuckin’ bloodbath.”

“Indeed. Perhaps it would be best if the humans were met with a familiar presence, rather than a strange youkai. Do this, or bear responsibility for the outcome. The West stands behind you, Inuyasha. You will *not* fail.”

“Fucker.” Inuyasha glared, but his scent was full of acceptance. “If you mate Kagome while I’m gone, I’ll cut off that arm again and beat you with it.” *Tactful and eloquent as always.* Sesshomaru pondered the hanyou’s words. The miko was his. He would keep her. But he had not considered what that would mean to him, to them. He had every intention of claiming her body, but to make her his mate – he had not considered it. “You bastard!” Inuyasha hissed, obviously sensing his hesitation and drawing his own conclusions. He pushed away from the wall and stood with one hand on the Fang. “You were gonna- gonna *use* my friend and throw her aside, like some whore-”

Sesshomaru was at his throat in an instant. This time he did not make the mistake of allowing the hanyou enough air to speak. His youki was clawing for release, and he was angry enough to want to let it out. “Do *not* speak of the miko in such a way again. Your foul words are undeserved.” He bared his fangs, “And they displease This One.” With great effort, he pulled his claws from his brother’s throat and stepped back.

“You’re the one who said it shamed father,” Inuyasha rasped. He still smelled of anger, but

also...sadness. "She is my friend, Sesshomaru. I won't let you do that to her."

"You would not be able to stop This One," Sesshomaru noted without any heat. He did want the miko. But he would not shame her. She was worthy of a place of honor. But a mate...a mate was for eternity. A mate produced pups, heirs. He had already decided that he would not allow her to age and die as other humans did. Pups, however, were another matter.

"I would die trying. And Kagome *does* love me, Sesshomaru. If you killed me, you'd have to force her to stay. You'd have to keep her locked up and force yourself on her if you wanted her. Is that how it will be with Kagome?"

"No," Sesshomaru answered without realizing he had spoken. He blinked. He would never hurt the miko. He could not. And she *would* stay with him, invite his attentions, because she desired it to be so. He had already decided that he preferred her acquiescence. But pups... He ignored Inuyasha's hateful stare and imagined the miko holding his son or daughter. Wide golden eyes meeting soft blue. Tiny claws on her breast. *I will remind the young one to be careful.* White hair strewn across her kimono. Pointed ears straining for the sound of its mother's voice. Sesshomaru stiffened his already straight posture. Not pointed ears. Furry dog ears, like Inuyasha. A hanyou, like Inuyasha. He considered his brother with renewed interest. "Hanyou," he murmured quietly.

"What? You got somethin' to say for yourself, bastard?"

Inuyasha was uncouth and tactless, but those were products of his upbringing, or lack thereof. It might not have been so if their father had lived...and he had given Izayoi the place she deserved. Sesshomaru had spoken the truth to Hisao. The hanyou was stronger than most full-youkai, and had not yet fully matured. Formal training would make him superior to nearly all but Sesshomaru himself. The demon blood of their father ran in his veins, and if he ever managed to control his youki, he would be a formidable opponent. Despite the prejudices against hanyou from demons and humans alike, Inuyasha had gained allies and friends of both species.

Sesshomaru had never considered taking a mate or having pups of his own, but still... He realigned his mental image to give the pup fuzzy triangles on the top of its head. The picture was no less attractive to him. Would, could, the West accept a hanyou heir? *My choices are my own.*

"She will be This One's mate," he announced, more so that he could hear the words himself than out of any need to reassure his brother.

Inuyasha made a derisive sound, "Ya haven't *asked* her yet, have ya?"

"She will agree with This One's decision. Your presence is not required or desired." He narrowed his eyes to make certain that Inuyasha got the point.

The hanyou chuckled, his scent easing to one of anticipation with only traces of darker emotions. "This thing in the East better not take too long, 'cause I don't wanna miss the shitstorm you are about to crash

right into. It's gonna be great." Sesshomaru ignored his laughter and turned back to the rooms. "Ya sleeping here?" His voice was disapproving, and the answer self-evident, so Sesshomaru did not respond. "Stupid wench'll let ya too. Keh. Whatever. I ain't guarding your ass all night and smellin' you," his voice dropped and the sadness grew stronger, "and her. Ya know she used to...she smells nice, doesn't she?"

There was an aching sort of regret, but no longing, in his brother's voice, so Sesshomaru did not remove his tongue for commenting on the miko's scent. He tried to imagine what it would be like to have the miko to himself for years, and then know she was no longer his. It would never happen. Still...he could understand Inuyasha's loss. At least the hanyou had recognized that the miko belonged to Sesshomaru.

"The kit and Rin would miss your presence. This One will erect a barrier for sound and scent. In the morning, you will leave for the East." He slid open the door, and seeing that the miko had ignored his order and gone into her own sleeping chamber, he said quietly, "Cherry wood and magnolias." He sensed, more than saw, Inuyasha's nod behind him.

"Yeah." The hanyou closed the screen and settled himself against a wall to sleep. "At least the fuckin' wolf didn't get her. Can't wait to see the look on the mangy mutt's face." His mutters were insensible, but Sesshomaru filed them away for further consideration.

He slipped into the room and threw up his youki barrier even before the screen had softly clicked closed. Kagome stood still, eyes wide and obi dangling from her fingers, obviously mid-way through undressing for bed. He breathed in her scent and it soothed him; it confirmed all of the decisions he had made about her. She was his. He would claim her. She would be his mate and bear his pups. They would be hanyou, and stronger than any others. He wondered if they might develop a resistance to purification, and put that aside for further contemplation as well.

"I, ah-" Her embarrassment was abruptly replaced with irritation. "What are you doing in here? I am trying to change!"

"I was not aware that miko had such power." He deliberately misunderstood her, and waited with a contented sort of anticipation for her reaction. "What sort of form do you change to? It cannot be as pleasing as this one, but I would see it regardless."

"Why, you- I-" Her face grew red again, but he was unable to discern if it was from modesty or anger. He enjoyed the peppery spice in her scent. "I can't change into anything, you nut!"

"Nut? Is this a term from your era? I do not understand what-"

"You're completely crazy! Do you even listen to yourself? You think you can just barge in here and-and-"

"Converse?" He suggested helpfully.

“Arrgh!” Her growl did strange things to the hairs on the back of his neck. And other parts of his anatomy. “You are so frustrating! It is like talking to a mental patient.” He opened his mouth to goad her again, but she beat him to it with clenched teeth. “I am trying to tell you, you can’t be in here, not while I am trying to undress.”

“You do not wish me to see your nudity,” he said calmly. Her face reddened again and she nodded in a strangled sort of relief. He almost smiled. “Has it changed in some way since this morning? You have said you did not have the power to-”

“Sesshomaru-sama,” she interrupted him sweetly. The daiyoukai was enjoying himself too much to take any notice of her dangerous tone. Pink sparks crackled along her fists. “Get out or I’ll -” She broke off abruptly with a sound of agony. He was at her side in an instant, holding her against his chest as she sank to the floor. “Oh, it hurts!” She panted, her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

Sesshomaru reached out with his youki, desperate to understand and stop her pain. Her body seemed fine, but her reiki was curled in on itself like an injured animal. It snapped at him when he approached, drawing another *mewl* from the miko. With the smallest amount of power he could manipulate, he wrapped it around her energy. The second time, her reiki responded, turning into him and burrowing against him seeking warmth and protection. Her power was far beyond the exhausted state he had encountered after her session with Aki. She had over-used it. Like prey that runs until it is weakened, and then goes on until it is crippled, she had pushed her powers beyond its limit until it would require significant rest to recuperate. Perhaps even more than that. He settled her on the futon, her legs folded to her chest and her head and shoulder leaning against him.

“You have damaged yourself. I instructed you not to use your reiki.” He recalled the brief moment earlier that day when he had felt her power. His instinct had been to go to her, but he ignored it as his senses told him she was physically well. Physically, not spiritually. His jaw tightened and he berated himself for not caring for her properly. She would be his mate. He could not allow anyone to damage her. Not even herself.

“My temper,” she whimpered. “Mama always says it will get me into trouble. I thought she meant detention. I didn’t think it would hurt so-” He stopped in the act of standing when she clutched at his clothing. “Please, don’t go, it hurts less when you-”

“Hush,” he smoothed his hand across her hair. “My youki will stay, I wish only to remove my obi.” He had to pry her fingers from his collar, and she still made sounds of distress as he stood and loosened the wide cloth. He quickly divested himself of everything but his pants as well, determining that she would be reluctant to let him go again to make himself more comfortable. As he was reluctant to leave her. He knelt next to her, and seized her small hands when she would have latched onto him again. Her whimper shot straight through his chest. He should have taken her personally from the springs to her room. He would not fail her again. He loosened the ribbons tying her kimono closed and she made no protest as he slid it from her shoulders. He reached for the ties of her inner kimono and she finally balked.

“Sesshomaru?” she whispered.

“You should be comfortable. You need to rest.” She still smelled anxious, although it was difficult to scent under the fear and pain. “And you are wrinkling your kimono,” he added in the calmest voice he could manage.

“Oh, yes, please help...” She moved her arms to try and assist him, but her motions were more of a hindrance. Her sandals and socks had already been removed, and he was reluctant to sort through the strange braid of her hair, so he pulled her into his lap and tossed her two kimono on top of his own. “The wrinkles -” she protested weakly.

“Hush,” he soothed her again. Carefully, he lay down on her futon, holding her close to his chest. She refused to unfold her legs, and if it eased the pain he was not going to force her. Instead, he lay down with her tucked between his chest and his arm. He pulled a light blanket and arranged mokomoko over top of them.

As his body heat seeped in to her and his claws traced lightly up across her spine, he stroked her reiki as well. Slowly, he added additional tendrils of his own power, cradling the bruised pink light in a thickening web of youki. He smelled it when her pain eased to a manageable level and her spirit relaxed against him, relying on his energy to support and comfort it. He tucked a stray hair behind her ear and traced the line of her jaw. “You must not use your reiki again until I know you are completely healed.”

“It was just for a moment,” she whispered against his chest. “I just wanted to show that jerk I wasn’t helpless.” His beast raised its head at the mention of the ‘jerk’ but he set the potential for a rage-induced disemboweling aside. He could find the one responsible later. The miko needed him now.

“You are never helpless. I am here.”

“You won’t always be, Sesshomaru. If I depend on you to fight my battles, what will I do when you’re not around anymore?” He wanted to reprimand her for even considering that they would be parted. He would not allow it.

“I will always protect you,” he responded instead. She hummed noncommittally and yawned. He listened through the one-way barrier as Rin slid open her screen and approached Inuyasha. They spoke in hushed tones for a moment about Sesshomaru’s location and Inuyasha’s pending departure. *The girl should be in bed.* He began a rumbling vibration in his chest, something he remembered his father doing, a very, very long time ago, to soothe an injured pup. She yawned again and pressed her face into his skin, breathing in his scent and leaving her own in return.

“I am sorry for being such a burden, Sesshomaru. You-” she yawned again, “you brought me here to help, and you have spent so much time watching out for me.”

“It is my duty.” A sharp jab to his reasoning skills, something rude that felt an unfortunate amount like Inuyasha, reminded him that she was more independent and required more reassurance than most females. “My choices are my own, Kagome.”

She was breathing softly, deeply, and he wasn't sure if she had heard him. Her reiki was resting, encased in his own power. He was surprised he had managed to push his youki so deeply inside her with no real effort or thought, and little resistance on her part. The miko was asleep. He pressed his lips to her forehead and closed his own eyes, realizing with a reluctant smile that she had managed to avoid a discussion on his intentions, as well as the repercussions of her actions with mokomoko. The miko was truly unique, and her challenges were part of her appeal.

He listened to Rin and Inuyasha, speaking of nothing and wasting time that the girl would have better spent sleeping. *I told her to go to bed.* He wondered briefly, as he inhaled sweet magnolias and drifted into a light doze, if Rin's exposure to the miko would not make Kagome more biddable, but instead make Rin less so.

Chapter 14: Passing Notes

“How many dead?”

“Thirty-seven, Ryukostokken-denkaue. The village was nearly wiped out.”

“Next time, kill them all,” he ordered his captain. Ryukostokken stared at the map before him. Eighteen villages in the West, forty-two in the East. He had directed they leave survivors at first. Survivors became refugees. Refugees sapped resources and strained defenses. They told tales of suffering and death. And those that did not speak, they were even greater allies to his cause. Every fourth village the dragons captured and tortured a few - human or youkai mattered little. The most effective method was to cut out their tongues. His soldiers were not inflicting pain to gain information; if they did it was an axillary benefit. They left vicious scars, wounds that would never heal on the flesh and the spirit. Those that survived were turned loose, close to the next village so that they would receive treatment for their injuries. The ones that could not, or would not, talk...they inspired fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of the dark and monstrous things that the imagination could conjure with greater creativity and terrorizing effect than any half-mumbled story of raiders and murderers.

Ryukostokken knew what fear was. He knew its power. The deaths of the lesser youkai and filthy humans were pleasing to him as well, but it was the stark, hushed whispers of death without a face that he wanted to reach other ears. By the time he moved his army, the small bands of assassins would have created a panic that would shake the foundations of Japan. Even the arrogant Sesshomaru would tremble, wondering what such whispers could mean of his enemy.

“What of Kuren?”

“The crane of the East is no more, my Lord,” Captain Natsou stated. Ryukostokken could taste the soldier’s satisfaction in the air.

“It was painful?”

“As you ordered, Denka-ue. He was incapacitated in another room while his mate and daughter were raped and flayed. The child died just as we released him. The female put up a considerable fight; he saw her last breaths before I ripped out his heart.”

Ryukostokken reveled in the fulfilment that welled in him. Kuren had been a new lord when he returned from the mainland after his father was sealed by the Inu no Taisho. Ryukostokken had approached him for a trade alliance, to help bring wealth and prestige back to the North. The crane refused, stating that even if he had the fortune and goods to risk on the dragons, he would not be willing to make a move that would so obviously displease Sesshomaru.

Displease him. As though the dog’s simple displeasure was worth more than the fate of the North.

Kuren had gotten only a fraction of what he deserved. Ryukostokken wished briefly that the crane had been more prolific, that there might be other children that could be brought back to his castle, screaming. It had been many decades since he had tasted the flesh of bird youkai. As he recalled, the young ones were the most tender.

He also recalled that the Lord of the South had at least two cubs, although the older must be an adult, the younger had been born only a century or so ago. Bear meat had good marbling, and would still be full and sweet so early in the season. "When we take the South, you will bring the second heir to this one - alive."

"Yes, Denka-ue."

"Speak of the fate of this village," he pointed to another speck on his map. He sat back with his sake and listened to the number of deaths, the mutilations of those that were allowed to flee, and smiled.

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Sesshomaru was eager for the repairs to his rooms to be completed. With the miko's condition, he was unwilling to be separated further from her than his nose could easily discern her state. He was certain he could maintain the youki bandage he had made for her power from a greater distance, but there was no need to test it when he was more comfortable in closer proximity. Kento had brought his most pressing work to the antechamber outside her room, and his secretary handled all visitors and reports, personally relaying any information that Sesshomaru needed to hear immediately. Unfortunately, the room was far too small for himself, his work, Kento, and occasionally Hisao. It made him want to growl in irritation. He tried to relieve his frustration by considering how the miko would view the situation. The uncommonly cheerful woman would endeavor to look for positive repercussions of his new workspace. He fought the warm feeling that expanded in his chest at the mental image of her wide smile and bright optimism.

His kowtowing administrator's presence did not fit in the smaller guest apartments, nor was it allowed above the main floor of the castle. The absence of that demon was welcome.

He could smell her clearly. Not on mokomoko, which had been reluctant to leave her when he rose, but through the rice paper screen that separated them. He could smell her clean scent, finally free from pain after a long night at her side. He could hear each small sound she made as she shifted restlessly or murmured through a dream. Her nearness was pleasing.

Unfortunately, the close quarters also necessitated that Rin and Shippo be sent elsewhere so that he could concentrate on what must be done. As soon as he had finished relaying instructions to Inuyasha, the children bid their goodbyes. The kit gave reminders to say hello to those in Edo, and passed along notes and drawings for the slayer and monk. He even teased the hanyou, calling Sesshomaru's half-brother 'nisan' and earning a rough smack to the back of his furry head. Rin offered her hand, as a

proper lady should, and then impulsively hugged the hanyou. Sesshomaru determined, as his nose was offended by her unshed tears, that she had grown far too attached to his bastard sibling. Although it was amusing to see a child successfully admonish Inuyasha for his foul language. Jaken was summoned soon after and led the children away for breakfast elsewhere and a game that made Rin clap with excitement and Jaken groan in dread.

He ate little himself, hoping only that the savory smell would tempt the miko to wake, but she slumbered on. He worked for hours, reading reports, demanding information, signing orders, and glaring at anyone who spoke above a whisper when they entered. Hisao and Kento appeared as a servant removed the untouched lunch tray, and he was reminded again of the unsatisfactory size of the room. Three large inuyoukai made it uncomfortable. Hisao was also not known for his well-modulated voice. Sesshomaru stood and waved them to the outer walkway. He paused to look in on the sleeping miko and then followed them out. The cold and falling snow would not bother the youkai, and their voices would not reverberate against the screens, disturbing her.

"If I may, Sesshomaru-sama," Kento began.

"This is ridiculous," Hisao interrupted. Sesshomaru was torn between amusement and the desire to vent his frustration and pent up concern on his subordinates. Kento, ever the diplomat, had been walking on eggshells since Sesshomaru had revealed that Aki's new state came at the health of the miko. Hisao was even shorter-tempered than usual, having been forced to deal with a higher state of tension within the troops, a new, nearly equal standing with Inuyasha, and transferring messages from the flighty administrator, who was chafing at his restriction from his Lord. "You can't keep working like this. Only the bare minimum is getting accomplished, and there is much more that needs to be done. We cannot discuss plans for potential attacks or defense if you are spending all of your time reading mail. That is a job for clerks!"

"And we do appreciate the occupation, Hisao-san," Kento said dryly.

"There are more important things for the Saidai Mao to be doing!"

"Paperwork is important. It brings word of your potential attacks, it orders resources and men for defense, I think I even have your payroll here somewhere - waiting for authorization."

"I'll show you where you can put your authorization!"

Sesshomaru was getting a headache listening to the two dogs bark at each other. Tensions were high among his closest advisors, only few outside of their group of three had heard the reports, seen the missives that crossed Sesshomaru's desk. No one else had seen them all. The knowledge of what *could be* weighed heavily on them. Coupled with forced inaction and tight quarters it was pushing them to the edge. He felt his own mask slipping. He bore the responsibility for all that happened in the West, and the condition of the miko still concerned him. He growled.

The low, warning vibration was accompanied by a pulse of youki. Hisao's mouth snapped shut, though

he was still fuming. Kento folded his hands neatly in his sleeves, his eyes flashing.

“Cease this foolishness at once.” His command was met with silence, and the daiyoukai took a deep breath of crisp winter air and magnolias and continued, “This One’s rooms shall be finished soon, we will reconvene there until the miko is well. The administrator and his clerks will have no further access to reports.”

“Sesshomaru-sama,” Kento began, then fell quiet with a low bow under his Lord’s intense scrutiny.

“What can wait for This One’s attention will do so. Evaluating the wake of the disease and making arrangements to deal with it are the first priority, followed by information gathering and strategy. Hisao, since you are so concerned for This One’s time, you may assist Kento in sorting through the reports for value after you have completed training each day. Kento-”

“These reports?”

Sesshomaru was at the miko’s side the moment she spoke. He had not noticed her approach and it spoke more to his unsettled state than any stealth on the part of the normally the clumsy female. He had left the screen to the anteroom partially open, to better hear if she should become distressed, and she was poised in the opening, a sheaf of loose papers in her hand. His gaze raked over her. She was dressed only in her silk robe, but mokomoko protected her from the cold and indecency. Her only exposed flesh was her hands, face and a sliver of neck and collarbone where her clothing had shifted while she slept. With a twitch of youki, his fur slid tighter around her, concealing even that pale skin.

“It is far too cold here for humans,” he said in a low voice.

“I feel much better,” she answered brightly, still staring at the reports.

“You should be resting.” He pressed more authority into his voice, and even used a bit of his power to try to nudge her back inside. She rolled her eyes.

“I’m fine, Sesshomaru. Why are you all fired up about this stuff anyway? It is just a bunch of trade accounts, surely they aren’t that urgent?”

Sesshomaru paused, leaning back to consider her. He knew she could read, he had seen her do so on many occasions. While some of the kanji were unfamiliar to him and the phrases strange, he could read the bound scrolls she brought from her time. If they were any indication, her education was quite extensive.

“She can read?” Hisao sounded dumbfounded. Considering the standard for education in general, and women in particular - especially among humans - Sesshomaru decided it to be an appropriate response.

“Of course Kagome-sama can read,” Kento responded as though it should have been obvious. It was more likely his cousin told him.

“Then she can cull through this lot!” Hisao’s excitement was tempered only slightly by Sesshomaru’s glare.

“The miko needs to rest.” He could feel her gearing up for a protest, but he was done discussing how to put her to work when she was standing barefoot in the cold air. He pulled her tightly against his chest and moved into her sleeping chamber, snapping up a youki barrier, closing the screen, and settling on the futon. He had her secure in his lap before she could open her mouth.

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“I’ve rested-” Kagome was abruptly aware that she had been relocated back to her futon, and Sesshomaru surrounded her. “-enough,” she finished lamely. One clawed hand wrapped around her waist, the other tangled in her already sad braid, freeing her hair and tickling her scalp. “Sesshomaru,” her breath hitched when his nose dipped into the shell of her ear, “what are you doing?”

“Examining,” came the low reply. His nose was surprisingly cool in comparison to the heat of his body, and Kagome was struck with the image of a large dog, snuffling at her hair.

“Examining?” Her voice was faint, but she was having trouble focusing on what they had been discussing before. His head dipped and his breath ghosted along her jawline.

“It means-”

“I know what it means, Sesshomaru.” She rolled her eyes and felt mild irritation flaring. Prior to coming to the West and spending so much time with the daiyoukai, she would not have thought it possible for one person to be so infuriating and intriguing at the same time.

“Temper,” he said flatly, pulling away to look in her eyes. Her confusion must have shown, because he elaborated, “You are getting angry with me. You will not summon your reiki.”

Phantom pain at the memory of her last attempt to use her power made Kagome wince. It had hurt more than when Urusai had taken her soul to resurrect Kikyou. She shuddered. “Right, thanks. Although, it would be easier not to get angry if you weren’t so- so-”

“Considerate?”

“Annoying,” she said wryly. Something changed in his face and body. He was still holding her, still cupping the back of her head with his hand and looking into her eyes, but his face was wrong. Cooler, more emotionless. How she could tell between his varying levels of cool, cold and frigid, she wasn’t sure, but it was evident in the stiffness of his posture and the way his eyes shuttered. She had hurt his feelings. *Is that even possible? Don’t give yourself so much credit, Higurashi*, she chided. Still, she hadn’t meant to hurt him.

“Considerate too.” She cupped the side of his face and smiled, trying to show him she wasn’t really upset. “Thank you, Sesshomaru. I don’t know what you did to make me feel better, but thank you.”

“Hn.” He relaxed, fractionally, and Kagome was relieved to see his mask melt a few degrees. “My youki is sheltering your power while it regenerates.” Kagome closed her eyes and sank into herself for a few moments. She didn’t even notice it until she looked, but his youki was indeed inside her. The amount of power he had filled her with was astonishing - not only that he had so much to spare for her, but also that she hadn’t realized it was there or unconsciously rejected it. It felt...nice. Warm. As though she had been wrapped in her favorite blanket, been given a cup of hot tea...and then surrounded by armed bodyguards. It was nice, and also supremely weird. She mentally shrugged. Nothing hurt anymore, she felt full of energy, and Sesshomaru had apparently decided not to retaliate for her attempt to zap him with a shock of purification. The whole day had a positive sheen to it.

“Sooo,” she began, and then faltered when he leaned in to her neck again, this time tracing the edge of her collar. “I, ah- about those papers...”

“Do not concern yourself.” His lips brushed against the hollow of her throat and she completely forgot what she had been saying. It tickled. And also felt really, really good. “Kento and Hisao will manage. You must rest.”

His nose brushed up the opposite side of her neck and her pulse quivered. *Sesshomaru! This is the cold, unfeeling daiyoukai! This is Inuyasha’s brother, the killing machine, gorgeous, great kisser* - Kagome shook herself, and embarrassment flooded her. She was sitting in his lap, and he was...nuzzling her. She wondered briefly if the damage to her reiki had also affected her brain. There was a low, rumbling vibration that thrummed against her wherever they touched.

“Are you...laughing?” She pulled back, although he didn’t let her go too far. His face was expressionless, but his eyes were warm and...amused. Daiyoukai were confusing.

“I do not know if it is your species, or something unique to you, but your emotions are...exceptionally transmutable. It is intriguing.”

“Transmut-” she cut herself off, knowing he was about to explain, “No, I got it. I just can’t decide if that was a compliment or not.” She was conscious of his palm against her waist, under the mokomoko. His thighs were warm and hard through the thin robe where she was sitting on him. It was intimate, and unsettling, and just *weird*. It was also oddly right. She knew her cheeks were still pink, but she did her best to act as though it was not at all strange to have a calm discussion with Sesshomaru while she was on his lap. In her pajamas.

“So, the thing with the papers. No, hear me out,” she raised a hand to silence him. He frowned, almost imperceptibly, then gave a brief nod. “I really do feel one hundred percent better, and I don’t think I could go back to sleep right now if I tried. However, I understand, given my recent, er, relapses, that you might think I should take it easy. Let me help you with your paperwork. I can read and sort just as

well as Hisao, and it isn't exactly strenuous."

She could see he was ready to refuse her, so she threw everything she had into her argument. "And I'll be right next to you the whole time. If you think I'm getting tired or whatever, I'll come straight back here and lie down. Please?" She did her best to make her eyes huge and let her lip hang a little. It almost always worked on Inuyasha.

"Hn." *Brothers, more alike than they'd ever admit.* She grinned and impulsively kissed his cheek. Kagome pulled away again almost immediately, wondering if she had overstepped. If the contact had bothered him, he didn't show it. He slowly stood, setting her on her feet, which put her at the distinct disadvantage of having to tip her head far back to look at him. "You will dress first." He nodded to a stack of freshly laundered clothing. "And eat." He narrowed his eyes and specified, "You will eat until I feel you have had enough."

"Okay," she agreed without complaint. She was starving; he couldn't possibly force her to eat more than she would have on her own. Kagome turned and stepped away, only to find herself pulled flush against him, back to front. She sucked in a breath and did her best to contain a riot of emotion as his claws slipped between the mokomoko and her robe. Directly under her breast. His thumb slowly brushed against the swell of flesh, then it was gone, and with it the fur that had draped around her shoulders. He stepped away from her, taking his tails with him, and she looked back to see it secured in its usual spot on him.

"Dress warmly, Miko." He disappeared through the shoji screen, but his barrier remained. She was grateful for the layer of privacy as she pressed one hand against her rapidly beating heart.

"Is it warm in here?" she whispered, dazed.

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Almost five hours later, and Kagome was filled with a tired sense of accomplishment. Her back ached a little from sitting and reading for so long. She had quickly given up a ladylike position and instead sat or lay in the most comfortable way she could find while staying modest in her new blue kimono. Kento and Hisao raised their brows at her, but no one said anything as she breezed through stacks of paperwork.

It had taken her an hour or so to get used to the script and archaic kanji, but once she was settled in, the reading was interesting. Even the trade reports, so lamented by Hisao, easily held her attention. Everything from silver and salt to silk and ink were tracked and traded in the Western Lands. She even found some brief descriptions of rice harvests in human areas, which she decided she would take up with Sesshomaru at a later date. She had already muddled in his affairs as thoroughly as possible. At some point, she figured, she couldn't mess up the timeline any more than she already had.

She made piles for economic news, social/political requests, castle business, disease, and military

affairs. Kagome sorted each by urgency, and then kept a few scrolls and papers set aside that needed Sesshomaru's immediate attention, or that she had trouble categorizing. She had also come across a paper that was written in some sort of code, which she had great fun deciphering. She saved it for the end of the afternoon, while she waited for Kento to look through her left-over papers and Hisao and Sesshomaru finished up a debate. It was a Uesugi cipher with a waka poem - something she had learned about in middle school which the girls used to pass notes in class. Kagome couldn't help a little whoop of triumph when she completed it. All other conversation stopped and three pairs of demon eyes stared at her.

"Sorry," she said without really meaning it. She was too pleased with herself to be embarrassed. "I didn't think I'd remember how to do these." She smiled and passed her working paper to Kento, along with the original message. He frowned at the pencil scratches, then read over her work twice. His face twitched and he passed the work to Sesshomaru. When the daiyoukai stared at her after reading it, Kagome felt the first inklings of trepidation. "I, ah, maybe I shouldn't have..." He passed the papers to Hisao, who took about two minutes to explode.

"You broke our code!"

Kagome flinched, grateful that a youki barrier had been put in place to keep the conversations secret. "I didn't mean to? I mean, humans used it a lot, in the fut-" she glanced at Sesshomaru and smiled weakly. "Where I am from, this is a pretty simple thing. Kids use it to learn about cryptography. I'm sure it's a really good code?"

Hisao stared at her, clearly fuming but unable to form words. Kento looked aghast. Her eyes locked on Sesshomaru, pleading with him to understand. A tiny, tiny smile flickered at the corner of his mouth, and she breathed easier.

"Hisao, This One thinks you should work with Kento to develop a new method for sending messages. If human schoolchildren can read your battle plans, they are not very secure." Hisao sputtered, and Kento sighed. "The miko must eat. You may return to This One in an hour to begin with the reports."

"It shouldn't take too long," Kento said with his own smile. "Kagome-sama has only these that need your immediate attention." He placed a thin sheaf on Sesshomaru's table. "The others I can deal with or can wait for you. She has also made a few notations that may be of interest, my Lord." Kagome blushed under the scrutiny and fiddled with her obi. If she had known she would draw so much attention, she might have tried harder to make the formal garment look better. Not that it would have done much good. She was terrible with the folds and knots required to wear a real kimono.

"Hn."

Hisao bowed stiffly to both Sesshomaru and herself, still muttering about the work ahead of him as he left the room. Kento bowed as well, and then knelt before Kagome, his fists on his thighs. "I must thank you, Kagome-sama, but I am unable to find words to express myself. Aki," he took a deep breath and smiled, "my *mate* and I are grateful. We are in your debt. If there is anything that we may do for

you, please call on us. Only our loyalty to Sesshomaru-sama comes before you.”

Kagome didn't know what to say. Sesshomaru filled in the silence. “Your debt to the miko is first, Kento. Your obligations to This One may be set aside if the miko is in need.”

Kagome blinked, and Kento became gravely serious. “Your high favor is most well-placed, my Lord.” Kento bowed again and backed out of the door. Kagome stared at Sesshomaru, who had already stood and cleared her little table so that they could eat.

“What just happened?”

“In this moment, nothing of consequence.” He nodded to the doors and dropped his barrier. “Eat, miko.” She frowned at him, ready to question him, but the smell of approaching dinner made her stomach growl loudly. She blushed and frowned harder.

“We aren't done with this,” she warned.

“Hn.”

They ate in near silence. Kagome found she had enough trouble not looking like a half-starved street urchin and still filling the bottomless pit that had replaced her stomach - without adding talking into the mix. It did not seem to bother Sesshomaru. *Of course not, idiot, he's probably grateful for a moment's peace.* He did, however, look over her empty bowls with approval.

He finished his work just as the children returned, tired and a little crabby after a long day with only Jaken and the servants for company. Well, Shippo was crabby. Rin was resigned. Kagome suggested a bath before bedtime, and Sesshomaru escorted them to the springs. For a moment, she had been torn between fear and anticipation that he would join her again, but he disappeared to the far side of the boulders with Shippo.

The girls washed quickly, and Kagome had time to fix Rin's hair before Sesshomaru and Shippo reappeared. She was growing a bit anxious, considering how quiet things on the boy's side had been. Inuyasha and the kit were usually all splashes and loud arguments. Shippo looked content and sleepy, however; he was a matched set for Rin.

Kagome picked up the kitsune with a soft grunt. He was growing too big to cuddle in her arms, and she had to perch him on her hip instead. He immediately laid his head on her shoulder and yawned. She turned to find that Sesshomaru had picked up Rin as well, who cuddled into his mokomoko and was struggling to stay awake. They moved quickly back to the rooms. Kagome was pleased to have only tripped twice on the way.

They settled the children into bed. Kagome gave them each a kiss and a hug. Then Sesshomaru leaned down to pat each head with affection. Something gooey and warm bubbled up in her chest at the sight. The proud, tall daiyoukai bending to smooth hair from brows and straighten bedding.

She returned to her room and was just untying her outer kimono when the screen clicked softly shut. Anticipation fluttered in her belly and she sternly admonished her feelings to settle down. His rooms were a construction zone. He had nowhere else to sleep. *Except an entire castle.* He was worried about her, afraid she would collapse again. *Yeah, okay, this is just a check-up, he'll probably leave when he's done.* She turned from her inner pep talk and found that Sesshomaru had changed into a short sleeping robe and seated himself on her futon. She had to drag her eyes away from the pale, muscular calves on display.

“So, ah, did you want to check on my reiki?” He tilted his head slightly, so she took that as agreement. She knelt carefully beside him, keeping a few key inches between her knees and his thigh, and turned her thoughts inward. His youki was so thickly bound around her, she almost couldn’t see her own power. She reached out gently, and the green vines shifted and bent to reveal a healthy pink glow at the center. It was getting better, slowly, but her power was still dimmer and much smaller than she was used to. “I think it looks pretty good. So you can-” she opened her eyes and swallowed, hard. His face was close to hers, his warm breath puffing against her mouth. “Ah, you can, ah, go now.”

“I will stay close.”

“Right, yeah, of course. Your youki. Thank you for that.” She tugged on a blanket and scooted backward. “I’ll just...over there-” she gasped when his arm latched around her, pulling her forward and down until they both lay on the futon. Her face rested on his chest, and blankets were pulled up over her shoulders. “Uh...”

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Sesshomaru felt the urge to sigh. He could have laughed at her misplaced anxiety and modesty. He wanted to roll her over and turn back the folds of her garments so that he could learn every inch of her scent. He did none of those things. He had a strategy. She needed reassurance. She needed to feel comfortable with him. The miko would grow accustomed to his presence, then long for it. He would explain the benefits she would receive from mating him. When he was sufficiently assured of her agreement, he would ask for her acceptance. Then he could trace the dip of her waist with his nose. The crease of her hip.

“What you did for Kento and Aki was ill-timed, but appreciated.”

“Kento’s thanks were too much. Really it was-”

“I am appreciative,” he clarified. She shifted slightly, her cold toes brushing against his legs. That would not do. He trapped her feet between his calves, warming her. Her scent raced. Embarrassment. Anxiety. Arousal. Irritation. Contentment.

“Er, you’re welcome? I’ve never done anything like that before, but it was interesting. I mean, those

kinds of reproductive issues are pretty rare, and they have to be even more so for demons, right? So what are the chances I would ever see that again?"

"Healing them was a good thing. Spider demons are intended to have numerous offspring, and Inu should have many pups." He wondered how long it would take the miko to conceive. He was unfamiliar with human physiology, but they seemed to reproduce at a lightning fast pace. However, his father was with Izayoi for nearly two years before she ripened, so perhaps that was a more reasonable timeframe.

"Really?" She sounded intrigued, and...almost...disbelieving.

"A litter-" At her scent of confusion he explained the term, "Pups that have not yet reached adolescence are part of a litter." She nodded against his chest and he continued, "A litter is often comprised of five or six pups at a time. An inu demoness may have multiple litters, and twins are not uncommon."

"So, your mom could have fifteen or twenty kids, er, pups?"

Sesshomaru was both amused and horrified of the idea of InuKimi with a litter of pups, hanging on her skirts and learning from her how to properly stalk prey - in the forest and the political arena. "I am her sole offspring."

"Is that, like, an age thing? Inu have a, a window of opportunity to have kids?"

"Females remain fertile for a thousand years or more after their maturity. Males," he dragged his claws down her ribs to the swell of her hip and squeezed. His voice grew lower, "are virile until death. Would you like to know when inu reach their peak?"

"Ah-" Cinnamon and turnips did a battle for dominance in her scent and Sesshomaru had to bite back a groan. This phase of the plan was for reassurance, not seduction. "Eh-hem. I mean, it doesn't seem like there are any litters around here. Does everyone keep their pups at home? Or are the villagers and your servants all pretty young?"

"They are of many ages." He realized that she wouldn't really know what that meant for a demon. "I am nearing eight hundred years of life." He rolled over her sharp intake of breath, "That is still young for a daiyoukai. There are many in the village and at the castle that are older than I. Many upper level youkai may live to be three or four thousand years old, if they are not killed in battle. A daiyoukai may live twice that time. Although, some have been recorded as far older."

"Holy crap," she whispered. "I mean, I, ah. When do they reach maturity?"

"It varies by type of demon." His voice took on a husky note. "Inu come of an age to take a mate near two hundred and fifty years, although most do not do so immediately." He tipped his head to brush his lips across her hair and breathe in her scent. "It is said that males are most...pleasing...after they have seen their seven hundred and fiftieth year." He listened to Kagome's swallow and the beat of her heart

and grinned.

“So where are they? The kids I mean? If you people - youkai - have so many pups, how come I haven’t seen any? They must be adorable.”

“You would view them as such.” Sesshomaru paused and considered her observation. He had not spent a great deal of time among young of any species until he found Rin. He was aware that neither Kento nor Hisao had pups, but Kento had Aki and Hisao’s mate had died only a century or so after they mated. During labor. He tried to picture the packs and families in his villages, then he compared them to the human villages he had observed. There were very few demon children. He frowned. That was not right. Inu had large packs with many pups. He had been an only child, but that was easily explained by the relationship between the Inu no Tashio and Kimi. He did not have pups of his own yet, other than Rin, but he had every intention of remedying that lack. He considered those inu he knew personally, sorting through all who worked at the castle or lived in the village. There were none that had more than two pups. Over half, he recounted quickly, did not have any pups at all.

That was *not* right. Toga had thirty-six siblings, although most of Sesshomaru’s paternal aunts and uncles had died in glorious battle or personal conquest before he was born. Kimi was younger than her mate, but she was one of twenty pups. Sesshomaru only knew of one that was still alive - his mother.

He thought back to his history lessons from childhood. Stories of great inu with long lists of progeny he had to memorize. But the lists became shorter as the time of those demons grew closer to his own. Sesshomaru could feel a growing concern. He had no cousins, no second cousins. His closest living relative, outside of Kimi and Inuyasha, was Kento. Kento and Jun’s grandsire was Kimi’s great uncle. Sesshomaru sat up, disturbing Kagome and ignoring her small protest.

He calculated in his head. Then did it again. They were dying. The inu were dying out and he had not realized before. Certainly, his pack was small, but his sires had always walked a path of conquest - it often ended in bloodshed. It was not just his line, however. It was every line, every inu lineage that he knew had dwindled in numbers. If things continued as they had for the last three generations, in less than one thousand years, they would be gone. Stunned, he pulled what little he could easily remember about other youkai out for examination. He found similar situations. The bears, cranes, panthers, badger youkai, monkeys. Only the kitsune seemed to be pushing back the tide of extinction, and even they were decreasing.

“There are no youkai,” he said flatly.

“What?” The miko sat up as well.

“In your time, in the future, there are no youkai.”

“Yes, but that is why I wanted to come here, when you said the demons were getting sick. I think smallpox may have been responsible for them being wiped out. I’ll know for certain when I go back home again, but-”

“No, it will not be the disease. It is us.” Her small hand touched his shoulder, and he stared into space. His entire race was dying. “Do you understand? There aren’t enough pups.” He did his best to explain, to make her see the terrible knowledge that made a knot of cold anguish in his chest. He had not believed her about her medicine, and he nearly paid with his life. When she told him there were no demons in her time, he had brushed her off. He knew now; he could see the truth.

“So, let’s find out why.” He tilted down to look at her face, and found she had leaned her head on his shoulder and tucked her hand into his. “I decided, when I agreed to come to the West, that I was going to help you survive. I want you to survive. I want to go through the well, and know even in my time I might see Kento walking out of a bank, or Hisao drinking coffee.” She squeezed his hand, “I want to know that my friend, Inuyasha, will still be grumbling about the stench of humans in five hundred years. I want to know that somewhere out there, Sesshomaru is still protecting the West. We’ll figure it out, then we’ll fix it. I am not going home unless I know that you will be coming to the future with me.”

Her words were simple and full of assurance. He realized that part of her calm came from the time she had been afforded to consider the problem. She had known about the fate of demons for years. He, on the other hand...it was understandable that he was still reeling from the discovery. She was right, though. He straightened his spine and recovered the cool rationality that had abandoned him for a few moments. He had never met an enemy he could not defeat.

He eased back down onto the futon, pulling her snug against his side. Her breath blew against the parted vee of his neckline. Her arm draped across his chest to place her palm over his heart. With the Miko no Mao, the future priestess, *Kagome*, at his side, not even time would stand in his way.

Chapter 15: Of the West

Despite the cold, Kagome took a deep breath of fresh air - and promptly coughed. Sesshomaru was flying high enough and fast enough that the wind froze the moisture in her nose and mouth. She tucked her face against his chest and sucked in the warmer air trapped between their bodies. She could practically feel his eyes on her.

"I'm fine," she mumbled. She had argued far too long and hard for the *privilege* of going with him, she wasn't going to let him take her back because she was chilly. He didn't say anything, but mokomoko draped around her. Even with the heavier weight pants and jacket Aki had made for her, she was grateful for the fur and told him so.

He had attempted to go without her. She woke that morning, the morning after their unsettling conversation on the future of demons, to discover him on all fours above her, his nose pressed into her neck. He was fully dressed, and the incongruity of the situation had her so off balance that she almost missed it when he told her he was leaving to inspect reports of attacks and she should remain in her rooms, under guard, while he was gone. She had bruised her forehead on his chin and almost strangled herself with the bedding, but she managed to stand and demand that he take her with him. He had promised, in the springs, that she could go if she agreed to his conditions. He pointed out that the situation had changed - she was not well.

Kagome had taken a deep breath, pushed her pride as far down as it would go, and agreed. She told him she was worried about how effective his youki bandage on her reiki would be if they were apart. He hadn't looked like he believed her, and left the rooms with a 'hn'. She was still struggling with her kimono so she could chase after him when a servant arrived carrying the new clothing. She also brought a message that Sesshomaru-sama would leave from the courtyard soon, with or without her. Kagome cursed him, but the servant helped her dress in record time and shove a few things into her bag. She arrived out of breath just as Rin was saying her goodbyes. She managed quick kisses and hugs, and laughed when Shippo told her to stay safe.

"Of course, I'm with Sesshomaru!"

Hours of flying and countless stops later, Kagome had lost her excitement. The first village had been bad. Entirely youkai, they had been grateful to see their Lord. They were wary of his human companion at first, but Sesshomaru introduced her to the local healer and word that Kagome-sama, Miko no Mao, had arrived spread like wildfire. He was never more than ten feet from her, but Kagome couldn't spare a thought for him. She was far too busy with the ill. Approximately half of the village had survived. Kento had made certain that inoculate and instructions for making more were spread to the villages as soon as it started showing results with the infirmary patients. The first village had also experienced the trailing edge of her power. They described a brief pink wind, and immediate improvement of those who were sick - although no outright curing. The healer, a demon that appeared younger than Kagome, took her to visit a few very young and old who had not recovered enough to come outside. She had to walk past the dead to get there.

They were all wrapped with care. Clean red and white shrouds that had been neatly folded and tucked around fathers, mothers, children. There were so many. Kagome bypassed the exposed graveyard on shaky legs and tended to the sick. She soothed brows and held hands. She smiled and kissed children and bowed deeply to elders. She praised the work of the healer - who had been third in line for the position before the pox had taken the others. Kagome made adjustments to treatment and left instructions and herbs. Then she returned outside.

Sesshomaru was waiting for her, ready to leave and go on to the next village. She looked back to the dead, and signaled him to give her a moment. Quietly, she stood at the end of the line of bodies. She could feel the tears pricking at her eyes. She had seen death before. The feudal era was a dangerous and brutal place, but rarely was she exposed to such large scale destruction of life. The youkai wrapped in those shrouds could do nothing to fight the thing that was killing them, killing their families. They didn't even understand it. Kagome knew the same was true for the human villages, but for some reason the deaths of the demons hit her harder. Such powerful creatures, their long lives cut down to a fraction of what they could have been. Sesshomaru stopped behind her and she spoke in a low voice she knew only he would hear.

"Would it be offensive, or inappropriate, if I prayed for them?" He was quiet for a moment. A crowd had drawn together, most of those left alive, and they stared at the miko and their dead with hollow eyes.

"As you will," he had finally responded. Kagome set down her bag and dug around for a few items. She requested a candle and incense, and the healer disappeared into a hut and then brought them forward. She lit both, and then closed her eyes, trying to remember a prayer for the deceased. When it was over, she instructed the healer to burn the bodies. Then Sesshomaru had pulled her to his side and they rose on his cloud again.

Kagome shivered, not from cold, but from the image of the youkai left alive. They stood and stared, some crying, others empty from so much grief. She didn't remember what she said, only that the words sounded right. The six coins she left seemed insignificant in comparison to the number that lay ready for cremation. The next village was worse. Wholly human, it had been outside of the range of her reiki, and most of the people had already died. Others lay suffering, but there was no healer left among them to administer the inoculate or even ease their pain. Kagome moved among them while Sesshomaru appointed a new village leader and gave concise instructions for defense. Again she prayed over the dead, and then they left. On and on they flew, slowly crisscrossing the Western Lands and moving north. Sometimes they were surprised and there were more survivors. One village, the only mixed human-youkai village she had seen, was completely untouched.

As they moved further north, they began to hear reports of attacks. The stories were whispered with a fear borne of the unknown. The last village they stopped at, in the late afternoon, had become home to several refugees. The village itself had been decimated by disease, only eleven survived. Those who had lived through the attacks...Kagome shuddered again. She had not started or flinched at their wounds, but treated them as she would any patient. Inside, she wanted to scream. Lost eyes and limbs.

Ragged scars. Kagome wondered what sort of weapons could cause such damage. The psychological injuries were the worst. Kagome knew what caused that. Watching family and friends beaten, raped, tortured - having the same treatment then inflicted on them - would kill a person's spirit just as easily as a sword could kill the body. Sesshomaru sent the youkai refugees back to the castle and ordered the villagers to pack what they could and move further south to a village that would have ample room for them - once they burned the dead.

A slight change in their flight brought Kagome out of her memories. The sun was low in the sky, and she searched the ground for the next village they would assess, but was unable to find anything. "Why are we stopping?" The daiyoukai did not answer right away, but landed in a sheltered clearing. The wind was completely blocked by the trees, and although snow was still falling, it had not drifted in the secluded area.

"We will stay the night here."

"Why not in one of the villages? Surely that would be safe- ah, warmer?" Kagome didn't want to offend him by implying that he would not be able to protect them, but it *was* winter, and she had seen enough to know that there was something or someone very dangerous in the area. Sesshomaru studied her, his head tilting slightly.

"The smell is most...displeasing." She nodded, silently berating herself for not thinking of it. The stench of death was noticeable to her, she couldn't imagine how offensive Sesshomaru must find it. "You will accompany me while I hunt."

"Oh, that's not necessary," she responded quickly. As much as she enjoyed roasted rabbit, she could barely clean them herself without completely losing her appetite, and watching Inuyasha kill them was worse. "I'll stay here and build a fire."

"Miko," his voice was a reprimand, and Kagome was startled. "You will accompany me."

"Really, Sesshomaru, I'll be fine. I have my bow and arrows, and you'll be able to hear me if-"

"This enemy will not give you time to scream." His flat statement crushed all of her protests. She nodded, trying not to think about how quickly a youkai attack in the night could be. She left her bag and followed him, staying as quiet as possible. If the number of dirty looks he gave her were any indication, she wasn't very good at it. When he came to a standstill she stopped behind him, shivering in the cooler air where the sunshine did not penetrate. Mokomoko wrapped around her, and they waited in silence until a stag walked within three feet of the daiyoukai.

It was over in an instant, without a drop of blood on Sesshomaru's white silk. Kagome blinked. A single puncture wound oozed sluggishly on the back of the deer's neck. *He severed the brain stem.* Sesshomaru bent and efficiently gutted and skinned the animal, leaving the inedible parts for other animals to scavenge. The remainder he butchered and wrapped in the skin to carry back to camp. Kagome was surprised to find that she was not nauseated. Those years with Inuyasha, she had assumed

it was the hunt and kill that bothered her. It was interesting to find out that it was the suffering, however short, that the game felt when the hanyou slit its throat that turned her stomach. She would have to tell him there was a more humane way to kill his food. *Humane. Demon-ane? Hanyou-ane?*

She gathered wood on their way back to the clearing and soon had a small fire going. Sesshomaru quickly spitted the meat - all of it - and settled down to watch it cook. Kagome busied herself with making tea and clearing snow at the bottom of a tree for her sleeping bag. They ate quickly. She was content, despite his insistence, with two generous helpings. He finished the remainder, as though eating an entire deer was nothing, with perfect manners and in an amazingly small amount of time.

“Where do you put it all?” She blurted, then blushed in embarrassment. He gathered up the skin and tossed it far from their camp.

“I am more than this body,” he said simply. She looked him over, still not understanding how that equated to fitting eighty pounds or so of meat inside his stomach. He banked the fire and sat down on her sleeping bag, his back against the tree. “My true form is my beast. This is a mask for the other.” Kagome recalled the few times she had seen his huge dog form. She traced her fingers along the wrist and hand exposed as they lay on his knee. She understood the laws of physics, she just wasn’t sure how or if they applied.

“It doesn’t seem like an illusion, and you don’t appear any more dense.” A tiny smile lifted the corner of his mouth.

“This form is real, it is just not true. Although I inhabit it, I have the power and strength of my true self...and must sustain that form.”

Her eyes widened, “So you always have to eat as much as a dog the size of a house would? When do you find the time?”

“I usually hunt in my other form every few days. And I do not take the time to cook my prey.”

“Is it...” she glanced back at the fire, then at his face, “Do you prefer it that way?” He shrugged, almost imperceptibly.

“It is food.” She took that to mean they both tasted good. It was strange, to think of Sesshomaru not as she usually saw him, but as the massive canine he became. The dog that he was. She had kissed him, held him and thought things that were...intimate things. He was a *dog*. A very large, very intelligent and deadly dog, but still. Unbidden, the image of her being licked by a tongue bigger than her flew into her mind. She wasn’t sure she was ready for that. But then, if she wanted Sesshomaru, but she couldn’t want his true self, could she really be with him? And why was she even worried about it? He had kissed her, touched her, sniffed her in a strangely erotic way, but it wasn’t like he had asked her out - if that was even something youkai did.

Kagome pushed back feelings of embarrassment and disappointment. She probably shouldn’t think

about it. Sesshomaru might not hate humans, as she once thought he did, but she very much doubted he would be interested in one, at least, not in a meaningful way. There were lots of demonesses that would probably fall all over themselves to 'be intimate' with the Western Lord. And they were a lot prettier, more exotic, and, she was sure, better bred - with courtly manners and the ability to walk in a kimono without tripping over their own feet.

She had intended to make herself less uncomfortable by getting rid of thoughts of his beast, but instead she made herself sad. It was stupid and immature, but without even realizing it she had begun to like Sesshomaru. She *liked* him. He had kissed her and it made her knees weak. He gave Inuyasha reasons to respect himself, and that made her chest swell with pride. He cared for his daughter, and her kit, and her heart melted. He was intelligent, challenging, gorgeous, and absolutely dangerous. She wondered how on earth she had allowed herself to like him. She wondered how she could not.

"Stop that," he ordered sternly. Kagome shook herself out of her stupor and stared at him in confusion. She wasn't doing anything. "You are sad and...other things. Stop." His nose twitched, and Kagome remembered how Inuyasha could smell her tears even before they fell. He always said her anger burned his nose. Apparently, Sesshomaru could tell a lot more about how she was feeling from her scent than his half-brother could. Only he would order her to stop *feeling*, and assume she would be willing and able to obey. She responded the only way she could. She laughed.

"Oh, Sesshomaru! I can't just *decide* how I am going to feel. It doesn't work like that. No matter how much you would like to command everything around you, you just can't." He narrowed his eyes and pulled her closer to him, careful to make sure her head rested against his unarmored shoulder. Her hips and legs were tucked between his, resting in the sleeping bag. The mokomoko covered them both and she sighed, relaxing into his heat. "I wish we could do more," she said after a few minutes. "These villages have suffered so much, I just wish..."

"You have done much, miko. More than any other. You have given my people hope. You have brought treatment for the disease. You saved me, so that I might protect my lands. Leave it to me to destroy the enemies of the West." His arms wrapped around her under the fur and secured her to him. She could hear the beat of his heart, and found the steady, slow cadence soothing. They were quiet again as darkness settled fully around them and the temperature dropped. Kagome was nearly asleep, her hands thrust into the mokomoko, when he spoke again, "I will not allow what is mine to be so grieved." She frowned in her sleep, thinking that was a strange turn of phrase, to call the West sad.

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Sesshomaru knew the moment she stirred from sleep. Her breathing changed slightly; her heart beat a bit quicker. Her hands made fists in his fur, squeezing and kneading the flesh underneath. He blew out a long breath that formed a cloud of frost in the air. The steady snowfall had become sheets of fat flakes and stinging ice during the night that buried the little fire and the rest of the clearing in almost two feet of snow. It was still coming down. The temperature had continued to drop as well, and the wind rose. He had grown concerned for the miko's health. Despite his own heat and mokomoko, her

face had felt chilled to his touch. He had taken drastic measures to keep her warm.

“Sesshomaru?” she called faintly. The daiyoukai looked down on her with one eye, unwilling to back away enough to get a better view of her, for fear the snow coating his back and head would fall onto her. She was completely buried in white fur. Her back was snug against his foreleg. He had wrapped his tails around himself to cover her like a blanket. Her eyes were wide and she smelled...good. Warm. Healthy. Happy and surprised. Sweet and...like him. She had carried his scent since he brought her to the castle, and it had deepened as he slept next to her at night. After hours completely surrounded by his true form, his scent layered her own in a way that strummed a deep chord of contentment in him.

“When did you - of course you can’t answer that. Two tails, just like Shippo. I bet you didn’t have to play any tricks to get the second one.” She shifted a bit, pushing up out of his fur to stand. A gust of wind made it around his body and she gasped. “It’s freezing!” He raised his brows. *Obviously*. She stepped closer, leaning against his side and burrowing into the fur over his ribs. “Thank you, Sesshomaru.” Her entire body molded to him and her hands patted and rubbed along his skin. He wondered if she had become so much more comfortable with him, she carried no trace of embarrassment, or if it was his form that eased her anxiety. *How strange that the miko would be more at ease when I am at my deadliest*. “I had almost forgotten how big you are,” she mumbled into him. “You are absolutely magnificent!” He refused to allow his tails to wag.

He peered up at the sky, knowing it would be difficult to fly in such weather. The miko would be especially chilled on his cloud. He was not certain if even his mokomoko could provide enough heat for her. He could fly in his true form, but with the snow and the strange winds, it would be near impossible for him to safely make it back to the castle. The miko needed better shelter. As it was, she would quickly freeze without his body heat, but she would also need to eat soon and he could not hunt with her burrowed against him. Sesshomaru knew his lands well, and the next village he had intended to visit was close by. He could reach it, even in the storm. He glanced at the miko again. She would have to ride on his transformed back, his fur would keep her warm and he could move much faster on four legs through the snow. Flying would be a risk in such weather, with nothing to protect her back from the wind. Regaining his smaller appearance would waste energy that he should conserve, in case they met with the band that had been attacking from the north. He hoped she would understand.

He used his nose to press her bag closer to her. “What do you - oh.” She lifted her face from his fur and glanced between him and the bag. “Do you want me to pack up?” He blinked, slowly. She smiled, “No problem, Sesshomaru. I’d rather not stay out in this weather, either. I suppose you already have the perfect place in mind to wait out the storm? I bet. You never do anything without a plan.”

She continued her cheerful chatter and the great dog would have smiled, if he were able. *Always finding the good in a situation*. It took her only a few minutes to roll up her sleeping bag and settle her bag on her shoulders. “All ready!” He stepped back, unable to prevent the shivers that shook her the moment she was exposed to the elements, and used his nose to push her behind the tree. Then he shook himself, releasing a blast of youki to dry his fur. A soft *wuff* brought Kagome peeking out with wide eyes. He lowered himself to the ground, and she quickly realized what he wanted.

"I should get on?" Her voice and scent were excited, despite the visible tremors that were shaking her small frame. "This is so cool. I hope my shoes aren't hurting you. Can I grab onto your fur, I don't want to-" He let out a low growl, to let her know he was losing patience. If the foolish woman didn't climb up quickly, he would become covered in snow again. She seemed to understand the command, grabbing handfuls of his fur and scrambling up his side - although she did not stop talking. Most of it was easy for him to tolerate, as she was primarily complimenting his size, the thickness and texture of his fur, and his form in general. Within moments she was settled between his shoulders, her feet tucked over his spine and her knees angling towards his sides. Her face rested on the scruff of his neck, her hands buried in the long hair there. "Okay, I'm read-"

He did not wait for her to finish, but took off at a loping gait through the snow. When they cleared the trees, she let out a sound of displeasure and burrowed deeper against him. The cold was intense. It was apparent that the miko could not stay outdoors for very long. She needed shelter. Immediately. He let out a sound of warning, and then started to run through the drifts. She gripped tightly with her arms and legs, but did not protest his motion. The storm was growing worse, and the miko was quiet. He could feel her presence, although her weight was almost too light to be noticeable. Her heart rate was slow, her breathing even, and she smelled tired. Sesshomaru worried. The emotion went beyond concern as he considered how much more delicate she was than a youkai. He thought on how human deaths always increased in the winter, when the cold weather sapped the strength of the old and ill. She was not as strong as she could be, and he had brought her with him.

It was selfish, he berated himself as he ran. He desired her company. He wanted her alone with him as he traveled. He wanted his people to see her, to respect her and to know that he respected her. He wanted to take her into the forest at night and lay next to her where no one else could hear or scent them, where he did not have to guard his expressions or words so closely. Where no one else had claim on her time. On her attentions. Her smile. It had been a mistake. He should have made her stay at the castle where she was safe. His youki could have remained with her, even from that distance. Or he could have sent someone else to check on the villages. He wanted both - to be master of his lands inspecting any harm that had come to his people personally, and to keep her at his side. The miko was so fragile, so human. The disturbing thought crossed his mind that he might not be able to fulfill all of his responsibilities, at least, not in the manner he wished.

Abruptly, the village came into sight. It was half-burned, and even through the storm and the lingering scent of charred wood and flesh he could smell blood. It was only a few hours old. Sesshomaru came to a stop and circled the perimeter. He could not hear anything moving, and there was only one, faint youki signature. It was dying. Sesshomaru got as close as he was able to with his broad shoulders and large feet, and then in a swirl of energy compressed himself to his smaller form. The miko shivered in his arms, already feeling the loss of his fur.

Mokomoko covered her and he stepped into the hut. He could not locate the youkai at first, despite the unexpected neatness of the house. There were no pox marked corpses or attack victims. His nose adjusted quickly, and he picked up a faint trail of blood from the doorway towards the raised platform at the back. The single room was dark; he knew the miko was unable to see anything. For the first time, he was grateful for her weaker senses. The wooden floor was deeply scored from a struggle. Bits

of torn paper littered the room and the sharp smell of ink emanated from an overturned writing table.

A youkai, inu from her scent, lay on a messy futon. There was little blood on her, only traces at her mouth and hands, but she still smelled of injury and death and traces of many, many other youkai. Sesshomaru's jaw tightened. The scent of those others had been disguised, but he knew how they had mortally wounded her without external blood loss. Rape was the instrument of lesser demons not fit to walk his lands. Causing such extensive damage that the inu female could not heal would require not only the weapons provided by the males' bodies, but also other implements, used with vicious intent. When he found them, they would pay with their lives. And their pain.

Her breath was shallow and uneven. Her eyes opened, narrow slits of red that proved how close she was to her beast. She had not transformed, not that her other state would be much more powerful as she was not daiyoukai, but he determined that she was drawing on its energy to stay alive. Her youki was expressed as well, but she had created her barrier poorly, as it deflected toward the ground rather than up and over her body. Her mouth fell open, and it exposed the raw stump of her tongue, severed with a poisoned weapon that did not allow regeneration. Sesshomaru's rage grew.

A low vibration, a whine and a growl intermingled, came from deep in the inu female's chest. A sound of warning and subservience. "Sesshomaru?" The miko whispered. He took her hand to lead her, keeping her pressed close to his back with mokomoko. The female spoke again, in the simple, primal language of their kind. It was all that was left to her by those that had taken everything else.

"Young. Care for them?"

"This one will make certain they are well." The miko gripped his sleeve when he spoke, but remained quiet and secure behind him.

"Your female."

"She will protect them as her own." The inu relaxed, the tension easing out of her body and the youki barrier shimmering, weakening. Her eyes closed, and a final rumble from her burned his ears.

"Dragons."

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Kagome wasn't sure what was happening, she was itching to get light, but she trusted that Sesshomaru would keep her safe. If there was any real danger, he would have already taken her away, or killed whatever was in the hut with them. She breathed in the clove scent of him and pressed herself against his warmth, listening to the strange animal sounds. Sesshomaru must have understood them, as he answered.

"This one will make certain they are well." Kagome tightened her hold on him, wanting to ask who, but

holding back. “She will protect them as her own.” *Who?* Her reiki sparked, just a little, and she sensed the youki of the other one withdrawing. There was something else as well. Her energy pushed a bit against Sesshomaru’s youki, prodding aside the thick ropes of power he had bound around her. There was something else in the hut. Something...or someone.

There was another growl, and then Sesshomaru let out a roar that shook the walls and roof. His entire body was tensed, and she could feel his youki swirling and thrashing around them. The other, the thing that had been speaking, was gone. She smoothed her hand against his back and hugged the mokomoko to her. His anger and unadulterated rage was a tangible thing and Kagome worried for a moment that he would lose control. *This is Sesshomaru*, she reminded herself. She pressed against his back and looped her arms around his waist, waiting for him to calm. It took only a moment.

“I will take care of the body. Stay here.” He pulled away from her, drawing the mokomoko away as well. There was a faint rustling, and then he passed by her again. “Do not move.” She rolled her eyes in the dark, if she moved she would probably trip over something. The door opened and closed, letting in a gust of wind and snow. She shivered, feeling his youki swirl outside and then move to the edge of the village. She wondered if there was any firewood inside.

A small sound, something so tiny she almost missed it, interrupted her thoughts. She strained her ears, listening hard, and heard it again. It sounded like... Kagome dropped her bag to the floor and dug around until she found her lantern by touch. It flared to life in the hut, bathing the room in the cool light of modern LEDs. Her reiki stirred, urging her forward. A futon, stained with blood and other fluids was quickly pushed aside to reveal the platform that had been built for it. It was a strange design, perhaps thirty inches off of the floor. She swept aside the bedding and found a latch, placed in a depression in the wood. Her reiki was screaming at her while her heart thumped in fear and a strange certainty of what she *had* to do. Kagome pulled on the latch.

Inside were three children. She blinked, and they stared up at her with wide, frightened eyes. The oldest appeared to be six or seven, and had his arms around the others protectively. His fangs poked out over his lip and feathers dripped onto his shoulders instead of hair. Kagome did not get a chance to look over the others, as a ball of blue cloth and black hair hurtled at her from behind the larger child. It was growling, small claws pricking at her chest and neck. “Shhh,” she whispered softly. “It’s okay, little one.” She tried to pat the narrow shoulders and was met with another growl. She wondered if the child was inu, and allowed herself to go limp. “Why don’t you smell me? I’m a friend. I came with Lord Sesshomaru; we’re here to help.” A nose pressed into her skin, hesitant at first, then growing more insistent.

Russet feathers and large, dark eyes peeked over the edge of the hiding place, “Nankae?” The bird youkai stared at Kagome and her guard.

“She smells good. Like inu, but not.” Kagome tried and failed to keep her heart from breaking at the distrust in the oldest child’s eyes. A cool nose nudged her jaw and claws retracted. “She’s good, Paho.”

“Did you really come with the Saidai Mao?” Paho’s whole face appeared above the edge, still uncertain.

“Yes,” she smiled and slowly sat up, reaching her arms around the demon on top of her and pulling him to her lap. “Sesshomaru-sama is my friend. Would you like to come with us?”

“I -” He looked down into the hiding place and his face hardened. “I have to stay with them.”

“It’s okay, I need lots of friends. Everyone can come.” Kagome held her breath while the child weighed her offer, and let out a sigh of relief when he stood and climbed over the edge with a murmur of assent. Her vision was blocked by slitted silver eyes and a wriggling nose.

“Are we gonna be part of your pack?” *Inuyoukai, how adorable. How small. How alone. How heart wrenching.*

“She doesn’t have a pack, she’s human,” the bird said condescendingly. The inu boy stuck out his bottom lip.

“I belong to a pack,” she corrected. Kagome turned the boy in her lap to sit on her hip and crept up to the hiding place. Inside was another, smaller child. A girl, Kagome guessed by the doll tucked under her arm, sat in the corner. Dark blue eyes stared out of a pale face. She didn’t look more than three. “It’s okay, sweetheart. Do you want to get out of there?”

“Emi doesn’t talk anymore. She’s scared,” the boy in her arms stated simply. The older boy, Paho, pulled the girl out and sat down next to Kagome. He looked exhausted, and worried. She wondered how long they had been hiding.

“You promise you’re going to help us? You won’t hurt us?” His frank words were too serious for someone his age, but Kagome had seen enough of the villages that had been attacked to know that he had probably lost most of his innocence in recent days. She mimicked his solemn tone and put her free hand over her heart.

“I promise, I will do everything I can to help you, and I won’t let anything hurt you again.” The demon nodded, and let his head lean back against the wood. The girl was leaning towards her, sniffing, and Kagome smiled gently.

“Sensei said someone would come,” he continued. “She said that if we were very good, and very quiet, someone from the West would come and take us away. She said the Saidai Mao would punish the bad ones who came.” Kagome considered the stained bedding crumpled on the floor and the growled conversation Sesshomaru had with whomever had been guarding the children. Their sensei, their teacher, had probably given her life to protect the three demons. Kagome vowed that she would not let them come to harm. The little girl stretched out her arms, and Kagome reached for her without thinking. She held the inu boy on one hip and snuggled the toddler against her neck on the other side. The bird youkai leaned against her arm, just as the door reopened. The children tensed, and

Sesshomaru shut out the snow, staring at them with unblinking eyes.

“Your sensei was right, Paho,” she said with conviction. She rubbed the backs of the two she held and gave the daiyoukai a determined smile. “I am from the West and I will take you away with me. Sesshomaru will find the bad ones, and they will get exactly what they deserve.”

Chapter 16: Lessons Learned

Sesshomaru watched the miko and her new charges closely while he listened to the storm. She had not followed his orders. Again. He told her not to move, and instead she threw herself into the middle of three frightened, territorial youkai children. Any of them could have seriously injured her out of instinct. He felt the strange, twisting sensation in his chest, the same thing he had felt when he saw her collapse in the courtyard. She could have been hurt.

He pressed down on that emotion, doing his utmost to stifle it. The miko was in good health. The young ones had accepted her far easier than they should have. The bird youkai, a species not known for physical contact with others, sat close to her, pressing his knee against her leg. Her lap was occupied with the two inu children. Sesshomaru realized as he watched them that it had been a very long time since he had seen pups that age. It was another indication that their fears for the extinction of youkai were reasonable. The pups took to her immediately. The male, Sesshomaru guessed he was not quite old enough to begin lessons in scents and tracking, sat facing her, eating the last of the food she had brought in her bag and speaking incessantly. Curled against her chest was the female. Barely old enough to know human words, the pup had pressed her nose into the miko's skin and fallen asleep with one fist in her mouth and the other tangled in the human woman's long tail of hair. That sight assured him that he had made the correct decision to claim the miko as his own. Nothing had ever looked and smelled so right to him as Kagome holding the pups.

He needed to get them back to the castle. When he buried the young ones' sensei, he had found other youkai bodies, some had obviously died from a combination of wounds and exposure. The dragons that had attacked the village may have been driven off by the weather, but they would return to ensure that there was no one left alive. The miko and the pups needed to be safe at the castle before the enemy arrived. *Dragons*. He could feel a snarl welling up at the thought. Intelligence reports had led him to that conclusion already, but to have it proven and to see the turpitude that the North had sunk to was appalling. Enraging. He wanted to kill something.

The wind was dying down, and Sesshomaru locked away all his desires for blood to attend to his first priority. There was no other way to transport everyone. He would have to carry them. He opened the only storage chest in the hut and removed a thick blanket. "Miko," he caught her attention. "Keep the pups warm and secure."

"What about me?" The bird youkai looked defiant, but he smelled frightened and sad. Sesshomaru raised a brow.

"You will not need assistance holding on to This One. Unless you are afraid to fly?" The demon's eyes widened and a small smile broke across his face. *Hn, it is a start*. "We leave now."

Shippo sat on the steps and frowned at the snow in the courtyard. He was worried about Kagome. She had been gone longer when she went through the well for school, but never had they been apart for so long when she was in his time. He missed her. He even kind of missed Sesshomaru. Shippo sighed. Rin's scent bounced towards him and he did his best not to look sad. It was his job to take care of his little sister while Kagome and Sesshomaru were away. They had both said so. Although Kagome had also said he should keep Rin happy, and Sesshomaru had told him to maintain the honor of the West. He guessed they both meant the same thing...basically.

"Shippo-kun! How was training?" Rin sat down next to him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Shippo thought it wasn't fair that his little sister got to be so much bigger than him.

"Fine," he answered. It sounded sullen, so he tried to inflect some cheer into his voice, "There isn't as much to do without Inuyasha here. Watching him fight with Hisao was fun. I thought I knew all of the bad words, but Hisao knows even more than Inubaka!"

"You shouldn't call him that, Shippo-kun," Rin chided, but she laughed too. "Hisao-san has a terrible temper. He is lucky to have found someone who can stand up to it. Sesshomaru-sama always beats him, of course, but he doesn't have much time to play with Hisao-san."

"I don't think Sesshomaru would like to hear you call it 'playing', Rin," Shippo noted dryly.

She shrugged, "But it's the only fun he gets. Of course, now that Kagome-sama is here, maybe he will find more time to-" Rin paused, "What is happening?" Shippo turned his senses outward. The courtyard and training grounds had fallen silent. Most of the youkai soldiers were ready to attack, their hands on their weapons. He reached out with his youki, and gasped. Something very big and very dangerous was headed their way. Shippo jumped up and tugged on Rin's hand, determined to follow his orders.

"Come on! We have to-" A shout rang out among the soldiers, and then a moment later Shippo recognized what they had sensed. The demon coming to the castle was Sesshomaru, and he was moving quickly. "They're back!" Rin stood too, clapping her hands in excitement. He was difficult to see at first, but then the kit pointed out the silvery white of the daiyoukai against the grey storm clouds to Rin. His own eyes grew bigger and bigger as Sesshomaru approached. He had never seen the Western Lord in his true form, and he was gigantic. Shippo swallowed, wondering how his human mother had ever found the courage to become allies and then friends after she had been attacked by *that*. He landed in the courtyard on all fours, sending up puffs of snow, but instead of immediately transforming, he lowered his belly to the ground.

Hisao approached from the training grounds, "My Lord? What do-"

"A little help, please, Hisao-san," Kagome's voice called down from somewhere above the mounds of white fur. The captain looked to Sesshomaru for permission, and received a slow blink in response. With a single jump, Hisao landed on the great dog's back, sending a cascade of snow and ice crashing to the courtyard. He returned to the ground holding a kid about Rin's size, who was wrapped in a

blanket and also covered in snow. A servant was summoned and took the white crusted bundle, and Hisao vaulted up again. This time he returned with a smaller, significantly less snowy bundle. There was a whirlwind of youki, and Sesshomaru transformed. Shippo had to shield his eyes from the blowing snow, but when it was over he was relieved to see the daiyoukai, holding Kagome.

“Kagome-mama!” He yelled happily, as Rin called out, “Sesshomaru-sama, Kagome-sama!” They raced to meet Sesshomaru as he strode towards the castle. Hisao and his bundle followed behind.

The Lord was speaking to his captain in low tones, “...speak immediately. Fetch a female to care for the bird, he will want his own kind.”

“Sesshomaru!” came an indignant huff from his arms. Shippo stared at Kagome. She was wrapped in an ice covered blanket, and everything the blanket had not covered was crusted with snow. Her hair, her eyebrows and eyelashes. Her face was pale and her lips a strange purple color.

“You will see him later, Miko. Hush.” As if there were not twenty or more demons watching, he bent his head and brushed his nose along her hair, still walking as though it were nothing unusual. “Hisao,” his voice came out as toneless and cool again, “break a platoon into fireteams and...” Shippo stood and stared in shock after them as they entered the castle.

“Did Shippo-kun see what Sesshomaru-sama did?” Rin’s voice was awed and excited.

Shippo nodded and replied, stunned, “Did you smell what Kagome was holding?”

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He’s fine, stop worrying, Kagome admonished herself. Sesshomaru had explained, after she finally tugged on his mokomoko for attention, that bird youkai only allowed themselves to be groomed or fed by their own kind. Paho had been taken to one who resided at the castle, but Kagome would be able to see him after he was settled. Nankae had latched on to Hisao with a death grip and asked a million questions about the Western army. When he realized they would be bathing, he demanded to stay with the captain. Sesshomaru had sent out a low tone that made the boy duck his chin and his lip stick out. Hisao listened to a rapid-fire string of orders from his lord, then deposited the pup on Kagome’s lap and disappeared.

They waited at the entrance to the private springs until a servant arrived with clean clothes and supplies. Sesshomaru whisked her off her feet and straight to the hot water. He took Nankae from her and set him on his own feet with a stern directive to strip and wait in the shallow end. With stiff fingers, she tried to unwrap the frozen blanket, but she couldn’t seem to get her numb limbs to work. Sesshomaru made a sound of irritation and brushed her hands away.

“I’ve got it, really I-” He glared at her, and so she bit her tongue and stood patiently while he unwrapped the blanket. The unconcealed look of surprise on his face was worth all of the tiny claw

pricks she had received on the way back to the castle. Nankae had snuggled up easily to her during the journey, clinging to her and Sesshomaru's fur on his own, but Emi was too little to secure herself. Kagome had worried that she would fall, or not stay warm enough, so she had unwrapped her gi and folded the little pup against her skin. Emi was still asleep, Kagome was sure, and the lump under her clothes made her belly look enormous. Kagome giggled. Her chattering teeth made the sound stutter, "Th- this is why you-u-u shouldn't f-feed me so much, I'll g-get fat!"

Sesshomaru had a strange look in his eyes when he approached again, and Kagome was speechless when he slowly loosened the knot of her obi. The shirt fell open, revealing her modern bra and the black-haired pup curled against her skin. She grabbed Emi with both hands, too stunned and preoccupied with the child to cover herself. Golden eyes raked over her exposed flesh, and Kagome trembled for reasons that had nothing to do with temperature. His hands moved to the ties of her pants, and Kagome was suddenly aware of how dry her lips were.

"Hey, 'Gome! This place is neat! Do you swim here all the time?" Nankae's guileless interruption had her jumping back with a guilty flush. Sesshomaru's claws snagged the ties, slicing through one so that she had to grab the waistband to keep from becoming even more exposed. She glanced to the boy, anything to keep her eyes off of the daiyoukai, and found him edging into deeper water. She had no idea if he could even swim.

"Nankae-kun, stay still until I get in," she said sharply. His head tilted and his eyes took on a wounded cast. She softened her voice, "Emi and I don't want you to have all the fun without us." He smiled and made a huge waving motion that comically splashed his own face.

"Then hurry up! It feels really good and warm, 'Gome."

"You will obey the miko, pup." Sesshomaru's deep voice drew her eyes unwillingly, and Kagome's mouth fell open. He strode into the pool without another glance at her, completely naked. She hadn't noticed him undressing. Smooth, pale skin. Hard muscle. Long, silky hair. "Do you need further assistance?" Her eyes snapped to his face and she had no chance of fighting the blush that raged on her cheeks. There were tiny wrinkles near his eyes, and the golden color looked suspiciously warm. *He's teasing me.* She shook away that ridiculous thought, which he apparently took as a request, for he began to rise out of the water. Past his chest...his waist... magenta markings...

"No," she practically shouted. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned to adjust Emi without looking at his...his everything. The pup woke and squirmed in her embrace to stare at her with big, unnaturally blue eyes. Another shiver wracked her body and she tried to force herself to get over the discomfort. After all, she had bathed with him before, sort of. It wasn't like mokomoko was going to molest her in the water again. She eyed the fluff, lying innate where he had piled it. Even if the daiyoukai was interested in her, at least physically, there were children present. He was far too proper to do anything in front of them. She assured herself it would no doubt be a quick bath in any case; Sesshomaru probably had an enormous amount of work to do. That thought made her wonder why he had stayed with them instead of sending the rock demons to guard the springs. "We'll be fine here, Sesshomaru. I'm sure you have more important things to do."

“But you said you had a pack, ‘Gome.” Nankae’s sad, confused voice came from behind her. “My father said protection and comfort for the pack was the most important job of the alpha. Unless...is Sesshomaru-sama not your pack?” There was silence behind her and Kagome struggled with the remaining knot in her pants even as she tried to think of a response that would reassure the child and not mortally offend the Western Lord.

“This One is a strong alpha.” Sesshomaru’s voice rang out behind her and Kagome stilled. *Is he saying I am...* “There are repercussions to pack that do not obey...and remain shivering out of modesty.” Kagome rolled her eyes, finding irritation her only defense against a pleased sort of blush. She stepped out of her footwear and took a deep breath. It was just like going swimming. No more revealing than some of the bikinis her friends in the future wore. She tried not to dwell on the fact that she had never been brave enough to wear one without a cover up.

“Yeah. ‘Gome isn’t inu, maybe she doesn’t know. You should tell her she needs to obey,” the simple directive made Kagome snort, and she turned and stepped into the spring in her bra and panties, still holding the clingy Emi. Agonizing needles of heat raked across her skin where she touched the water. Kagome bit back a cry of pain as she acclimated to the change in temperature. She refused to meet the golden eyes that stared at her as she sank into the water, not able to take a deep breath until she was in up to her armpits. Kento had once told her that inu often bathed and groomed together within their close family packs. It seemed so long ago that he had given her a first lesson on demons and dogs. Really, it had been just over a week since Sesshomaru had taken ill and Kento had lectured her:

“An alpha leads his pack, usually with his female. The more powerful the inu, the greater the size of his pack. The innermost circle is his female and pups. The next, larger pack contains his siblings, their packs, possibly parents. Next are more distant relatives, and very close allies. It goes on, further for each inuyoukai depending on his power and rank. Sesshomaru-sama has the entire Western Lands under his control. Alpha to us all.”

Kagome sighed. Alpha, indeed. She might be ‘of the West’ for a time, but she doubted that Sesshomaru considered her a permanent member of his domain. She did her best to brush aside the pull of sadness as she considered that if, when, the daiyoukai took a mate, the demoness would take a spot in that closest pack with their pups. She got to play in his personal space for the time being, but it was not permanent. He would never wish it to be so. *I wouldn’t either. How annoying it would be to be constantly expected to defer to someone else, someone so much stronger and more knowledgeable about many things. Someone with so much to teach – so much to learn. To be protected and cared for and...* Kagome shook herself. Listing Sesshomaru’s desirable qualities was not helping her mood.

His eyes were still on her as she took up soap and began gently scrubbing Emi. Nankae was standing on an underwater ledge near the daiyoukai, eying the deeper water. Having raised a sneaky kitsune for four years, Kagome could see the boy’s mind turning. She wasn’t a match for his demon quickness, however, and didn’t have time to utter a warning before he leapt off the ledge. Sesshomaru snagged him out of thin air by the boy’s waist and returned him to the ledge with a stern glance. Kagome

cuddled a soapy Emi and felt her chest constrict. A year ago, if someone had told her she would feel all melty and wistful watching Sesshomaru act the role of a parent - if someone had told her that Sesshomaru would take up the role of a parent - she would have backed away slowly and tried not to startle the crazy person. She thought of the demoness that would be at his side in the future and felt an unreasonable stab of jealousy.

“Miko.” His low, warm voice brought her back to the present and she frowned to cover up the inappropriate turn of her thoughts. “Hand the female to this one. The other pup needs your attention.” Relieved to have a task to keep her occupied, she stepped closer, holding out the wide-eyed Emi. The pup didn’t fuss, but held very still in his arms and watched Kagome. She turned to Nankae with her soap, and almost drowned herself when she felt hot breath on her ear. “Very good. You obey your alpha.”

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Sesshomaru watched with a mixture of amusement and arousal as the miko stiffened and sputtered. He was pleasantly surprised that she had told the young ones she belonged to a pack. Even if she thought of Inuyasha as her...no, he refused to consider that possibility any longer. She had willingly lain with him, had responded to his advances. She was *his* pack, but Nankae was correct, the miko did need to learn what it meant to be inu. He teased her with a command he knew she would follow, caring for the pup, but he was unprepared for how her obedience had sent a pulse of warmth through him. She would argue. He knew that. It was in her nature, and, despite himself, he often looked forward to the challenge she presented. Swift prey made for a better hunt. Her opinions, well, it was within his power and benefited him to consider the perspectives of others. A miko from the future would give interesting and insightful counsel.

The pup in his arms remained wary of him. She stayed still, her instincts warning her not to draw attention from a dangerous predator. Sesshomaru combed through her black hair with his claws, letting a quiet rumble vibrate his chest so that she would know she was safe with him. Her eyes followed the miko, even as she relaxed against him. It seemed that all young, human or kitsune or inu, were drawn to her. That was good. She would be an excellent mother. When he had pulled away the blanket and seen her clothing swollen by the pup she sheltered, he had been...awed, content, pleased, and overwhelmed with a possessive need to take her close to him and cover her with his scent, his touch. The logical part of his mind knew that the pup was not his, she could not be carrying his offspring, had not yet known his seed. The beast in him wanted to make it true.

He traced the line of her neck and the curve of her shoulder, the tiny indent made by the strap of her...undergarment...the only detraction from smooth skin. Her hair was pulled over her shoulder, so there was no impediment to his view as he followed the column of her spine past her shoulders and into the water. Ripples on the surface distorted what lay underneath, but he was more than satisfied with the deep curve of her waist and the generous swell of her bottom. Sesshomaru clenched his jaw and concentrated on willing away his response. He had much to do before he could enjoy her skin on his again.

She was efficient with Nankae, and soon they were ready to leave. He handed her the little one and exited first with the other. The males dressed quickly and Sesshomaru was not immune to her blush as she stepped from the water, a small inu head on her shoulder and water cascading over bare skin. Wet, her undergarments revealed more than they concealed. The thin white fabric clung to her skin, nearly transparent except for the heavy embroidery that created flowers and leaves across her breasts and at her hips. His eyes were drawn to the dark shadow between her legs as she hurriedly dried and dressed Emi. She did not lift her face to his as she handed over the pup, and he forced himself to give her his back. The gesture was less out of respect for her modesty and more out of understanding that if he saw her pull that clinging fabric from her flesh, he was not certain he would restrain himself as he should. He wondered if he would ever understand why it was *this* female, Kagome, who could shake his control like no other.

She dressed quickly, and when he turned and handed back the pup he took the opportunity, while her hands were busy, to retie her obi. He understood that the garment was not worn in her time, but he was repeatedly surprised that she could make new and more horrible messes each time she tried the simple task. He led the small group back through the castle, refusing to acknowledge the stares and whispers of his servants. The miko seemed to be a favorite topic of gossip. He was pleased to learn that, for the most part, she was held in high regard. The Miko no Mao had saved their Lord, saved them all. She returned with their Lord and brought back youkai children from the grasp of death itself. His eyes narrowed when he heard the ill-advised murmurs of one soldier who called into question allowing a human to remain so close to pups. Sesshomaru stopped in place and caught the male youkai's eye. He shrank back, baring his neck and bowing low. Satisfied for the time being, Sesshomaru continued on, making a mental note to speak to Hisao about occupying his troops better if they had time for idle gossip.

"Sesshomaru?" The miko interrupted Nankae's constant prattle. The pup did not seem to ever remain silent, asking questions and divulging all manner of personal and trivial information. "Aren't our rooms the other way? Have we changed again?" *Our rooms*. That pleased him immensely.

"This One's chambers have been repaired."

"Oh. Should we, er, the children and I, go to Rin's room?"

"You will accompany This One." He felt a twitch of a smile and a surge of pride when she noticed the changes. Her noises of surprise and appreciation grew as they continued through the family quarters. His carpenters had been working hard to remodel in the wake of his...disagreement with Inuyasha. The corridor ended abruptly with shoji screens on either side. Sesshomaru gestured to the left, and the miko opened the screen and stepped into the new room. He had ordered furnishings suitable for a gathering space. A low table, long enough to accommodate eight or more, sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by blue cushions. A smaller table, arrayed with implements for writing, faced the outer wall. A selection of scrolls had been installed on shelves nearby. He was pleased to see that Rin and the kit had been well occupied while he was gone. The shelves also held books from the miko's time and the main table had been decorated with flowers.

“Oh!” She turned slowly, her hand over her mouth. Her eyes were wide, and for a moment, Sesshomaru could not discern her state from her scent. “Is this...is this for me, Sesshomaru?”

“Hn.” He made the briefest inclination of his head, and was reduced to sniffing the air with a hesitancy borne of uncertainty. Then she smiled. Her hand fell away from her face and the bright, warm smell of her happiness filled the room. The pups smiled as well, Emi even laughed and Sesshomaru was struck with the realization that the miko held that power over all those around her. With her smile there was contentment. With her sadness, despondency.

“It’s beautiful, Sesshomaru. Thank you. I...I don’t know how to...” She laughed again and turned around the room, finally coming to a stop at his side. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed. “Thanks, Sesshomaru-sama. Thank you.” She leaned up and pressed her cool lips against the underside of his jaw. He knew logically that his height prevented her from reaching his cheek, her most probable target. She would have no way of knowing how intimate, how familiar, how deeply significant the act was to inu. His instincts did not care for logic. His chest rumbled, and both pups snapped to attention before leaning into Kagome in boneless contentment under the effect of the sound. Her free hand remained on his chest, her weight pressed against his side.

Rin and Shippo chose that moment to emerge from another set of screens, revealing the remodeled sleeping room for his adopted daughter. After a brief bout of sniffing and some encouragement from the miko, Nankae and the kit went to investigate Shippo’s toys. Rin dragged Kagome from Sesshomaru’s side to show her everything that had been done. The reception room opened to the girl’s sleeping chamber and beyond that another smaller room that had been laid out as a classroom. She pointed out a room for Shippo connected to the far end of the shared study area, and an open air garden, currently covered in snow, carved out of the side of the mountain. At the back of the gathering space, ornate shoji screens opened to another sleeping room, a raised futon designed for more than one was covered in luxurious bedding. Sesshomaru found a great deal of pride and satisfaction over the exclamations of the miko as she admired each new thing. She trailed her fingers over a lacquered wardrobe, which Rin explained was for her clothing, and glanced at him with worry in her scent.

“Sesshomaru...what about, I mean...isn’t this where your rooms were?” He raised a brow and gestured around the gathering space with a small smirk. He could almost see her mind working. The south wall opened to Rin’s space. The west opened to the garden. The northern doors revealed the sleeping room. And to the east...he barely held back a smile as she realized there was another, plain screen along that wall. She slid them apart and found Kento and Hisao waiting in an exact replica of the private study that the hanyou had destroyed. The sweet citrus of her pleasure filled the room.

“I have left papers on your desk, Kagome-sama.” Hisao’s eyes glittered. “See if you can figure out my new code.”

“Kagome-sama,” Kento began, “It is good to-” He was interrupted by the yell of a small inuyoukai.

“Commander-sama!” Nankae barreled across the room, Shippo trotting behind, and crashed into the

captain's legs. A barrage of chatter followed. Descriptions of all the pup had done and seen in the hour since Hisao had escorted them to the springs. Sesshomaru held back a smile; the miko was not so contained.

"I think he likes you, Hisao-san." Hisao looked confused, and Sesshomaru found himself enjoying the other male's uncertainty. He considered for a moment how many years it had been since Hisao's mate had died. He considered many things. Particularly how soon he would like to begin his own litter, and the opportunities to do so with a talkative pup hanging on the miko's skirt.

"Miko, there is work to be done." She took Nankae's hand and enlisted Shippo and Rin to help pull him away with promises of drawing, stories, and lunch. "Stay in these rooms. Hisao will join us for dinner." She winked at the captain and bowed, shutting the screens on the three adult youkai. He turned back to his two closest advisors and ignored their openly questioning expressions. Sesshomaru settled himself at his desk and poured a cup of tea from the waiting pot. There was much to do, and no need to waste time on personal inquiries. "Report to This One.."

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Rin was in heaven. She was sure of it. Sesshomaru-sama was well again. Kagome-sama was staying at the castle; she had loved her new rooms. Rin had two new pups to play with and Emi-chan was adorable. If she could name a single thing that wasn't perfect, it was that Sesshomaru-sama and Kagome-sama hadn't mated yet. She was sure they would soon, though. In the courtyard, Sesshomaru-sama had scent-marked the miko in front of everyone. *On her face.* Rin had lived with inu for long enough to know that such gestures were only for mates and pups. Her Lord had marked Rin that way for the first time on the day he announced her as his daughter. He had rubbed her cheek with his in front of InuKimi and his vassals. Rin was Sesshomaru-sama's...and Kagome-sama was his too, she just didn't know it yet.

Rin snuggled down in her futon, and listened to Nankae-kun and Shippo-kun breathing quietly. After a restless nap time where Emi-chan had a nightmare and woke up Nankae, it was decided that he would sleep at night with Shippo. Shippo-kun still preferred to sleep on the floor in Rin's room, so futons had been dragged in so that they could share. Jaken-san had squawked about the waste of space and bedding, but Rin was happy to have the youkai with her. Hopefully, the kit would be her brother soon, and if Sesshomaru decided to keep the pups...

That was what the adults were discussing, she knew. She could still hear the faint, deep murmurs of Sesshomaru-sama, Kento-san, and Hisao-san. Paho would stay with the only bird youkai at the castle. They were pleased to have him, and Rin had known several birds - they were nice enough, but they didn't like to sleep or eat with other kinds of youkai. It had something to do with prey instinct. Nankae-kun and Emi-chan were a more difficult problem. There were several inu that had already approached Kento-san about inviting the children into their packs. Rin could tell that Sesshomaru-sama would not send the pups far. She grinned into her bedding. Her Lord's face got...easier...when he looked at the miko and the sweet little pup together. Of course, it would also make a difference that Emi-chan didn't like being apart from Kagome-sama; she cried when anyone else, with the exception of the Western

Lord, held her. So, Emi-chan would almost definitely be staying with Sesshomaru-sama's pack for a while at least.

Nankae-kun liked everybody. Rin thought the pup was about four years old, but Shippo-kun said he was a lot older than he looked. Rin knew that youkai aged differently than humans – and differently from one another. Inu grew quickly at birth, and then more and more slowly. Kitsune grew as their control over their youki increased. Nankae was still young, by demon standards, but he didn't seem to be as sad about his parents dying as Emi-chan was. Rin thought that maybe Nankae-kun's parents had been like Rin's first father. Rin didn't miss him either. The boy was so nice and sweet, and cute, that Rin was sure Sesshomaru-sama would make certain his new parents loved him. It would be sad if he couldn't stay in their pack, but he would be at the castle, so Rin and Shippo-kun could still play with him.

Rin listened to the low thrum of her father and wondered how much longer it would be before he mated Kagome-sama. Shippo-kun said kitsune have a contest to decide how clever they are before they mated. If a kitsune impressed the one they liked with their tricks and illusions, that kitsune would give the trickster a gift; then their families would meet and exchange gifts. Then the kitsune boy would stay at the kitsune girl's house every night from the new moon to the full moon. Then the couple gave each other gifts, and there was a mating ceremony, and it was all done. Rin knew there were a few things different between inu and kitsune. Inuyoukai would not be very happy if someone played a lot of tricks on them. Foxes believed good tricks made a good kitsune. Rin knew that inu thought power and strength made a good dog.

Sesshomaru-sama had definitely proven how powerful he was, and Rin decided that although Kagome-sama was not very strong, her reiki was very powerful. They had probably both won the contest. Sesshomaru-sama had given the miko lots of gifts: beautiful kimonos, her new rooms, and Rin knew there was a gold hair comb waiting for Kagome-sama to find and use in the morning. She had not seen Kagome-sama give anything to her Lord, but Rin didn't think the girl had to get the boy anything right away.

Unfortunately, they would have to skip the next step. Shippo-kun said the magic well to Kagome's home wouldn't let anyone else through. For the same reason, Sesshomaru-sama couldn't stay through the moons at the miko's home. Rin frowned. She wondered if it would be okay if Kagome-sama stayed at the castle instead. That would mean she had to wait another...well, only a few days. Then they would each give the other a present, and they could be mated. Kagome-sama would be her mother, and Shippo-kun her real brother. Rin had to press the futon into her face to keep her happy laughter hidden. She tried out the sound, "Kagome-mama. Mama. Mama!" She laughed again into the cushy bedding, then froze. Someone was running up the corridor. The door to Sesshomaru-sama's study slid open, and she could make out Hisao-san's voice.

"Report, Eiichi-san."

"The leader of the Eastern wolf clan has arrived." Rin shivered, glad that Shippo and Nankae were staying with her. She knew the Eastern wolves had promised not to eat humans anymore, Kagome had

told her so, but she still didn't want to be alone with one.

"It's about damn time. Show him up and--"

"This One will not have the stench of wolves in these chambers. This Sesshomaru will meet him in the reception hall." The voice of the Western Lord was cool and calm. Rin was so proud to be part of his pack. He was powerful and fair, and he always took care of her. Rin was sure that Kagome-sama would-

"Eiichi-san," Hisao rumbled, "you will stay here to guard Kagome-sama. Eiji-san will--"

"The miko will accompany This One."

"It is late, my Lord. Surely Kagome-sama and the pup will be safe under the watch of two while you deal with this business." Kento sounded like he was trying to reason with his Lord. Rin wanted to giggle. Kento-san was always trying to steer Sesshomaru-sama. He would have been just as effective if he barked as he was with reasonable words. Rin pressed the bedding against her mouth, unable to hold back a laugh at the image of Kento, barking at the great inu's heels like a common herd dog.

"This One does not repeat himself."

"Kagome-sama-" Kento-san was interrupted by the woman herself.

"Is awake, and perfectly capable of walking downstairs, if it is necessary." Rin could almost see the roll of blue eyes and a small smile. "Is it necessary, Sesshomaru? And may I bring Emi?"

"Hn."

"I'll take that as a yes. Give me a moment to find her a blanket."

"My Lord," Eiichi-san sounded nervous. Rin frowned. Eiichi-san was never worried about anything. "The wolf has asked if Kagome-sama is at the castle. He believes he picked up her scent in the courtyard."

"He's probably being insistent about seeing me?" There was a pause, and Rin could imagine Eiichi-san looking at the cold face of his Lord before nodding. "I definitely need to go then, before he tries to tear up the place." There was silence for a long moment. "What?"

"Kagome-sama," Kento began hesitantly.

"Why would the wolf seek you out?" Rin knew that tone. Sesshomaru would be sitting even more still than usual. He was a predator on alert. Rin was very, very glad that she would not be in the reception room when Sesshomaru-sama met the wolf.

“Uh, yeah, heh, that’s kind of a long story. I had hoped the idiot would marry, er, mate with Ayame but he just won’t let this stupid idea go. I mean, he’s still my friend. He was an ally against Naraku, but if he grabs my hands one more time I might just let Inuyasha beat the cra- er, stuffing out of him.” There was the faintest rustle, and then Nankae and Shippo stirred on their futons. Even Rin could feel the release of youki in the other room.

“Miko,” Sesshomaru-sama’s voice was quiet, “what idea?”

“Ah,” her voice was higher-pitched than usual, “oh, nothing. Maybe I should just stay here? Emi is looking chilly and-” Her voice cut off abruptly. “Er, thank you, Sesshomaru, but-”

“This One is leaving. Eiichi, guard the pups.” Her Lord’s shadow flickered on the rice paper screens to the corridor, followed closely by Kagome-sama’s less graceful movements. Kento-san strode behind them, carrying his usual sheaf of papers and scrolls. Hisao-san should have come next, but a quiet noise from Eiichi-san held him back.

“Hisao-taisa, may I speak freely?”

“Go ahead.”

“Please stay close to Miko-sama.”

“Do you think the wolf will attempt to attack her?” There was a long pause, and Rin felt a shiver of fear crawl up her spine. She didn’t like wolves.

“No,” Eiichi answered finally, “the opposite. He seemed very...familiar...towards Miko-sama.”

“Then Sesshomaru-sama will teach him to speak with respect. What is the problem?” Hisao asked.

Eiichi answered with brevity, “When the Saidai Mao gives such a lesson, I do not wish Miko-sama to be spattered with blood.”

Chapter 17: Defense and Determination

“This One does not see any human whores with you, Arashi. Unless you are dragging your mother’s corpse behind you.” Ryukostokken dug his claws into the floor on either side of him. He had to remind himself that he still needed the spy. Once the West had been toppled and the cowardly dog lay whining at his feet, then he could gut the hanyou. He savored the imagined feeling of his claws ripping through the belly of the vile disgrace to the dragons. His entrails would steam in the cold Northern air when they spilled. Ryukostokken took a deep breath, and released sharp puffs of smoke. That day would be a good day.

“The miko is well guarded. I have found a way to her, but it will sacrifice one of my informants within the Western castle, Denka-ue.” The shorter, stockier frame of the hanyou knelt several steps below the Northern lord, his head bowed in a show of deference. Ryukostokken had several inches over the spy in height, but the younger demon was dense with muscles untwisted by disease. A lock of black hair on either side of his face had escaped his short ponytail and cast shadows across his grey skin.

“You will bring that pup’s human bitch before This One, or an informant much closer to the North will be sacrificed.” Ryukostokken stood and stepped forward until he towered over the other male. A door slid open, the audible rub of wood on stone announcing the presence of the wind demoness. She knelt beside the hanyou with a whisper of respect. Ryukostokken admired the bruises on her wrists and throat, wondering how much longer she might have been able to live without air. Perhaps he would test the theory when night fell again. Once he had the miko... That thought fueled both his lust and his anger, although Ryukostokken felt them so closely they were often as one emotion. “This One goes to inspect reclaimed territories.” He grabbed the female by her hair and jerked her to her feet, displeased when she made no sound of pain. He allowed his claws to dig into her scalp until blood trickled down her neck and her sightless eyes widened with effort to hold back a scream. “Upon returning, the miko will be on her knees before the North, or This One will use your blood to slicken her replacement.”

The dragon lord left without a backward glance, his youkai transport gliding gracefully behind him, despite her injuries. The spy remained as he was for a long moment, contemplating the deep game of shogi he had played for many years. Arashi thought on the value of a general versus a knight, and the strategic importance of a pawn that may be promoted. They had reached mid game, and the hanyou was a 9 dan player - an elite. He considered many ways white and black might move forward, he even calculated the chances of one side or the other winning. “Check, white,” he whispered to himself. Decision reached, he stood and disappeared into the shadows to follow the game to its conclusion.

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Sesshomaru was not pleased. Each step he took made the stench of wolf stronger, and he found his control threatening to slip again. He could imagine what young Kouga thought of the miko. Any male not blinded by his own narrow vision would see her beauty, her power, the value she could bring to a pack. *No other will have her.* His youki was rising and his instincts clawing for release, demanding that

he take her, mark her, and spill the blood of any who made claim to what was his. He pushed both youki and instinct down. Kouga was a valuable ally, one with power in the East that Inuyasha would need if he were to bring stability back to those lands.

Kagome was his. Mokokoko tightened without any conscious thought on Sesshomaru's part, helping her to keep up with him and pulling her closer. Her scent drifted towards him, layered heavily with his own. *Fresh cherry wood. Dew-kissed magnolias. Sour melon flesh* - anxiety, but for whom or what he could not tell. The hot pepper of her irritation - that was most probably for him. He was aware the miko did not like being herded or dragged, and with mokokoko he managed to do both at the same time. She was his, and the wolf would know it. By her scent. By her position.

By Sesshomaru's dokkaso seeping into his open wounds, if necessary.

He seated himself on the dais in the reception hall, assisting the miko to his side. She had just settled Emi when the shoji at the far end were thrown open and the wolf entered. He was fast, Sesshomaru noted with a strategic eye. It was unlikely that the miko was able to follow his movements, but the daiyoukai had no such difficulty. Kouga made straight for the dais, his intention to reach the female clear. Sesshomaru halted his progress with a punch of forceful youki. It was marginally satisfying. The wolf dropped out of his run to glare and clutch his chest in surprise.

"Perhaps things have changed in the East, but in the West it is customary to have introductions before an audience is held," Kento said calmly. "My Lord, may I present Kouga-san, leader of the Eastern Wolf Tribe. Kouga-san, you are received in the Western House of the Saidai Mao, Sesshomaru-sama and Kagome-s-"

"Yeah, I already know them." Kouga grinned, baring his teeth in a way that Sesshomaru found offensive. The wolf stepped forward, reaching one hand out, and the daiyoukai could smell anxiety and irritation growing in the miko. *Surely she does not fear for herself while I am near?* The Western Lord repressed a frown. "How is my woman?"

Sesshomaru went still. The miko was untouched, he knew, so she was not the wolf's woman. She had also mentioned that the presumptuous barbarian was an idiot and unable to listen to her. It was reasonable to assume that she had refused his advances. She had most strenuously *not* refused Sesshomaru's. His lips pulled back to reveal the smallest flash of deadly fangs. Sesshomaru had cause to teach Kouga his place, and how it did not come near the miko's.

Hisao entered the room and flanked him on the opposite side from Kento, protecting the female. That was good. "Do you make a claim?" The daiyoukai's voice was steady and cool, and the wolf looked confused.

"Like I been telling dog-tur, er, your brother for years. Kagome's my woman." He puffed his chest out and his eyes ran across the miko possessively. Mokokoko twitched, and the wolf hesitated. "Don't worry, Kagome, I'll carry you back to the East and you can scrub off that dog smell at the first springs we cross." Kouga's eyebrows rose suggestively. Her irritation and worry were ready to boil over, but

Sesshomaru ignored it, eager to let his own instincts run free. The miko was his, and he would be most pleased to make a demonstration. His eyes felt hot and poison pumped through his veins. He had to remind himself that the wolf couldn't be killed - Inuyasha needed him. The mongrel just needed to be taught a lesson.

"The miko carries the scent of her pack. This One will give you a single opportunity to dismiss your claim, and your insults to the House of the West."

"Yeah? Or what? Just 'cause Kagome hangs out with that half-breed doesn't make her a dog. I claimed her first and-" Sesshomaru's claws lengthened and he could sense Kento and Hisao preparing to back away from the coming battle. His anticipation was cut short.

"Don't call Inuyasha that." The fury in the miko's voice was white hot. She stood, shrugging out of mokomoko with some difficulty and settling Emi into the fluff. It prevented Sesshomaru from pulling her back with his tail and kept the child warm. He tensed, ready to leave his tail for his advisors to guard and leap after the miko. "I'm not a dog, Kouga. I'm not a wolf either. I am most definitely not your woman - as I have been telling you for years. I am Ka-go-me, do you hear me? I am my own person, and if you think I need anybody to fight for me, you need to think again." Her reiki rose, still encased in his youki but intensifying to illuminate her from the inside out. The sharp tang of an ocean breeze mixed with her peppery anger, and the wolf hesitated. Sesshomaru stood as well.

"The miko will-"

"Stay out of this, Sesshomaru," she snapped. The daiyoukai's eyes narrowed on her back. She was his, and she *would* accept his authority. Challenging him in front of others was unacceptable. The wolf smirked again and the fool's ego won out over his survival instincts.

"I knew you didn't want this pompous ass, Kagome. Come with me and I'll show you how much you'll like being my woman." He reached for her hands and winked lasciviously. Sesshomaru clenched his teeth in anger and his youki whip appeared of its own accord. Emi awoke and began to whimper.

"Do. Not. Touch. Me." The miko's hands were fisted at her sides. Sesshomaru couldn't see her face, but the wolf's grin was slowly sliding into a pale mask of uncertainty. Then fear. "I am here because I want to be here. When I want to leave, I will. I want to be your friend, Kouga-kun, but if you don't get it through your thick skull that *I don't want you* I will have to burn it into your brain, got it?" She poked him, right between the eyes, and the smell of burnt flesh assailed Sesshomaru's nose. The wolf yelped and jumped. Before Kouga managed to slap a hand against his forehead, Sesshomaru caught sight of the perfect finger-shaped hole of purification.

"Miko," Sesshomaru began, but for perhaps the first time in his long life, his laconic persona was the result of an inability to find words to express himself. The female, his female, had defied him and denied his right to claim and defend her - in front of other males. She had also quite neatly put the wolf in his place, and declared that she wanted to be with Sesshomaru. All while keeping intact an alliance they needed.

It was not inu, or youkai. *It is Kagome.* He couldn't decide if he was displeased with her refusal to allow him to protect her, as was his right, or proud of the strength she displayed. Perhaps both. There was also his long-term strategy to consider. "*I am here because I want to be here. When I want to leave, I will,*" she had said. She wanted to be with him, but, as she had reminded them all, she could change her mind. She was not youkai, but human. He could not let her go, so logic determined that he must make her *want* to stay. The matter needed considerable contemplation...which he did not have time for at that moment. There were many things he desired that he did not seem to have enough time for.

"And you," the miko spun and narrowed her eyes at him. Sesshomaru found himself in the unfamiliar and unenviable position of wondering how to calm down a female who, as far as he could tell, had no reason to be angry with him. "You woke Emi-chan!" she scolded. She stalked back to the dais and picked up the fussy toddler.

Sesshomaru had, of course, been aware of the whimpers and worried sounds of the pup, but she was perfectly safe and there had been more pressing concerns. The miko acted as though Emi had been left out in the snow without food. She cuddled the pup close and Sesshomaru would have reprimanded her for her tone, but she also picked up mokomoko and wrapped it around them both. Where his tail tucked under the child and across the miko's lap, he could feel her hand stroking along his fur. If he hadn't known better, he would have been certain that the woman had learned how to apologize in inu. Of course, that was not the case, but still...some of the tension drained out of his body. He settled back into a seiza, his ruffled pride soothed with her attentions and silence, as well as with the obvious display of her desire for his proximity. If the wolf had not lost hope for any chance with the miko when she burned his flesh, the sight of her wrapping the daiyoukai's tail around herself would have beaten the message into him.

"Tell This One what you know of events in the East." Sesshomaru had regained complete control of his indifferent mask and he waited for the wolf to respond. The lesser youkai was slow to set aside his disappointment and shock, but after a few moments he straightened and began a recounting of happenings in the Eastern lands. Kuren had sent summons to the wolf clan, notifying them that a wolf youkai refugee had come from the north, claiming that his own pack had been completely wiped out by attackers. Kouga was dealing with a pack dispute along his southern borders so he sent Ginta and Hakkaku to collect the refugee and receive any messages from Kuren.

"I should have gone myself; I would have been faster. If I was there when they came, I could have taken care of the damn dragons before they did their work." Sesshomaru almost regretted bringing the miko and pup with him as the wolf recounted the news his packmates had given him. The pup slept through the telling, but the miko became heavily scented with sadness as he described what they had found.

The two wolves arrived as the slaughter was finishing. The sizeable village outside of the Eastern castle had been crippled by disease. Any who survived, even those still suffering from the pox, were murdered. "There was no honor in these killings, no purpose. No food or land was taken, the castle

was abandoned to stand empty. Single males were cut down by hunting groups of three or four dragons. Females and children were torn apart as they tried to flee or hide. Kuren's family was tortured. They took the heir and she was--"

"You are certain it was dragons," Sesshomaru interrupted swiftly. They all knew what had most likely happened to the female crane youkai. There was no need for the miko to hear it confirmed.

"Ginta and Hakkaku are slower than a breeding toad youkai, but their noses are good. If they say it was dragons, then that is the truth."

"They didn't get sick, did they?" The miko's worry filtered through her depressed spirits. "Those boys need to go to Edo and get--"

"We already got your medicine, Kagome. The houshi and his woman brought some to us, and sent messages with some of my faster runners to warn other villages of the sickness. There hasn't been a single report of illness south of Edo."

"Thank the heavens," she whispered. Sesshomaru spoke with Kouga long into the night, discussing various means for enemy egress from the north and key supply routes. The miko finally slumped against him, her eyes drifting shut and her scent smoothing out with sleep. Still he kept her at his side while he informed the wolf of his plan. The daiyoukai shared what the wolf needed to know of the strategy; it was illogical to inform him of all of the details. There was the expected amount of denial, sputtering, and outright refusal regarding Inuyasha's role, but the wolf kept his voice down.

Sesshomaru smirked to himself. No doubt the youkai was afraid to wake the pup and miko and incur her holy wrath again. Eventually, Kouga came to his senses and saw reason. He agreed to his part, and to stay the night at the castle and return east in the morning. He left the reception room with a last, mournful look at the miko, and Sesshomaru dismissed Kento and Hisao. He gathered her up in his arms and carried her back to her new sleeping chamber. As he slid the screen closed behind him and lay her down on the bedding, he allowed himself a genuine smile. *Their* sleeping chamber.

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Kagome blinked in the darkness for a few moments, trying to remember where she was. She was warm and tired, but she also needed to use the facilities. She was lying on her side with Emi curled against her front. The little girl had her hands wrapped around the neckline of Kagome's robe. The miko blinked. She was pretty sure she was wearing a kimono when she fell asleep; she vaguely remembered someone helping her get ready for bed. Kagome blushed. She very much doubted that Sesshomaru had called in a servant to help her change. The miko carefully loosened Emi's fingers and tried to wiggle away from her without waking the toddler. She promptly ran into a hard body. An arm snaked around her hip, pulling her closer, and Kagome held her breath. Hot lips pressed against her neck.

"Rest," he commanded in a sleep-roughened voice.

“Sesshomaru,” she whispered, once again embarrassed, “I really have to go.” He hesitated for a moment, and then relaxed his hold. With a relieved sigh, Kagome squirmed out of the futon. When she was finished, she washed her face and hands with cool water and then stopped, staring at the rice paper screen between her and the sleeping room. Always before, Sesshomaru had pulled her into bed, or she had fallen asleep and he had laid down with her. She hadn’t had to make a conscious choice. She was fully awake. If she went back to bed with him, she was admitting, to herself and him, that she wanted to be there. Which was true, she realized.

Kagome blushed again. *When did that happen?* Two weeks prior, she had admired Sesshomaru’s fighting skills, his patience, his cold, perfect beauty. Without her noticing, she had also come to see and admire the loyalty he inspired in his people, his determination to protect and provide for them. He was not just patient with Rin, he truly loved her. However hard he tried to conceal it with the facade he wore, Kagome could see that the human ward had become his daughter. If that weren’t enough of a revelation, he had a soft spot for children. *Sesshomaru* had a soft spot. He cared for Shippo, provided for a home for Paho, took in the inu pups. He even found a way to make a place for Inuyasha, to give the hanyou a new purpose and at the same time, a wary kind of acceptance by full youkai. In their own gruff, sometimes ferocious-bordering-on-murderous, way, the half-brothers had come to at least tolerate one another. Kagome knew that Sesshomaru deserved much of the credit for the change in their relationship.

She wondered if he respected her. He seemed to appreciate the value of her knowledge and healing skill. He hadn’t outright killed her earlier when she told him to butt out. *Oh, crap.* Kagome closed her eyes as she realized what she had done in a fit of temper. As if it hadn’t been bad enough that she burned Kouga, *that was deserved and was a long time coming*, she had told the Killing Perfection to mind his own business. In front of his men. And Kouga. He hadn’t removed her head, though, or even verbally put her in her place. Instead, he let her fall asleep on him. That was...surprising, encouraging, or possibly disturbing. He *might* just have a tiny bit of respect for a human miko. That was a huge change for Sesshomaru.

There was also his body. *Yeah, that,* Kagome thought, leaning back against the wall to keep from sliding into a lust-induced puddle. Sesshomaru was beautiful, no one could deny that. It turned out, on closer, more naked inspection, that he was also muscular beyond belief. Sleek and toned from fighting, sparring, and who knew what else, the daiyoukai was mouth-watering without a shirt - Kagome felt her face go bright red - or any other clothing. She had a strong intuition that he would know how to use that body too. *Get yourself under control, pervert!* Kagome buried her face in her hands, but she couldn’t deny the thought, once it had entered her mind. Sesshomaru was an excellent kisser, not that she had a lot to compare to, but still... She got weak and melty when he whispered against her neck, she couldn’t imagine what it would be like if he was really trying to turn her on.

He was a dog. An actual dog. Kagome had felt some reservations about that, but the more she considered it, the more it didn’t really matter. He was still him, no matter what shape he was in. And if they did become more...physical...if he even *looked* like he would suggest it, she would just be very clear that she did *not* want puppy kisses. Although, his fur was incredibly soft and warm. *If she*

cuddled... Kagome stood straight. She was getting ahead of herself. She wanted to sleep next to Sesshomaru. She - Kagome squelched the girlish impulse to giggle or hyperventilate with awkwardness - wanted to sleep *with* him. Sesshomaru seemed to be headed that direction, but she wouldn't know for certain unless she committed to that desire.

What about love?

Kagome squared her shoulders. She didn't think she loved Sesshomaru, but she thought she could. She refused, however, to wait around and let herself become more attached, hoping that he would declare his undying devotion to her. *Been there, done that.* As unlikely as that outcome had been with Inuyasha, it was preposterous with his older brother. Kagome wasn't a girl with a crush any longer; she was a woman. After risking her life, tracking down shards, and killing the most devious and evil creature in Japan's history - not to mention giving up her heart and having it gently, but resolutely, handed back to her - all without any parental oversight, she figured she had more than earned the claim to be an adult.

If she wanted something, she was going to go after it. Sesshomaru might refuse. He might even be offended. It would definitely take work to elicit any feelings that might be love, or even affection, and a damn miracle if she could get him to admit it. Kagome wasn't one to back down from a challenge, though.

She slid open the screen and made her way through the dark to the raised futon. She only tripped once, and felt her way under the bedding without falling onto Emi or Sesshomaru. Kagome held her breath as she slid over, finally encountering his heat through a sleeping robe. He lay on his back, silky hair spread around him, and the child on his chest. She could barely make out the shadowy lump of Emi, snuggled against his sternum and listening to the steady, low vibration he emitted. Kagome hesitated one last time, but she wasn't given the chance to back out. A strong arm wrapped around her, pulling her into his side and capturing her leg between his own.

"Sleep." His command was followed by a brush of lips across her forehead. The miko relaxed, resting her cheek on his shoulder and reaching out to cover Emi's hand - directly over his heart. She smiled in the darkness, recognizing all of the soft, happy feelings that came with being close to him, with him wanting her close. It wasn't love, but with a nudge, it could be. A tsunami of excited fear washed through her, making the daiyoukai sniff and twitch.

"Goodnight, Sesshomaru," she whispered to let him know she was fine. She could let herself love him. Now she only had to find the tenderness under all of his ice, and find out if he was willing to give her the same chance. Kagome went to sleep dreaming of ways to make the Killing Perfection let go of his control long enough for her to get close to his heart.

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"We will move tomorrow," Arashi said softly from the shadows, watching the flow of water down the

aqueducts in the dark village.

“There has been a change since last you were here. Several orphans have been taken in from the northern towns. One clings to the miko constantly.”

“That only benefits us.” Arashi watched his informant out of the corner of his eye. In the low lamplight, the inuyoukai’s face was unreadable, as usual, but his kimono was creased, as though it had been slept in. The hanyou considered the implications such carelessness could have on the youkai’s ability to perform certain tasks. It might require certain adjustments to his strategy.

The informant shifted restlessly, “You’re sure he will want to go with her?”

“If he doesn’t, I will encourage him.”

“It will be better to have her out of the castle,” the inuyoukai muttered. The informant stiffened, almost imperceptibly, as though he had said something unintended. *Interesting*, Arashi noted the admission. *This one may have his own agenda. It is good that I have never truly trusted him.* The traitor to the West continued as though he had not spoken, “I think Ryukostokken has underestimated Sesshomaru-sama if the dragon believes my Lord will allow an incursion on his home to go unanswered.”

“The Denka-ue’s estimations are none of your concern. Play your role, and the miko will be removed. Forget your place and... Do not forget your place.” Arashi jumped onto the stone lip of the aqueduct. He picked up speed sliding down the steep incline and then took to the air, silent and invisible in the thickly falling snow.

Chapter 18: Painful Decision

Emi growled in Kagome's ear, making her laugh and sit up in the futon. "Okay, okay, I get it. Time for breakfast!"

The toddler smiled at her, and Kagome raced through dressing them both and combing hair before stepping into the gathering room. Shippo, Rin, and Nankae were already seated. Jaken oversaw servants setting out dishes that made Kagome's stomach rumble in anticipation. Breakfast was a happy affair. Sesshomaru did not join them, but Kagome had a fuzzy memory of him sliding out of the futon and whispering that he would see her at dinner. That was good, because she was going to need the whole day to plan her attack. She couldn't help but hum a little with happiness as she helped Emi with her food.

"Is Kagome-sama feeling all right?" Rin caught Kagome's attention with a worried look. Shippo snorted and Nankae looked confused.

"Gome smells happy," the boy said. He glanced at the kit for confirmation, "Right, Shippo?"

Kagome overrode further discussion before things got out of hand. "Of course I'm happy! How could I not be with you four to keep me company? I thought we could practice with brushes this morning." She turned to Nankae as Jaken and the servants returned to take away the dishes. "Do you know how to write, Nankae-kun?"

"No, 'Gome," he shook his head.

"Then we'll start with your name. Would you like to learn it?" At his shrug, she decided to offer an incentive. "After you have practiced, and Rin and Shippo finish their lesson, we can go play in the snow. How does that sound?" The children all whooped and cheered with excitement, even Emi smiled and laughed at their antics. Jaken's squawking could barely be heard over the din.

"You have other responsibilities woman, er, Miko-sama! My most fearsome and prodigious Lord has magnanimously decided to allow you to remain within the impenetrable walls of the Western Palace - but you must earn your keep, lowly human! Er, Miko-sama. Your presence is required in the infirmary this morning."

Kagome wanted to roll her eyes at the toad youkai's pomposity and incessant fawning. Sesshomaru wasn't even close enough to hear him, and the servant still fell all over himself to flatter the daiyoukai. She smiled with wry humor instead. "What requires my presence, Jaken? I thought everyone had been returned to good health. Has there been an injury?"

"You have brought these waifs to beg on my Lord's generosity. Foundlings-"

"Jaken," Kagome held onto her smile, but she could feel her temper sparking, "be very careful what

you say next, or I'll throwing something much bigger than a pebble."

The toad gulped, his eyes bulged comically, and the female servants grinned. "The hatchling, Paho, is in the infirmary. Jun-san requested your presence."

"Is he hurt?"

"I do not know, hum- er, Miko-sama. Jun-san sent the message to me through another vassal of our Lord."

"I'll come down right away." Kagome continued, trying not to let her worry get out of hand. "Thank you, Jaken. That will be all." The servants giggled and Jaken squawked, but he hurried them down the hall, leaving Kagome and the children in peace.

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"The treacherous bastard!"

Sesshomaru agreed with Hisao's sentiment. Informants had brought news of a bounty Ryukostokken had placed on Rin's body and it still sent his instincts howling, despite his knowledge that she was safe with him in the castle. Unfortunately the matter was not one of he and his enemy battling to determine who would live. There were other lives, thousands, which would be drawn into a war between two Cardinal Lords.

"The North has never claimed friendship, or even neutrality, with the West." Kento responded reasonably. "I do not think they are treacherous, so much as ambitious. And while it has been a while since I looked over the lineages of the daiyoukai families, I believe Ryukotsusei was properly mated to the mother of his whelp."

Hisao retorted, "*Ambitious coward*, then! He slinks through the dark and murders females and pups. He uses assassins instead of challenging his enemies in the open, with honor."

"We knew it was most likely Ryukostokken behind the attacks, Hisao-san. Confirmation gives us the upper hand. He does not know that we are certain of his involvement. As long as he is trying to keep himself hidden, he will have to keep the size of his raiding parties small. We can use this opportunity to secure the East with Inuyasha and Kouga-san while his movements are hindered by shadows."

"We do have the advantage, and we should press it. Attack now with the army and we can wipe out the dragons and be done with this!"

"Wipe them out? This is a war, Hisao-san, not an extermination."

"It should be..." Sesshomaru had been listening to Kento and Hisao debate the merits of various

responses to the dragon assaults for several hours. Each inu had proposed the option he favored.

Kento wished to play along with the concealment Ryukostokken had wrapped around his actions. The daiyoukai's assistant recommended sending spies to the North and an envoy to the South. He even volunteered himself to speak with Hirimoto, the Southern Lord, to make certain he was aware of the situation and gain his support. Kento wanted to gather allies and information and wait for the dragon to make an overt move.

Hisao, ever the military captain, preferred a direct attack with the full force of the West behind it.

Sesshomaru had always preferred the long strategy. His temperament gave him the advantage over his enemies; they always made a final, fatal mistake in their impatience. However, he found himself considering immediate action. There was a part of him that wished to end the threat against his lands as quickly as possible. It had been over a century since he had last waged war, and several years since the evil of Naraku had been defeated. Perhaps age had reduced his interest in stalking his prey from afar. More likely, he admitted to himself as his advisors continued their debate, he had more to lose. A strategy that lasted years, even decades, and resulted in minor losses on both sides was less acceptable when those losses could be personal.

There was also the constant, insistent reminder that not everyone close to him could wait years or decades. He would not let the passage of time take his miko from him, but to ensure success he needed to be able to devote attention to the matter. A war did divide his focus somewhat. It was a delicate balance, and Sesshomaru did not like being in the unfamiliar position of having his desires conflict with his logic. He would simply have to devise a strategy that allowed for both.

He opened the youkai barrier, erected to ensure secrecy, around his study and searched her out. She was with the pups. Sesshomaru touched briefly on each of them. Her cheerfulness had an undercurrent of worry. The female seemed to worry about everyone; in time she would come to recognize that he would not allow harm to come to her or those she cared for. At least her reiki seemed to be recovering. She had enough power to burn Kouga, and he felt confident that she would not injure herself again - at least not before one of the guards or his own youki alerted him to the danger. Still, he kept her close by, holding his meetings in his private study so that she could remain near him.

Rin and Shippo were happy and excited. Nankae was content as well and the last traces of his grief were nearly gone. The littlest one was...with Kagome. There was no other way to describe the perfect combination of security and warmth that filled Emi. He recognized it, as similar emotions mingled with desire, satisfaction, and possessiveness in him whenever he was with the miko. Or when he saw her. Or scented her. Thought of her.

He sealed his barrier again. "This One will send a messenger to the South. Kento, you will remain and coordinate information. Hisao, call up any who owe service. The North will fall before the winter is over." Sesshomaru pulled a fresh scroll towards him and selected a brush. "This One will consider your thoughts on the identity of a traitor among us."

“See Emi? Those are the gardens. In the spring, they will be full of flowers. Can you say ‘flowers’, Emi?” The pup didn’t answer, but smiled up at Kagome from inside her heavy wrap. Fat flakes of snow dusted her dark bangs and eyelashes. The miko sighed, but her determination to get the adorable girl to speak didn’t flag. “Do you see Eiichi-san and Eiji-san?” The pup glanced over Kagome’s shoulder, then swiveled comically to the front, checking the location of both guards. “Do you think they would like the flowers? When the spring comes, should we make necklaces of pretty blossoms for them to wear?”

The rock demons endured her teasing stoically and the toddler giggled and smiled, but still refused to speak. Kagome kept up her one-sided conversation as she followed Eiichi through the courtyard to the infirmary. As they neared the building, she gave Emi a little squeeze. She hoped Paho was okay; he had lost so much recently, he deserved to find peace with a new family. Kagome whispered a little prayer that the youkai who had cared for him would love him, and he them. Eiichi grabbed the door, but Jun caught it from the inside before it could open more than a few feet.

“Do not let out all of the warm air, Eiichi-san. I have a patient. I’ll be putting up a barrier, if you don’t mind. The young one wishes to say some things to Kagome-sama in private.” At Eiji’s reluctant nod, Jun turned to Kagome, and she let out a breath in relief that he did not appear sad or worried. His eyes were tight at the corners, but if he had sick or injured that needed care, a little concern was not out of place. “I have given Paho a clean bill of health, but he wanted to speak with you before he goes back down to the village.”

“Oh, yes,” Kagome smiled and ducked her head in a small bow. “Thank you, Jun-san.” She turned to the guards, “You’ll wait here?”

Jun stiffened slightly, and Kagome wondered if perhaps he did not care for the rock brothers. They shook their heads in the negative, and Eiji made her promise not to take too long so that they could return to the castle before Shippo and Nankae got into any mischief. Kagome laughed and agreed before stepping inside. Jun slid the door closed. She felt a twinge of uncertainty, and then a barrier snapped into place around the room.

“If you resist, the hatchling dies,” a nasally voice said from the shadows. Kagome turned to her left slowly, pressing Emi against her side and freeing up one hand to defend them both, if necessary. The pup whimpered.

“Do not hurt the young one, Gakuto-san.” Jun stood stiffly, his hands fisted at his sides. *No wonder his eyes looked pinched*, Kagome thought. *Being held hostage would worry anyone*. Gakuto, a thin, brown-haired male, had his back to the balcony wall. Paho was clutched to his chest, his neck nearly concealed by a large, clawed hand.

“Shhh, it’s okay Paho,” Kagome soothed. Her eyes flicked to Jun and then Gakuto. He looked familiar, as if she had seen him somewhere before. “What do you want?”

"I want your kind to suffer. The *holy* human," he sneered. "You cast youkai into ash with a touch. No more! The Western Lord has already brought enough shame upon youkai by bringing that human whelp into his pack. It would have died in only a few decades, but you, you will bring more than shame - you bring the stench of purification and death to youkai! A human whore who would bear weak half-breed bastards like the Inu no Taisho! You and your kind mean to weaken the greatest race to walk the earth! We will raise our hands against the humans, and no one will stand in our way. Not the pathetic isha," he spat at Jun's feet, "not a miko whore. Not even the mighty Sesshomaru will stand between the most powerful youkai and the deaths of every last human! Your weakness will not infect Japan any longer."

Kagome realized where she had seen him before. He had been one of the demons gathered outside Sesshomaru's study when the daiyoukai fell ill.

"You can't do this, Gakuto," Jun tried to reason with him. "The Saidai Mao will hunt you down and rip your heart from your chest if you hurt any under his protection."

"Saidai Mao." The youkai said it as a curse, his claws digging into Paho's neck. The action drew blood and a pained gasp from the boy. Kagome felt her heart leap in sympathy. "Not for long. He does not deserve the title. A youkai who can lead, who sees that we are meant to rule this land - free of the stinking rot of humans, will take his place. The dogs will follow a new master, as they are meant to do."

"Inuyoukai will not obey any but an alpha, Gakuto. Only the Inu no Tashio and Sesshomaru have brought us all into one pack." Kagome could sense the angry aura rolling off of Jun. "You are a fool if you think to bring the West to heel."

"A new age is coming, Jun. An age where youkai rule the earth as we were meant to and the only humans left alive will serve us and worship us as gods. You inu can fall into line, or you can be crushed alongside your little pets," Gakuto snarled, and Kagome interceded before their argument could result in further injuries.

"What does that have to do with Paho?"

"Nothing, you stupid woman. He is merely the bait. You will come with me, and my new Lord will use you as he sees fit to bring the end to the mockery of youkai that the West has become. You will taint no one else with your vile spells."

Kagome took a deep breath. "If I go with you, you will let him go? You will not hurt anyone else? Not Paho, Jun or Emi?" Kagome felt like her stomach was going to jump out of her mouth. Fear, sour and cold, pooled in her chest. Paho was so close to danger...and little Emi...

Gakuto cursed her stupidity, but he nodded. She leaned into Jun, passing over the little toddler, whose trembling escalated into whines. "Shhh, it's okay, baby. Jun-san will take good care of you until

Sesshomaru comes. Shhh.” She kissed the little girl on the head and avoided the grasping hands that reached for her.

Kagome wanted to stay. She desperately wanted to grab Emi and run out the door, shouting for Sesshomaru. She wanted to let the rock brothers deal with Gakuto and rescue Paho. But she couldn't. No one else would come in time. She wanted to blast Gakuto with purification, never mind how badly it would hurt, but she hadn't spent much time practicing with her offensive power since Naraku had been defeated. She wasn't sure she could control herself enough to not hurt Paho. Even if she could, she didn't have much reiki to work with – not after overusing it so recently. The demon had a boy by the throat, and he would kill him without blinking. She knew he must have been stronger or smarter than he looked as well, since Jun had been tricked or overpowered into letting him into the infirmary and near Paho. No one else could reach them before Paho could be killed, not with the barrier. Gakuto might also be able to get to Kagome, Jun, or even little Emi before the guards realized something was wrong. She had the opportunity to save them, though. Paho and the others would be safe, Jun would look after them and raise the alarm. All she had to do was go quietly.

“Don't do anything to anger him, Kagome-sama,” Jun whispered. He tucked the little girl close to his chest and stepped back, ignoring her whimpers and frowning at the miko. “Obey their directions.”

Kagome nodded shakily and stepped towards Gakuto, suddenly, inappropriately feeling lucky for choosing pants and a jacket that morning. As soon as she was within arm's length, the youkai grabbed her wrist and shoved the boy away. Paho hit his head hard on the floor. Gakuto bound her hands quickly and gagged her. She stood still, trying to ignore her fear and concentrate on the relief she felt in seeing Jun bandage Paho's wounds.

“Wait for a count of one hundred before you raise the alarm, or I will slit her throat,” Gakuto ordered Jun, and then he opened the outer shoji, stepped onto the stone aqueduct, and leapt out of sight. Kagome closed her eyes against the sting of snow as they raced through the storm.

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Jun checked the bird youkai's pulse. The hatchling would wake up with a headache, but he would be fine. The pup was still whimpering, and had crawled away from the spot where he had left her on the floor. Jun doubted that he would be able to pick her up without ruining his hearing with piercing shrieks. “You were correct, he had no problem going with her.” He glanced towards the shadow at the far end of the infirmary.

“Gakuto is a simple one. It was not difficult to know what he would do.”

“You'll meet up with him near the border?” Jun finished wrapping a bandage around the boy's neck and stood slowly. He had respect for the spy of the Dragon Lord, both his tactical mind and his fighting skills.

“Somewhat sooner.” Arashi glanced to the pup. She was pressed back against the wall, trying to appear as small as possible. Jun followed his gaze and made an irritated face. “How will you explain her fear of you? She could no doubt scent your duplicity.”

“She is a pup,” Jun shrugged. “I will think of something. Once I bring down the barrier I will have plenty of youki to mask my scent. She doesn’t speak, and no one else will realize.”

“Good.” Arashi stepped up to the aqueduct and prepared to follow Gakuto and the miko into the increasingly thick snow. “Jun-san,” he called over his shoulder, “Your part at the Western Palace is not finished. Be certain that you are able to perform your next task. Or I will not be pleased.”

The hanyou stepped out onto the stone and began his race out of the castle. He did not need the superior sense of smell inherited by inuyoukai to know that the healer struggled to repress his anger. Jun was not as foolish or near-sighted as Gakuto, but he would not be valuable much longer. Arashi had pushed both sides into a new phase in the game, and some pieces would have to be sacrificed.

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Sesshomaru was on edge. His instincts were urging him to inspect his territory, but he could not leave until the discussion was complete. Only *his* youki could make a barrier strong enough to prevent any form of espionage, and the search for a spy inside the Western castle demanded secrecy. Still, he was eager for Kento and Hisao to agree the list was complete so that he could check on his pack and patrol the castle, if not all his lands. The reports he had received, of threats to Rin that made his blood boil, had him torn between seeking out his enemies or gathering his pack and protecting them.

A frantic knocking cut off the conversation and Sesshomaru quickly withdrew his barrier. Before the guard could enter the room, the daiyoukai was standing at attention. Sesshomaru could not find the miko. The young ones, minus Emi, were all still in the gathering room with no hints of distress. His youki flared out, seeking the two females. He was aware of the stiffening of his servants and soldiers as his energy whipped past them, but he ignored it. Within seconds he had found the pup in the infirmary, but the miko was not with her. That was not right.

The guard was bowing and speaking, but Sesshomaru listened with only one ear as he moved to the outer wall in a blur of movement. He slid aside a screen and stepped onto a balcony, summoning his cloud and bypassing the corridors and stairs that would only slow his passage. The guard’s words echoed in his head, “Miko-sama has been taken.”

Sesshomaru had to force his cold mask into place. He could not afford to lose control. If he did, if he allowed the emotions that statement stirred to be expressed, he would not rest until he had destroyed everything that stood between the miko and himself - even his own people. Rage filled him. The enemy had come into his domain, his very home. He would devour the one who had entered the Western Lands and his castle to undermine his authority. A snarl rose in his chest. He was Alpha, his dominance over what was his was absolute, and any who took from him would pay with their lives. Those who had not done their duties to protect the castle, the miko, their punishment would be swift as well. He

had given her his word, made her one of his pack, and he could not, would not, allow his honor to be impinged by breaking a vow of protection.

Taken. He would retrieve her. The miko had been kidnapped many times while she travelled with Inuyasha. Even once while the daiyoukai was with their group. She knew to leave a scent trail or markings to make herself easier to find. And she had her reiki as well. Sesshomaru felt something icy wrap around his spine. If he had known the emotion before, he might have called it panic. Or terror. Her energy had been badly damaged, and although she had used it against Kouga, it had been a small demonstration. He had no real idea of how well she would be able to protect herself, if necessary. He dispersed his cloud and opened the infirmary door with more force than required, snapping the wooden frame. Sesshomaru would simply locate and retrieve her before she needed her reiki.

Paho was unconscious and bandaged. Jun knelt over the hatchling, wearing an expression of worry and shame. Eiichi stood near the pup, whose wailing could be heard throughout the courtyard. His face was stony with anger, and he stared at the healer. Eiji was not in sight, nor was the miko, although her scent was faintly present.

“Report,” Sesshomaru said tightly. His fists clenched inside his sleeves to keep from drawing his sword and demanding answers.

“Eiji and I escorted Kagome-sama here to see the orphan bird. She took the pup inside with her and we stood guard. Jun’s barrier came up-”

Sesshomaru’s eyes narrowed. “Jun.” He didn’t have to make the name a question, everyone in the room understood he was demanding answers.

“The kidnapper threatened to kill Paho if I did not,” Jun answered.

Sesshomaru lost control for only a moment, but it was long enough to grab Jun around the neck. His claws sank into the smooth, tanned skin of the healer’s throat and blood welled and ran in dark rivulets down his skin to stain the white of his kimono. Such a barrier had been responsible for keeping the guards from protecting the miko as they should have. Whatever the situation, Jun had not chosen wisely. The miko was gone. What was *his* had been taken, and Jun was responsible. Sesshomaru’s hand closed tighter, his fingers nearly touching inside the hot meat of his vassal’s neck. Jun would pay for that mistake, but Sesshomaru needed more information before he could impress upon the healer how wrong he had been. He took a deep breath, blowing out through his nose and barely managing to contain the instinct, the raging beast that wanted to destroy the weak male that had failed to protect the miko. He withdrew his claws and Jun sank to the floor, gurgling and trying to stem the flow of blood while his youki worked to heal the wounds.

At the Lord’s nod, Eiichi continued, “When the barrier went down a few minutes later, the pup was crying. Jun called for help. When we entered, the boy was hurt and Kagome-sama missing. Eiji went after her the way that Jun said her kidnapper took her.”

Sesshomaru could feel the dokkasou dripping from his claws, unbidden. The guards had failed him, and they would earn back their honor with actions and blood, or be removed from his pack by his fangs. The same punishment would be suffered by any who had failed in their duties and allowed his enemy entrance. His arm raised and flashed out, quicker than any eye could follow, and Eiichi flew across the room. Dokkasou left sizzling holes in the guard's chest armor and the smell of burnt flesh was strong in the room. Sesshomaru barely restrained the urge to cull them both where they stood. He had more pressing concerns and the incompetence of Jun and the rock brothers would have to wait. Sesshomaru found that he had to clench his jaw in order to speak, rather than snarl, at his subordinates, "She should not have left her rooms. You and your brother will take responsibility once she is returned." Eiichi nodded, anger, regret and anxiety overpowering his scent.

Sesshomaru turned to Jun. He did not have to speak, Jun bowed low before him, emanating shame. The wounds in his neck were raw and oozing, the blood still wet on his skin, and his voice came out weak and grating. "The kidnapper came in while I was examining Paho and took him hostage. He threatened to kill the hatchling if I did not bring Kagome-sama to the infirmary and form a barrier once she arrived. Once she got here, threats to Paho's life convinced her to leave the pup behind and go. My Lord," Jun paused and cast his eyes down, "it was Gakuto."

My administrator. Sesshomaru's anger boiled up again. He had been looking for a traitor. Someone was passing information about the size and defenses of villages in the West to his enemies. Gakuto, with his position in the outer chambers of the reception room, announced all guests and even handled some correspondence when Kento was busy. He was in a good position to know valuable information. And his hatred of humans was well-known. If the duplicitous youkai harmed the miko, his death would *not* be quick.

Hisao and Kento arrived, slightly behind their Lord as they did not possess the ability to fly to the infirmary. Jun verbally repeated his story to Kento, rather than using the telepathic communication that their inu line was capable of. Kento remarked on it, but Jun stated that he did not wish to share the shame and fear he had felt when the miko was taken. Hisao questioned Eiichi, the captain's tone betraying his disappointment and anger at his own soldiers' complete and monumental failure in protecting one so instrumental to the well-being of the West.

Sesshomaru stood by silently, battling with himself. He needed to go after the miko. He wanted to go after her. If he left immediately, it was unlikely the traitor could make it near the border before the daiyoukai caught him, not with Eiji tracking him. The miko would still be alive. If Ryukostokken wanted her dead, Gakuto would have tried to kill her rather than taking the risk of fleeing across the Western Lands with her.

Sesshomaru *should* wait.

That thought sent his instincts howling. His logic, the calm reasoning side of his mind that ruled the largest of the four youkai lands and earned his title as Highest of the Lords, told him that the miko would not be killed. The longer she remained with his enemy, the more likely it was that she would be tortured. But the West needed time to mount an attack without the detriment of a spy among them.

Time to strengthen defenses. Time to gather intelligence. She was strong. She was not defenseless.

Going after her would put Rin at risk. It would leave the Palace without a daiyoukai to protect it and make his pack vulnerable to the threats that had been made. It would also jeopardize his entire strategy against the North. Lives could be lost. Not just one. Hundreds. Thousands. The Western Lord could not take action thinking only of himself. If he went after her, Ryukostokken would know that his plotting had been revealed. Sesshomaru would kill any dragons that stood in his way, but it was unlikely that their Lord would face him in combat. He was too cowardly. Left alive and exposed, Ryukostokken could cause significantly more damage, increasing the casualties from the pending war exponentially.

His emotions fueled his youki; the instincts of his beast snarled for immediate action. She had been taken from him, and that would not be borne. The Dragon would seek to harm her, and if he did, Sesshomaru would crush the lowest of the youkai lords, the Saigo Mao, between his jaws and melt his castle with dokkasou. He had nearly lost control when the wolf made a claim on her. The image of her bruised, beaten at the hands of his enemy, was enough to make his eyes bleed red. She was *his*. The miko was strong, but her power was compromised.

The miko was only one. A human miko. Powerful, unique, but only one.

He was the Western Lord. The Saidai Mao, responsible for thousands of youkai, hundreds of thousands of lives. He knew his duty to his people, his title, demanded that he sacrifice one for many. And yet, he owed her - the Western Lands, all youkai, owed her a debt for healing the pox. It was a debt that might never be fully repaid. Her service to the West earned her his protection. His feelings for her urged him to claim her regardless of her utility. The two duties were at odds with each other, and he could not bring them into alignment. He would have to choose - something he did not want to do. He walked the path of conquest, and to conquer his enemies, he had to be cold. Calculating.

He closed his lids and sent mokomoko to comfort the pup. Her high-pitched cries subsided to whimpers and tears as his tails wrapped around her and lifted her close to him. "Quiet," he commanded her in a low voice. The others fell silent as well, and Sesshomaru focused on the lingering smell of magnolia blossoms and cherry wood that clung to the pup. He had acknowledged that the miko meant much to him. She was his. But with each day, each hour she spent with him, he felt himself becoming further entangled in her. He wondered if she had entered him, as his youki had done to her. His power had made a home within her, and he was not certain that he could live in the cold again.

Is this what father felt? Is this why he risked everything for Izayoi? Toga had jeopardized all that he had spent his life building – the peace of his lands, the prosperity of his people. He had saved the mother of his child, but at great expense to the West. If he had put his responsibility to his Lands, his people first, war might have been averted. But Inuyasha would have died. Sesshomaru would not have had to step into the role of Lord only to lead his forces in one of the bloodiest engagements in youkai history. He would not, he could not, follow in his father's footsteps. He had to choose another path.

The miko had to be strong. If he would mate her, and he had already made that decision, then she would rule the West at his side. He would throw aside tradition, culture, and the prejudiced arrogance

of millennia to keep her. There would be detractors. Even after her display of power, of compassion to youkai when she healed those at the castle, some would not think her fit to be at his side. She could very well be the only certain means of curing the pox, and her ability to sense and repair the damage to the fertility of youkai might be the key to ensuring their continued survival.

He had already admired and determined to secure her knowledge of the future for the West; he could not let that fall into the wrong hands. However, she was also his weakness. His desire for her, his feelings for her were dangerous - to her as well as to the security of the West. His enemies could use her against him, if they knew her value. If war came too soon, to a West unprepared, if many died because he placed his attachment and concern for her above the welfare of thousands...he could not afford for her to be perceived as weak. The West could not afford it.

And yet...he could not do nothing. He would send scouts. His most trusted and experienced trackers. The heavy snow would make it difficult, but they would find her trail and where she had been taken - and by whom. Sesshomaru knew the opportunity to save her, to bring back what was his and correct the injury that the incursion on the castle and her kidnapping had done to the security and pride of the West, would be narrow and with great risk - if it came at all. He would still be ready.

He would be truthful with himself, always, and he wanted her back and would risk almost anything for her. He wished he could risk *everything*. He wished he did not have the burden of leadership that he could claim what was his, without wait, and destroy his enemies without creating consequences to so many lives. That was not to be, but Sesshomaru had always had a long-term strategy, and he would be prepared for the moment that circumstances could be manipulated in his favor. He would consider alternative plans as well. *Perhaps there was another...*

“Jun.” He did not open his eyes, but his ears easily noted how the healer snapped to attention. “Finish with the hatchling and a guard will return him to his caretakers. Then report to Jaken for new duties. The junior healer is promoted; he will take over here. Eiichi, fetch your brother.”

“My Lord, if there is even a single bare patch of dirt or stone that Gakuto steps on, Eiji may yet find Kagome-sama’s trail and-”

“Now.” His voice allowed no room for argument. “Return to the castle and guard the pups. If you and your brother fail in this assignment, it will be your last.”

“Hisao, Kento.” He opened his eyes, certain that he had cleared the red from them and could maintain an emotionless facade. “This One is not finished with your counsel.”

“Surely, my Lord, we will not wait -”

“Speak out of turn again, Captain, and This One will remove your undisciplined tongue.” *A traitor among us can take every advantage of careless words. There is no guarantee that Gakuto acted alone.* He turned to leave, the pup held close against his shoulder by mokomoko. “The miko was told to remain in the castle.” He shuddered, almost imperceptibly. His anger, and a sadness that he refused to

examine out of concern that it would overwhelm him, tried to drag his next words back. With all of the self-discipline that Sesshomaru had honed over eight centuries, he forced out what had to be said, “There are consequences for every action.”

He stepped over the remains of the door and out into the snow. Heavy, wet flakes stuck to his fur and hair. The deep drifts dampened the ankles of his pants. The pup squirmed and wriggled until she could look over his shoulder, and suddenly threw her weight against him, arms outstretched.

“Gome!” Her little cry was high and sharp in Sesshomaru’s sensitive ears. The twisting of his heart hurt far worse. *Kagome*.

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It was a good day for the North. Ryukostokken left the cell deep underneath his castle with a smile. It had been thoughtful of Captain Natsou to bring a few Western captives back for his Lord’s use. The daiyoukai had already finished with the first female; his servants disposed of the corpse before he had started breakfast. His experience with her child had been just as pleasing. Humans were filthy, uncivilized creatures, but he had nearly forgotten how tender their meat could be. After such a meal, he turned his attention to the male. Unfortunately, Ryukostokken had also forgotten how much weaker humans were than youkai. The torture session had been disappointingly short. Still, the taste of fear and pain in the man’s hot blood was enjoyable, and he had the second female waiting for his pleasure.

He would request at least one captive from each village going forward, he determined. It was an amusing pastime, a way to whet his appetite for vengeance before the time came to move his army forward and attack the pup.

Ryukostokken detoured to walk past the training grounds where his men held weapons practice, training the young fodder that would make up the front lines of his army. The soldiers were ready. The path of attack had been cleared for their approach. Sesshomaru’s ranks were thinned by disease, both at the castle and among those stationed across the Western Lands, and his nearest ally had been killed. Soon, Arashi would return with the miko, and then the dragon would take even more from the dog. First his people. Then his whore. Then his life.

It was a good day.

Chapter 19: The Burden of Leadership

Kagome struggled to take a deep breath. Gakuto carried her over his shoulder, and with every step she was jarred against him, driving the air out of her lungs. She knew she would be bruised the next day, assuming she didn't already have a cracked rib or two. The thick layer of snow had hardened underneath, and was coated with a few inches of powder that muffled his footfalls. She had spent the first hour of the journey worrying about Emi, Paho, and Jun. She hoped Sesshomaru wasn't angry with the rock brothers; they were already on some sort of probation after she had shorted out her reiki. Kagome didn't want them in trouble because of her again.

The next hour, reality set in. She had been kidnapped. It wasn't a friendly kidnapping like Kouga, or even a simple matter of using her as bait to get to Inuyasha. This was a war.

Kagome knew what war looked like. She had read more military history since she had first fallen down the well than most graduate students of the subject. The sudden and strange disease, the raids on Western villages, and the murder of the Eastern Lord were preludes to a war. If the opening act was any indication, it would be a bloody, desperate grasp for power that would devastate youkai, if not all of Japan. And now she played a part in it. Her stomach churned and bile rose in her throat. Even if she could have, she probably wouldn't have stopped herself from throwing up all over Gakuto's back.

In seconds, she found herself flying through the air. She hit a snowbank, luckily, and skidded to a stop against a tree. Her head snapped against the trunk, and for a moment she saw stars.

"Stupid, filthy human!" Gakuto shucked off his kimono and scrubbed it against the snow. Kagome didn't respond. He didn't seem to be interested in what she had to say, and the dizziness was not helping to settle her stomach. The youkai snarled, apparently upset that vomit wasn't easy to get out, and stomped towards her. A puff of snow exploded in her face when he stopped. "You'll pay for this insult, whore," he spat and the back of his hand flashed across her vision and withdrew before she even felt the pain of the blow. Her cheek throbbed, but she bit her tongue to keep from crying out - or losing her temper. Kagome scooped up snow with her bound hands and held it to her face. Something hot trickled out of her hair and under her collar, quickly cooling into an uncomfortable wetness. She leaned back against the tree gently and winced when it sent a stab of pain through her scalp. A whirlwind kicked up flakes and stung her eyes, causing Gakuto to curse. When the area cleared, another youkai stood with them.

"Gakuto," his voice was flat, "that doesn't belong to you." The administrator snarled and stalked away, cursing her species and females in general. Kagome focused on the new demon's face, sensing that, despite the injury Gakuto had inflicted, the shorter, heavily muscled youkai was far more dangerous. His eyes were black; the iris disappeared into the pupil. His skin had a greyish hue that darkened across the pebbled surface at his brow and down his nose. He stepped forward and examined her cheek.

"Where are you taking me?" Her voice wavered a little bit and Kagome shivered, from cold or fear she couldn't tell.

“North,” he answered shortly. He reached out to lift her gag from where it had fallen around her neck, and his hand brushed against her skin.

Kagome wasn't sure what made her say it, but she couldn't stop the words from tumbling from her lips, “Please.” He stopped, his eyes meeting hers. “Please don't. Don't do this.”

His black eyes considered her, and she was unable to read any emotion in them. Kagome could not breathe. It was her worst nightmare, repeated over again. She had thought with the death of Naraku that she wouldn't have to live through such a situation again. Instead, she was being used, used against the people she cared about. Their enemies would dangle her like a prize and draw her friends, her family, into danger. The snow soaking into her pants, the frost forming on her breath, the sting of her cheek and the raw feeling in her throat were nothing in comparison to the crushing weight of that moment.

“They won't come,” she said desperately. “Sesshomaru cares nothing for humans, he won't come after me. And Inuyasha doesn't even know I have been taken, I haven't seen him in weeks,” she lied, praying that this demon would not be able to smell her deception. Something flickered across his face, as though he had heard something of interest.

“You may call me Arashi,” he said. He slipped the gag back into her mouth and tightened it to secure it from falling again. Gakuto had put his stained kimono back on and was complaining that they should be off. Kagome kept her eyes on Arashi, waiting for him to tell her that her words meant nothing to him. Instead he ordered Gakuto to go on, and picked up the miko behind her knees and shoulders. He leaned in close to her ear and whispered, “Do not struggle.”

They travelled for hours, listening to Gakuto complain about the weather, the lack of respect he received in the West, and his general disgust concerning Kagome. They stopped only once - to drink at a stream and allow Kagome to relieve herself.

She hardened her features into a cold mask, trying to replicate the frightening apathy of Sesshomaru. The moment her gag was removed she spoke carefully, having considered exactly what she wanted to say during the long hours they travelled, “If you try to hurt my friends, if you want to use me to hurt them, I *will* kill you.” She did her best not to let her fear or anger show.

Arashi considered her, and then replaced her gag without waiting for her to drink. They ran on. Gakuto was breathing heavily, but Arashi did not seem to notice her weight. The sun rose high, and then sank, casting absolute darkness over the land. The snow had not let up for days, and as they continued north it seemed to fall even thicker. The wind blew harder and the snow piled higher, forcing the two demons to bound rather than run to avoid sinking into the drifts.

Kagome worried, and boiled with anger, and worried again. She wanted to reach for her reiki. She wanted to purify the two demons who had taken her and run back to the Western Palace. She was afraid. Afraid that she would only injure herself further if she tried to use so much of her power.

Afraid that she would fail to summon it, but provoke further punishment from her kidnappers. Afraid that if they believed she would and could use miko powers on them, they would devise a way to keep her from her holy energy, ending any future attempts to escape.

In the end, she did nothing. She felt bitter over the decision. Kagome was always the damsel in distress, always the one taken and held captive or used as bait. She always did nothing, waiting to be rescued; waiting for help to come. It was likely Sesshomaru would save her this time, and it stung that she would have to be saved at all. He would not be pleased by an incursion into his home, and he had said she was under his protection. If she was injured or killed, it would be a stain on his honor. Whatever else Sesshomaru was, Kagome knew he was honorable. It might take him a while; after all, he had the disease, raids, and chaos in the East to deal with, but he would come.

She stiffened her resolve. Kagome could wait, but she wouldn't be idle. She would look for the opportunity to make her own escape. She was not the clumsy schoolgirl she had been four years ago. Well, she was still clumsy, but she had learned a lot about herself, her power, and violence. At the very least, when Sesshomaru came for her, she would be able to say she had put up a fight. They reached the northernmost point of the main island, and stepped into a waiting boat. Arashi left her on the boards while he rowed, powerful strokes that ate up the waves and the hours of night.

"There," Arashi's voice was low and toneless. She followed his gaze through the darkness, but saw nothing. As they continued to move forward, tiny pinpricks of light appeared in the falling snow. Then a wall emerged, soaring out of nothingness to rise like a cliff face before them. The stone was black and smooth like volcanic glass. Guards stood at the base of a short floating dock, braziers burning beside them. Between them was a massive gate.

Arashi picked her up again and climbed out of the boat. "I have returned," he stated.

Both youkai bowed low, lower than Kagome thought they needed to, and pulled on the wooden handles of the doors to open the way. Arashi strode forward silently. Gakuto less so. Twists and turns in narrow passageways, the snow still falling on top of them, led them to another gate. And then another. At each barrier, the guards bowed to Arashi and let them through, until finally they approached the castle itself.

Kagome suppressed a shudder. The walls were not whitewashed, but made entirely of the same black stone. Reptilian eyes watched her from positions of defense and followed their progress. Kagome could feel her reiki surging to life, fighting for release, and it *hurt*. Her base impulse was to let her power loose and *run*, as fast and far as she could. Logic told her it would most likely get her killed. She battled with herself, doing everything she could to hold back her own survival instincts. The door opened slightly, without any bows, and Arashi put her down, securing her by the cloth that bound her hands and leading her behind him.

Gakuto's tirade finally fell silent as they stepped into a large stone chamber. A raised wooden floor muffled their footfalls until they were halfway across the large space, then Arashi fell to his knees, pulling Kagome down with him. She glanced wildly around, looking for whomever they were waiting for.

“Remain silent.” Arashi’s voice was barely even a sound, but Kagome did not have time to wonder if it was a threat or a warning.

A screen at the far end of the room opened and a daiyoukai of incredible power stepped out onto the dais. His youki slammed into the space and Kagome’s eyes widened. She had rarely felt anything even approaching his energy before. Naraku. Inuyasha’s full-youkai state. Sesshomaru.

The daiyoukai’s black eyes narrowed and a malicious grin broke across his face. “You have relieved some of the inept shame that follows your name, half-breed.” Kagome’s eyes widened slightly before she could control her reaction. From the corner of her eye she watched Arashi nod. *Hanyou, like Inuyasha*. “Finally you succeed at the task This One has given you.”

He prowled across the dais, not moving closer, but Kagome could feel the hot, irritating tentacles of youki prodding at her in the same way his gaze inspected her visually. She clamped down on every emotion, picturing only the cool mask of Sesshomaru’s features at his most detached and striving to emulate it. She must have been successful, because the daiyoukai lifted his lip with distaste and pushed harder with his energy, trying to unsettle her and force his way into her body. A distant part of her brain was surprised at how little reiki it took, floating just under her skin in a barrier, to keep him out.

“It was not that lowly creature, but I, Gakuto, who brought Sesshomaru’s whore to you.” Kagome wanted to look at the traitor, to see his face as he realized how stupid it had been to speak out, but she did not. She had only just met the Lord that ruled the Northern Palace, and she was certain that he would not appreciate such an outburst. “She is a gift to you, the next Saidai Mao! Break her and throw her bones at Sesshomaru’s feet as you conquer Japan and drive out the human infestation, my Lord!”

Kagome found a spot on the far wall to stare at. She would not have felt a bit of remorse for purifying Gakuto’s lying face, but she had no desire to see what would happen to him if the daiyoukai decided the administrator was not worth the air he breathed.

“You? You have brought the miko for this one’s enjoyment?” the Northern Lord asked.

“Yes, my Lord! Take your pleasure and bathe in her blood before you leave her to rot!”

There was a tiny sound from beside her. In another place and time, Kagome would have considered it a snort of disbelief. The great demon heard it as well. His black eyes turned to Arashi. “Do you disagree, half-breed?” He bared his teeth in a parody of a smile that sent a shiver down Kagome’s spine.

Gakuto foolishly threw himself in the spotlight again. “What else would he say but to try to claim honor for his own? I alone have done as you wished, Denka-ue. I have betrayed Sesshomaru. I have brought you the miko. I should remain at your right hand.” Gakuto preened and puffed out his chest with ego.

“I would not disagree with my betters, Gakuto-san.” Arashi’s voice held no inflection. “I am only confused at the encouragement you give the one to which you have sworn a life oath. I would never be so bold as to assume such ignorance of Ryukostokken-sama. I am eager to see how he will discipline your error.”

“Error?” Gakuto was confused for a moment. Kagome watched from the corner of her eye as his face went slack. She didn’t know why Arashi was doing it, but Gakuto was being played.

“Speak,” commanded Ryukostokken.

“The miko was kept by Sesshomaru for a fortnight, yet she remains pure. I do not know what would stop the dog from rutting with a human female at his disposal, much like his father, but the rumors...” His voice trailed off, and Kagome had trouble staying calm as a sudden gust of wind ruffled her hair and hot, acrid air blew in her face. The daiyoukai had moved across the room in an instant, his face mere inches from hers. His tongue flicked out, tasting the space around her. Kagome was reminded of a snake.

“Pure? As the mud under my feet is pure. As the floor of a human hovel is-” Gakuto’s scoffing was abruptly cut off by the Lord.

“She is still a miko.” Black eyes, hard but curious, bored into hers, but he did not touch her.

“No longer, my Lord! Many in the Western Palace witnessed her collapse. Her power has died, she cannot harm you.” The Lord turned slightly to look at Gakuto, who quickly tried to fix his mistake. “Not that you could be injured by even the most holy of priestesses! She didn’t purify anyone at the Western Palace, only healed them, even before she lost her power. Mikos lose their power when they are defiled, my Lord. That is common knowledge. Her purity is gone – touch her and know the truth for yourself,” he insisted.

“Do you question This One’s senses?” The Lord stood straight, glaring down at Gakuto as he sputtered. “Or do you think to fool This One into being purified? You have committed treason against one Lord. This Ryukostokken will not suffer such a fate!”

The dragon’s voice rose with every word, until he was shouting. He sucked in a great lungful of air, and then Kagome was blinded by heat and light. There was a shrieking, wailing sound that did not end abruptly, but slowly wavered out with a series of pops and cracks. Kagome was assaulted by the smell of singed flesh and burnt hair. It took several minutes for the fire to die down, leaving a pile of charred remains in a blacked circle on the floor. She blinked back the tears that threatened; the smoke stung her eyes and burned in her lungs. She tried not to think about the person, the mess, a few feet away from her. *Sesshomaru would not look. He would not care. Be cold. Be aloof. It doesn’t affect me.*

Ryukostokken stepped towards her again, drawing a claw down the side of her face. It hurt. The slow drag of burning pain hurt more than any quick punch or cut she had ever received before. Kagome did not look away from the spot on the wall, but sweat trickled down her back.

“She does not defend herself?”

“My informant,” Arashi paused, “my more intelligent informant, tells me she has no offensive skills. I believe it is common for human priestesses to have only one skill or the other, healing or fighting. The scholars that once worked for your sire wrote that once a miko has been defiled, she shall lose all of her power.”

“You dare suggest that This One lacks knowledge?” Kagome felt the rising tide of angry youki and wanted to scream at Arashi to shut up before his lies got them both killed.

“Forgive me, Denka-ue.” Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Arashi bow, touching his head to the floor. For some reason, despite the terror trying to claw its way out of her stomach, the action seemed wrong to her. Arashi wasn’t the type to bow to another, or to apologize. *You don’t know anything about him*, she chastised herself. Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling.

Then the Dragon Lord was in her face again, “This One has tested many youkai healers, witches, and miko for skills such as you are rumored to possess – and been disappointed. Those human females that could not heal youkai did not need their purity. They were made useful in other ways.” His tongue flickered out and hovered over the blood on her cheek, and she couldn’t think of anything but not screaming. Not clawing his eyes out. Not blasting him with reiki and running as fast as she could into the cold. She needed to be strong. Sesshomaru was strong. This was his enemy; Ryukostokken was her enemy now too. Sesshomaru said she was part of his pack. She wanted that, wanted to be worthy of that. To that end, she would muster up all the strength she could manage in the face of such a monster.

“You will show This One how you heal youkai, Miko no Mao.” Ryukostokken taunted her with the title, and she could do nothing about it. In that room, between the Dragon Lord and his youki that rivaled Sesshomaru’s, and Arashi who she instinctively knew was far more than he appeared, she could do nothing but wait.

She stared at the wall, pushing down the bile that threatened when his hot, sulfuric breath blew her bangs back and dried out her eyes, and remained silent.

“You will show This One your worth, human, or you will become the whore Sesshomaru did not have the virility to make you.” He lifted his hand to his mouth, and flicked out his tongue to taste her blood on his claw. “Sweet, white blossoms,” he said, closing his eyes. “This will be most satisfying, either way.”

He left without another word. Kagome didn’t dare relax her spine, for fear that she would collapse onto the floor and be unable to move. *I don’t think I can do this alone*. The whispered thought nearly broke her, and then the image of Sesshomaru came to mind. The Killing Perfection. The Western Lord. Something deep inside her warmed, and flexed. She could almost feel him beside her, stroking her with his youki to settle her emotions.

“Remain silent,” Arashi whispered. “Remain alive.”

Then he was gone and four guards, one with a limp and the other three horrifically scarred, entered. A tall, thin dragon youkai followed them and took a seat in front of her. He snapped to one guard, and the male stepped forward, holding out his arm. The dragon pushed up his sleeve, and drew a thin blade, coated with something shiny, across the skin. The flesh was laid open, and it did not immediately knit together.

“Heal it,” the dragon ordered.

Kagome took a deep breath and called her power slowly. It tingled, irritating and painful. Her fingers glowed a gentle pink, and the injured guard had to be pushed forward before he would give her his arm. It was the work of a half hour to eradicate the poison that prevented his healing and push the skin back together. When she opened her eyes, the guards were staring at her with frightened shock.

The dragon seated before her narrowed his eyes. “Again,” he said and pulled out his knife. It would happen many more times before the sun rose.

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Arashi settled into a perch on the inner wall, staring out across the cold sea. The snow had stopped, finally, and a few stars could be seen between the parting clouds. The fire in his chest warmed him, melted the frost on the stone around him. Despite his calm facade, Arashi was a dragon. Half-dragon, but his blood was strong enough that it made him superior to most full-youkai. Thankfully, although he had their physical strength, he did not share the foolish disposition of his forebearers.

The Shikon Miko. He had long heard the rumors, had collected them with interest. A strangely-dressed miko with the responsibility of the jewel of four souls. The girl travelled the lands with a band of allies to defeat Naraku. She was followed by a slayer and a monk. She adopted a kitsune orphan. Her greatest protector was an inuhanyou. He had often sought out information on the miko while he was unoccupied with other duties. He followed the progress of her quest with interest. All of the tales resounded with her ability to make allies—*friends*—with any creature, regardless of species.

It had occurred to him that the Shikon Miko and the Miko no Mao were one in the same, but he had not been certain. There were not many human priestesses that were found in the company of youkai - *willingly* in the company of youkai. That the Shikon Miko travelled with Inuyasha, the half-brother of the Miko no Mao’s Lord Sesshomaru should have made the connection obvious. The relationship between the two inu was what had obscured the truth. They hated each other, which was common knowledge. That Sesshomaru had ignored the plight of the orphaned Inuyasha out of bitterness over his father’s death was speculated on so frequently as to have become truth. Arashi had even heard a first-hand account of a battle between the two, in which the Shikon Miko was nearly killed trying to get between them and the lord had lost an arm. He had not had proof that the two women of so many tales were one in the same until she’d admitted to knowing and caring for both brothers. The Shikon Miko

had not been heard of for several years because she was no longer merely the keeper of the orb. She was the Miko no Mao.

However it had come to pass that she left the hanyou for the daiyoukai, it had happened. If she was to be believed, it had also been willingly. She claimed Inuyasha had not suffered for it, but Arashi found that difficult to believe. Sesshomaru was more lenient towards humans and hanyou in his lands, but to take his brother's woman without a battle did not seem plausible. He would have heard if there had been anything more significant than a skirmish - anything that resulted in injuries or death.

Arashi needed more information. She was the Shikon Priestess. The holy human who defeated the greatest evil Japan had yet seen and made companions of hanyou, human, and youkai. She brought enemies together as allies. It could change everything. It might change nothing.

He stood, concentrating on his substantial youki and preparing to depart the Northern Palace. Ryukostokken had given him orders. He was to scout the Southern Lands and find the best route through the East so that they could be taken next. The West was to be saved for last. Savored at the Dragon Lord's leisure.

Arashi would do what he had always done best: survive. It often required that his plans be mutable, changeable. He was not sure if that would be required, his strategy was long and patient, but he would consider all options. He needed more information. He only hoped that the miko could follow his advice and stay alive long enough for him to return. Perhaps she was only a pawn in the shogi game he had been playing so long. Perhaps she was something more.

But one thing was certain: the Shikon Miko might change the course of the world, alter fate itself, if given time.

Arashi shook his head and drew in his heat. He needed to know more, and he knew just where to listen. He jumped off of the battlements, and flew into the night.

ooo

Sesshomaru was punishing himself. He knew it, but he could not stop. He sat at the desk in his private study, bare paper before him, and envisioned every possible torture that could be visited upon the miko while in enemy territory.

Ryukostokken would break her down with words first, or at least he would try. He would not succeed, not with Sesshomaru's miko. She was strong, and had been through more dangerous and frightening situations than most seasoned youkai warriors. She would not break. Sesshomaru had not seen Ryukostokken since they were both little more than pups, but he well remembered the quick anger of the dragon. After a few days he would lose his temper. It would be a backhanded slap. Then wrenching her hair. Punches. Small cuts...that bled into larger wounds as she refused to give up. Eventually he

would go too far and a healer would be summoned. The North was known for its excellent healers and vast medical library. They would revive her, save her, heal her just enough to prevent death. When her reiki did not surface to injure her attacker or close her wounds, the dragon would grow bolder. More vile.

A snarl of rage bubbled in Sesshomaru's chest. Ryukostokken would torture her, and if the actions of the raiding Northern warriors reflected on their lord he would do more than that. If Sesshomaru did not rescue her soon, Ryukostokken would hurt her until she broke and submitted. Until the miko was-

I will not allow it! Sesshomaru plunged his claws into the table. Each deadly point pierced through the wood, clearing the way for his fingers and hand to follow until a pile of sawdust and splinters lay on the floor. The sound woke the pup. She had been sleeping, fitfully, for several hours, but if she was moved away from the daiyoukai she woke and screamed until he returned. He could not even leave her with mokomoko. His fur would satisfy her for a short time, but after less than a half hour she would begin whimpering, then crying, and then the shrieking would begin again. Sesshomaru did not have it in him to reprimand her as an inu should. How could he, when he wanted to do the same.

The miko should be at the castle, with them. He should have gone after her, should still go after her and bring her home. He closed his eyes and pulled Emi close to his chest. He had made his decision. The only decision he could make. The miko would never put her own welfare above that of others, and it was his duty to protect many more than just her. *Protect my pup. Our pups.* He was frustrated - torn between protecting his pack and protecting his future mate. He wanted to yell too.

Instead, he smoothed one hand, so recently thrust through his table, across Emi's back and rumbled in the language of his kind, *"Quiet, little one. I am here. You are safe."*

The small female responded, as she had so many times, with a dual lament in two languages, *"Sad! Gome!"* They were the only words she had spoken, and Sesshomaru feared she would never learn any others if she did not resolve the pain in her heart. Even her tiny youki cried out for the loss of the one she had taken to so quickly. It was not hard for him to understand why. His own self, every fiber of his being, howled for the miko. *Kagome.*

As soon as he had Hisao and Kento behind a youki barrier, he had ordered a tracking party to find Kagome's trail, directed by the few times Gakuto had stepped on bare earth and alerted Eiji to his location. The trackers were the three best, after himself. Two inu and an eagle youkai that could use all of the most powerful senses at their disposal to follow the miko, regardless of where she had been taken. They would know her location and report back by morning. If they found signs that she had been injured... Sesshomaru refused allow himself to dwell on that thought.

He still could not leave until Rin was secure and the leadership of the West in strong hands. The burden of his responsibilities grew heavier with each hour, and he had to bite back his urge to throw it off and follow his desire. Abducting the miko was only the first, he was sure, of many strikes against him that would lead to war. In the dark of the night, his concern for the miko's safety in the hands of his enemy was accompanied by the possibility that saving her would provide fuel to those in his lands

that would seek to denounce her. Many in the West, and among his allies in the East and South, would not find a human fit for the role of Western Lady. They might twist his departure to retrieve her into a justification for refusing her rule – labeling her as unfit to rule by his side if she was not strong enough to save herself. If the lands were in jeopardy in his absence, their arguments would be given more credibility. It might give rise to rebellion, at least among the daiyoukai, which would make the miko's position more difficult.

The miko's power was formidable. Her knowledge of the future and reiki, as a healing tool and a weapon, were advantages to the West, or to any enemy that could break her. Her capture, and his decision not to go after her personally, would jeopardize other alliances, not only with Inuyasha and Kouga, but with other youkai that owed the miko a debt.

Sesshomaru reviewed all of the information they had on the North. With Kento and Hisao, he had sent new orders to all of his own emissaries and spies: to gather whatever knowledge they could regarding movements of the dragon raiders, the North, and the conditions in the East. He had dispatched a trusted soldier to the South to deliver a warning about the North to Hirimoto and invite him to share information.

He had considered his options for an heir or proxy, and prepared a message for his mother. Kimi was well respected among youkai and possessed a vicious, devious mind that lent itself well to war strategy. He had already selected his strike force, those that would assist him in retrieving the miko. Hisao had quietly informed those that were chosen and would work with them in a hidden location outside of the castle to prepare to go North. Two falcon demons would carry those who could not fly. Three water youkai would bring them across the sea and conceal their approach with fog. The remainder of the small force were inu and wolf youkai. They would work well together to infiltrate the castle quickly and put down any guards that stood in their way. His own superior nose would not have trouble finding her once he was inside.

The strongest of the water youkai had been charged with taking the miko, should they meet resistance during the retreat, and conveying her back to the Western Palace through the rivers. Sesshomaru would lead the others in a stand to allow time for her escape. The strategy would leave him at a tactical disadvantage to Ryukostokken, but Sesshomaru was willing, even eager, to sacrifice that advantage to have his miko back. If he did not return, unlikely though he was to fall to lesser youkai and one such as the cowardly dragon, the lands would be well-led and his pack safe.

The pressing work - planning the strike on the North to rescue the miko, assessing the impact of the disease and raids, preparing the West's defenses - was all that occupied his mind from the reality of the loss of the miko. He set punishments for Jun and the rock brothers. Jun was assigned to work in the laundry under Jaken's watchful eye. The menial tasks were far below the healer's abilities and station, and were fitting punishment. More than that, they put him where he could not bring further harm to the West through his own stupidity, cowardice, or... *Perhaps it had been...* Sesshomaru set aside those thoughts for consideration later. Jaken was his most loyal retainer. The toad youkai was annoying, but he would watch the healer carefully, and make note of any suspicious actions for his Lord.

The rock brothers had received a far lighter punishment than he had originally intended. After his loss of control burning Eiichi with his dokkasou, he had given over their discipline to Hisao: whipping. He

did not trust himself not to kill one or both of the youkai if he had administered the lashes himself. They were also assigned to double shifts: guarding the young ones during the day and occupying Nankae each evening until Hisao would claim the pup. He had been considering the best place for the orphaned inuyoukai prior to the incursion on the castle. He had planned to tell the miko first, to allow her to accept the idea before the pup was removed from her care. Sesshomaru had decided that the male would become part of his captain's pack, to Nankae's joy and Hisao's confusion. Hisao needed an heir, and once the miko returned, Sesshomaru would want her to himself. *When she returns, she will be pleased, and sad.* His heart lifted as he considered the turbulent emotions of the woman. He glanced at Emi again. She would not be an obstacle to the mating, and the miko loved her as though the pup were of her own blood.

If not for the near constant wails of the female pup, he might have managed to forget, at least for a moment, the gnawing pain in his chest, the furious mania that he longed to give in to... He was daiyoukai. He was the Western Lord, Saidai Mao. His actions could not always be his own. Not when it put his daughter, his entire *people* at risk.

Once orders for punishment of those who had failed him were carried out, he had inspected soldiers and completed his own training exercises. His martial practice was enhanced by the presence of two unarmored rock demons whom were in need of additional training. They had been wounded badly enough that they would be uncomfortable for days. Combined with the flaying of their backs, Sesshomaru doubted the brothers would find sleep easily. The exercise had vented some of his pent up frustration but the dark emotions that were raging under his cold exterior did not disappear.

He had comforted the young ones as best he could. Shippo was alternately angry and heartbroken. The kit had even attempted to leave the castle to track down the miko himself. When the kitsune was found and returned, he had challenged Sesshomaru's right as the miko's Alpha. Shippo had bared his tiny teeth and demanded, in the barks and shrill howls of the kitsune language, that Sesshomaru either save the miko or stand aside so another could do so. The kit was far too young for the challenge to an alpha to be taken seriously, but Sesshomaru's own torn desires tempered his reaction. He'd forced his submission with youki, but he also allowed both the kit and Rin to hold onto his arms for a few moments while they cried.

The miko's son would not remain mired in sadness long, and Sesshomaru had made certain any future attempts which might prove self-destructive would be thwarted. The rock brothers had been set to guard the children against possible attacks and their own misguided attempts to leave. Rin was full of sadness and resolute belief that her Lord would save the miko. He did not have the words, or the courage, to tell her how wrong she might be... *I cannot let her be wrong.*

He had torn into his papers and punished himself and his two counselors with a savage pace, refusing to hear the opinions he knew they both wanted to express. He had already had all of their arguments with himself, and more.

He'd dismissed Kento and Hisao both hours ago to sit in the darkness of his study with the pup on his lap. Her cries for the miko subsided, but her whimpers remained. From within the coils of mokomoko, he withdrew a robe the woman had slept in the night before. Her scent clung stubbornly to

the thin silk, and Sesshomaru breathed deeply even as he pressed it into the pup's hands. She grasped the cloth, burying her little nose in the material and curling against his chest to fall back into a restless sleep.

New cherry wood. Magnolia blossoms fresh with dew. Satsuma oranges. A trace of cinnamon...

He *missed* her. He wanted her *back*. For the first time since his father had died, Sesshomaru hated his responsibilities. He did not want to be the Western Lord. Saidai Mao. He did not want to walk the path of conquest. Not without her. Those things were who he *was*. They had defined him. He would give them up, gladly, everything that made him Sesshomaru, if he would then be able to destroy those that kept his miko from him. The amount of time he had spent with her was insignificant and belied the depth of his feeling. *Kagome...*

A familiar youki pulsed gently in the corridor, seeking permission to enter. He did not respond, hoping the imbecile would go away. Kento, ever the foolish one testing and steering his Lord's temperament, slid back the screen and bowed low. Sesshomaru did not look up in the gloomy shadows to see his secretary's face. He did not have to. The man reeked of apology. Boldness. Irritation. And...fear. Sesshomaru did not pause in the action of gently rubbing the pup's back, but he did sharpen his senses.

"My Lord, forgive the intrusion," Kento began, then paused. He turned and looked over his shoulder. As if there was an enemy there that he feared would catch up to him at any moment. "Sesshomaru-sama, a guest has arrived. It-" he licked his lips and closed the shoji screen behind him. A youki barrier, weaker than Sesshomaru's but still effective against eavesdroppers, molded into existence. "A guest awaits you in the private reception hall."

Sesshomaru was not in the mood for intrigue. He was never in the mood for intrigue, but his internal battle had put him on edge. He was prepared to flay Kento with his whip if the inu did not get to the point and leave him in peace.

"Speak," he ordered.

"Your Honorable Mother is here."

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Kagome slumped forward, exhausted. Her reiki still thrummed inside her, painful but difficult to calm with so much youki flaring around her, but her body was ready to drop. Hunger had come and gone hours before. It would soon be time for breakfast, but the gnawing emptiness in her belly did not have any hope for food. Her throat was dry. She had been given a cup of water, between the fourth and fifth injuries she had healed, but she was not willing to drink it. Kagome was well aware that many things could be slipped into water that would kill her, or impair her. She wouldn't risk it. Her eyelids drooped after staying awake all night, and her ears had grown numb to the barks of the dragon who injured his own men and then ordered her to heal them. Over and over again. The wounds only became worse

with each passing hour.

“It appears the miko has limits. We will test them further tomorrow, when our Lord may be present to observe. You,” he snapped at the nearest soldier, Kagome recalled that she had sealed a scalp laceration for him, and regrown a finger. “Take her to the chamber of the Setting Sun. Two guards outside the room at all times. No one enters without express permission from myself or the Denka.”

Her hands were unbound, had been since the demonstration had begun, but she was in no condition to take advantage of it. Where the reception room had been dimly lit, the hallways she was prodded along were in absolute darkness. The youkai did not need lanterns to find their way, and it seemed they had no intention for providing such a courtesy to a prisoner. After a long, steep flight of stairs a door opened. Not a sliding screen, but a heavy, wooden door set with iron hinges and a real lock.

“In, Miko,” the guard muttered. He did not look at her face, or touch her. None of them did. Kagome smiled wryly. It was ironic that her acts of healing, even saving, the dragon soldiers, had resulted in a fear of her that bordered on terror. She stepped carefully into the freezing room, trying to feel her way with her sandals and prevent her usual clumsiness. The door shut behind her with a thud that reverberated in her bones and made her sink to the floor.

This was it. This was her prison. The floor was wood and smooth beneath her. Her eyes pricked with tears and she felt her way to the nearest wall. *At least no one has tortured me, yet.* Hysterical laughter threatened to erupt, and she turned her head away from the door to prevent the sound from alerting the guards. Light, faint and far-off, winked at her. Kagome closed her eyes and opened them again. There it was. And another. She crawled forward, almost crashing her face into another wall. Her hands slid up glassy stone. The occasional bolt or shackle bruised her fingers and reminded her that she was not a guest – and Ryukostokken did not treat prisoners well.

The light came from a window. A short, narrow opening, perhaps fifteen inches by twenty-four inches, was cut into the rock. No glass or covering barred the opening, explaining the bitter cold seeping into the room. She could see storm clouds, parting and drifting to reveal the occasional star. The faint light danced on something far down. Kagome squinted, waiting for another moment of illumination. Another cloud moved, and she realized what lay below: the sea.

The window was large enough that she would be able to squeeze through. *No trouble at all*, she thought hysterically. She would only have to deal with a sheer drop, of at least three hundred feet, into the wintry depths of the Tsugaru Straits. If she managed not to be killed on a rock outcropping or from the impact with the water, that is. Then she would most likely freeze to death in the water. Assuming she didn't drown first.

Kagome sank back to the floor and let out a harsh chuckle. She had told herself she would be strong. Strong enough to prove to Sesshomaru, to everyone, that she was worthy of the Lord of the West. Why was it that every time she made a vow, fate conspired to make it so hard for her to fulfill? She'd promised to repair the jewel, and had to defeat Naraku to complete that quest. She was determined to live up to the expectations she had of herself, of a woman that would seek out and win Sesshomaru's

heart, share in his life. And she was given obstacles that seemed insurmountable.

Kagome tilted her head back against the wall and absently rubbed her blood-encrusted hands against her pants. Her face was achy and itchy where the cut on her cheek had dried. Every wince or frown cracked the scabs and allowed new blood to sluggishly seep through. There was a dull throb on the back of her head where she had smacked against the tree. She couldn't give up. She *wouldn't* give up. She had just made a decision to make something new of herself, to become the type of person she had always secretly wanted to be. She was tired of being the damsel in distress. She wanted to be strong, to be seen as more than just the keeper of the jewel.

If Sesshomaru never loved her, it would hurt. She didn't even really love him yet, but it would still hurt if he rejected her. But she would live. She would still be someone she was proud of. Someone better than she had been before. Kagome would not let any obstacles keep her from achieving her goals.

"Right," she nodded to herself and glanced up at the sky again, "I can do this." *I will do this*, she promised herself.

Chapter 20: A Mother's Love

Dawn was nearing as Sesshomaru silently walked through his castle to meet his guest. The sky was not light yet, not even hinting at the sun that would rise within the hour, but he could feel the change in the air. The temperature was rising; life was moving on in the Western Lands as nocturnal animals found their lairs and those that thrived in sunlight stirred. Emi slept on, secured against him by mokomoko and clutching the miko's robe. Sesshomaru tightened his hold on her as he descended the stairs.

He had summoned Western Lady, InuKimi, but there had not been enough time for his message to reach her palace and for her to make the journey. That she had arrived without summons - set foot inside the Western Palace for the first time since the death of Inu no Tashio - was significant. Whether it would aid him or become a detriment, he could not yet tell.

He steeled himself for a confrontation. Discourse with his mother was always a battle of wits, and more than that, a battle of senses. It was intrigue, cunning, deception, and sly familial concern all at once and executed with the skill of a master of political maneuvering. Sesshomaru, ever striving for truthfulness with himself, admitted that he was not her equal in that arena.

Rather than attempt to best her on a field which she easily controlled, he had learned to reign in his emotions and reactions and refuse to compete at all. Eventually, InuKimi would grow bored with his lack of response, and drop her veil to make her machinations plain. He could not allow her to leave this time. He needed another powerful daiyoukai to rule the West in his absence. If Sesshomaru could fold her into his strategy, it would give him an advantage. *It might allow him to...* He shook himself, refusing to consider *those* eventualities before they were a possibility.

Kento opened the last door between Sesshomaru and his mother, bowed, and closed the ornate screens behind his Lord. A youki barrier slid smoothly into place, pulsing with the deadly precision of the Lady herself. The Saidai Mao stood still, just inside the room, considering his dam even as she considered him while she pretended to be concerned with nothing but the temperature of the tea before her. It did not escape his notice that she had taken her former place on the small dais, despite the fact that the cushion reserved for the Western Lady had been removed centuries ago. His mother had simply commandeered his instead.

"Are you so wrought with joy over seeing your long-absent mother that you cannot even move? Or have you simply forgotten all manner of graciousness that you were taught? Perhaps your human has been a poor influence." She did not look at him, but poured a second cup of tea and placed it near his designated spot.

"Mother," Sesshomaru greeted her flatly, "I see not even the disease that has killed so many youkai dares to inconvenience you." He made no move to sit beside her, knowing that her actions were designed to achieve some end that only she knew of - and it was unlikely he would appreciate the results. "Why have you come?"

She sipped her tea and glanced at him over the rim of her cup. He noted the slight flaring of her nostrils, and guessed she was assessing his mood, and that of the pup with him, via scent. Kimi's nose was exceptional. He had no doubt she would also note the miko's scent and attempt to conjecture how it had come to be on his fur.

"It is indeed a sad day in the West when the Lady is not welcomed at the Palace. I have made a long journey, and yet you have offered me no greetings, no warmth, no respite. Can we not share a meal, as a pack should, before you interrogate me? Surely you have some morsels in your kitchen that would be suitable. Has your little human grown plump yet? Perhaps?"

"As I have said before," Sesshomaru interrupted, "the child is not for eating."

"Hn, pity." Kimi pouted slightly, no doubt disappointed he did not rise to her teasing. "I see you have come into your second tail. Was the event as shocking as your father's? Or did you manage it when you forged Bakusaiga?"

"The defeat of Naraku," he answered shortly. He did not take her bait at the mention of his sire. Inu no Tashio's second tail had grown after he saved a human village from being razed as a casualty of youkai warfare - long before he had sired an heir. What had inspired him to end a long history of youkai either ignoring or slaughtering humans, Sesshomaru had never learned, but the result had been impressive. The Great General's strength and youki increased substantially, resulting in the physical growth of his dog form and a second tail.

His father had teased an overly serious young Sesshomaru that his human form grew taller as well. Sesshomaru had never allowed himself to believe his father completely, but when his own second tail came in, he couldn't stop himself from checking over his two-legged body. He was surprised with a wave of sadness when he found he had grown at least two inches, and was broader across the chest. Regardless, the conversation was a complete ruse. Kimi had spies and informants across the Western Lands, even in Sesshomaru's own castle - although not among his closest advisors and servants. She was well aware of his second tail, and how its growth had occurred. Probably within hours of the event itself.

"Really? And you didn't even kill the spider hanyou yourself. That must have come as quite a surprise." InuKimi sipped her tea calmly, but her eyes were sparkling.

Sesshomaru held back a frown. She was enjoying herself. If she found their exchange amusing, it would take her longer to get to the point. He had far more pressing matters to deal with than sparring with the only youkai who regularly engaged, and defeated, him in verbal battles. He also did not want to be occupied with her when his scouts returned. *They will have news of the miko*- He cut off his own thoughts, knowing that not even *he* could completely control his scent and expression where the priestess's welfare was concerned.

He was too late. Kimi's eyes narrowed with interest and her mouth parted slightly to better take in his scent. "Oh, my dear pup, you can't possibly think you will be able to get rid of me now."

Sesshomaru stalked forward, holding back the rage and shame, at his own untenable position and helpless inability to follow his instincts, by a thread. He knew he was vibrating with a repressed growl, but he determined that there was no reason for Kimi not to feel some of his anger. *Let her wonder if it is her, or something else that pushes me to the edge.*

The threat of physical violence had never entered their competition for dominance, as it did occasionally in other family packs. Sesshomaru was aware that he was Kimi's superior in physical strength and combat skill, as she also knew. His status as Alpha was not challenged. But she was his *mother*. She undermined his authority over the West, simply by *implying* authority over him by way of her longer life, extensive knowledge, political skills, and the virtue of having created him.

"I do not have patience for you this day, *Mother*. Come to your objective, but do *not* test me."

"Have you taken a mate, son, or a concubine?" Kimi changed the subject without warning and gestured to the sleeping Emi. "I am most grieved that you would sire an heir without alerting me to the news. Such a significant event should be celebrated by a pack, if not all the Western Lands."

Sesshomaru deviated from his own plotted course to defeat his mother by refusing to play her game, and growled. He refused to regret the action. "She is not of our line, which you well know. Why have you come?"

"Sesshomaru." Her tone was sharp, and her eyes lost the gleam of amusement. "I will explain myself when I know what needs explaining, and to whom, but not before. And you will not speak to me in such a way, *Saidai Mao*." That tone made him feel like a pup again; as if his mother already knew his sins, and he could only mitigate the consequences through confession. Sesshomaru clamped down on the distant instinct to tell her everything he had ever done that she would disapprove of. It had been many centuries since she had wielded that tone against him with any actual power, but it did not fail to make him recall - vividly - the few instances when he had disappointed or disobeyed his mother.

They considered each other for a few moments, and Sesshomaru weighed the potential advantages of gaining his dam's support and assistance over his distaste for explaining himself to anyone - much less answering his mother's questions and listening to her cutting opinions on his actions. He had never before considering humbling himself to ensure the wellbeing of another. There was also her position to consider. If she was not willing to stand behind his strategies, or at least stay out of the way, she could become an adversary. There were many among the West who would support her, who thought of her as the Western Lady - even ahead of their loyalties to him. She had saved Rin, but how would her tolerance of a ward, a child, translate to his new attachment to the miko? Although she had hidden it well, Kimi had been nearly crushed by the deception and rejection of Inu no Tashio for a human woman. Sesshomaru would have been surprised if that experience did not color her opinion of his choice for a mate.

He would save the West. He would defeat his enemies. He would regain his miko, and secure his claim on her. Options and complex contingencies opened before his mind's eye. With Kimi's support, much

could be gained. Much could be done. *With another daiyoukai of his line to defend the West, he could leave his lands and-*

He had to navigate the politically charged, dangerous territory around negotiations with his mother logically, carefully. He needed her support. He wanted it. He had not stopped the miko from being taken, and allowed her to remain with his enemy too long already. Shame, sadness, anger, *longing* threatened to choke him. He stared down at the smooth cheek of the pup in his mokomoko and pushed back his emotions, keeping his face impassive. If he wanted to save the miko, he had to hope, to trust, that she would survive long enough for him to get to her. He needed Kimi.

He gracefully lowered himself to the bare floor where his cushion usually sat, and turned towards his mother. His expression was cold when he looked up. Hers was slowly slipping from icy rebuke to naked interest.

He picked up his tea and took a long sip before speaking, "The pup is a consequence of attacks the North has made upon our lands. There are other orphans as well, some of whom I have brought to the castle. This pup will find some place within my pack. I will adopt a second - a kit, when I mate his mother."

It was childish and completely beneath him, but Kimi tended to bring out the worst traits in her son. Amid all of the turbulence inside the usually calm-and-ordered Sesshomaru, amused satisfaction flickered. Kimi smelled of shock. After nearly eight hundred years, he had finally done something his mother did not expect. Whether it was his determination to mate and adopt a young one, or his willingness to admit such to her, he did not know. He decided that the source of her bewilderment, however temporary, was not as important as the fact of it. It would only improve his chances of steering the conversation, and gaining her backing.

She recovered quickly, ignoring the news of the attacks and by that act confirming that she already knew of them. "The scent of the female on your mokomoko?" He nodded and she continued, thoughtfully, "Human. What is it about this one that has managed to overcome your distaste? For her species, and mating as well?" He did not miss the glint of intrigue in her eyes, quickly hidden, or the flickering tang of her worry.

If he had not become so used to the variety and intensity of emotions that he had felt since he brought the miko to the West, he would not have recognized his own reaction for what it was: relief. Kimi had not rejected the possibility outright. Despite the circumstances that had resulted the last time a member of her pack had taken interest in a human woman, she was willing to consider his reasons. If Kimi had objected, it would not have changed his determination to have the miko, but it would have presented unnecessary challenges.

He felt a distant pull on his youki, which he tried to ignore. He knew his power still rested within the miko. If it were possible, he would have sent her more, to keep her safe, to nourish her reiki until he could reach her. *She is strong*, he reminded himself.

“She is the Shikon Miko, as you already know,” he acknowledged her spy network easily. *If we are to be as a true pack once more, then there should be honesty.* Sesshomaru was not, had never been, one to act without assurance of the outcome. Nothing with his mother was ever certain, but in this instance, with what was at risk, he justified reaching out to the trait Kimi had passed down to her son - desire for superiority. Not only as an individual, but as a pack, and for the Lands. “She has great power, more than most youkai, and she can direct it to harm or heal our kind.”

“So it was not exaggeration,” Kimi murmured into her tea cup. “The Miko no Mao.” Her gaze sharpened and a small, feral smile played at the corners of her mouth. It was the same smile she had worn when she had uncovered a plot by Kuren’s father to assassinate Toga. She’d smiled at the Lord of the East across a banquet table, and then used his verbal missteps to trap him into a confession, a surrender, and a tribute to the West. That smile did not bode well for her enemies. “You have taken her from Inuyasha?”

“She was not his to keep,” Sesshomaru answered stiffly. He chafed at the need to let her ask what questions she would, to draw her to his side at her own pace before he could secure her assistance and leave the West. “She is mine.” He knew that Kimi’s spies would have already told her of his half-brother’s visit to the castle. “The hanyou has become mine as well.”

“You claim him as part of your pack?” Her voice was perfectly even and without inflection. It betrayed no feelings on the matter, but Sesshomaru knew that was a sign of a strong reaction. If Kimi were truly indifferent, she would have scoffed, or insulted the half-demon, or acted the part of the welcoming step-mother. That she could not utilize her considerable skill for misrepresentation and sophism indicated how very deeply affected she was by the knowledge that her mate’s by-blow had not only been in the heart of the West, he was accepted there by the Alpha. Whether Kimi was hurt by Sesshomaru’s apparent reconciliation with the past, or upset by old memories, he could not know, but he would tread carefully. He had no desire to bring his dam pain; she had suffered more than enough when the Great General left her for his mistress.

He had acknowledged his father’s bastard when he’d allowed Inuyasha into the Western Palace. The daiyoukai had made Inuyasha pack when he had trusted his impulsive half-brother enough to allow him to sleep in proximity to his daughter and intended mate, to spar with his men, to confide sensitive information about the Lands and his enemies. He’d sent Inuyasha on the most difficult and potentially rewarding assignment he could give. Sesshomaru expected nothing less than success in the East.

Only his two closest advisors knew all that had transpired between the brothers, and that their long feud was on its way towards a permanent mend; Sesshomaru would not share that decision with the Lady until it was necessary. Her mate had betrayed her to sire Inuyasha. The hanyou was not at fault, but it had taken Sesshomaru centuries to come to that conclusion. He would not blame his mother if she could not let go of the past. And if the miko was not saved, Inuyasha would no longer be his ally. He would do everything in his power to destroy Sesshomaru, and the daiyoukai might let him.

“Yes. He adds to the West.”

“Hn.”

They sat in silence. Sesshomaru found it difficult to remain patient while Kimi considered all that she knew from her informants and what he had told her - while she sorted through reason and emotion, and decided which would rule her decisions. The room brightened as dawn broke, and then was cast into gloom again as the sun disappeared behind the ever-present snow clouds. Emi woke, and he settled her into a quiet, if not calm, seat on his lap. He did not bother to call for food. The pup had refused everything but the strange future food the miko kept in her bag. She'd finished the last of it before nightfall. If he could not bring the woman back soon, he would have to force the pup to eat.

Emi stared with wide eyes, reddened from crying, at the Lady of the West. She returned the gaze, and they considered each other for some time before Kimi reached for the pup.

“She will cry if I do not hold her,” he warned.

“It has been some time, Sesshomaru,” Kimi responded dryly, taking hold of the young one, “But I believe I remember how to care for a pup.”

She pulled the robe away from Emi, who immediately screwed up her small face. With quick, deft movements, the Lady refolded the garment, releasing another puff of scent and exposing the seams of the collar and sleeves. She pressed it against the pup, who immediately buried her face in the material. Kimi's mokomoko wrapped gently around the young one, cradling her in the voluminous fur. Sesshomaru was struck with a memory worn fuzzy by time, of being comforted in the same manner. Kimi, more so even than most females, was two sides of a coin. Viciously maternal and protective of her pack, and at the same time beguiling and wantonly lethal.

One tail pressed against Emi's back, while the other flicked against the floor in anticipation. “You will tell me everything,” Kimi ordered after another long silence. “I will not abide your recalcitrance on this, Sesshomaru,” she warned. “I know you want my help; in fact, you need it. Do not think that I will throw my power in blindly, even for you. I want to know your plan, and your contingency plans. I will know all that has happened to bring you to this point.”

His instincts were screaming at him that he was wasting time. His beast wanted to put Kimi in her place, behind her Alpha, and leave her to protect the pups while he went after the miko. His youki roiled with anxiety and anticipation. Instead he sipped his tea, and spoke in short, pointed sentences. He told her of his suspicions of the North, and the informants he had begun placing some twenty years ago on the border. He spoke of the rumors of humans and lesser youkai that strayed over into dragon territory and disappeared. One of his spies had confirmed that the dragons were primarily eating those that trespassed.

“It came to my attention that there was a single village, deep in the Northern Lands, where such humans are bred. They are used for food, and entertainment.”

“You have done nothing about it?” Her eyes widened in obviously feigned surprise, and Sesshomaru was made aware that she already knew the generalities, if not the specifics, of the intelligence he had

received - and the result.

“They should not have gone where they were not welcome.” Sesshomaru bared his teeth, savagely. “It is unfortunate that a rock slide eliminated Ryukostokken’s herd.”

“A rock slide? That is unfortunate...for Ryu. Poor boy,” Kimi responded dryly. She took another sip of tea. “How are those two elementals you took in? I still do not understand why your father and his captain allowed you and Hisao to bring rock orphans back to the castle. The captain was certain they would die without their own pack.”

“Hisao’s sire was an excellent captain, but his long-term strategy was not as indefectible as my own.” Sesshomaru allowed himself a small, brief smirk. “The brothers have proven to be of *some* use to the West.” His smirk disappeared, “With sufficient incentive, they may overcome more recent error - in a few decades.” He continued his retelling.

The years after that yielded little information about the dragons’ intentions. Then Naraku had surfaced, and Sesshomaru’s attentions were divided for a time. He had only just begun to dedicate more resources to watching the North when the disease struck. He did not spare his own ego when he spoke of how the pox had nearly killed him. Nor did he downplay the magnificence of the miko’s healing ability. His description of her efforts for Aki were carefully constructed to maximize how the miko could benefit all youkai - and become a weapon for their enemies if she was not rescued.

“Aki and Kento have mated as a result.” Sesshomaru paused, considering how much of the theory he and the miko had developed to share with Kimi. “There are too few pups born to replace those youkai that die.”

“We are dying out,” she nodded, her easy acceptance surprising Sesshomaru. A small, sad smile graced her features. “It has been happening for several centuries. I have kept a tally of births among the daiyoukai, even their bastards, and numbers have decreased significantly. My records of lesser youkai are not as well kept, but they decline as well.” His mother was unfazed by the revelation, her vast knowledge once more impressing Sesshomaru. He was curious, even a bit envious, of her information network and how quickly she had come to the conclusions that he had only recently realized. “While the humans have increased at a phenomenal rate.”

“They will overtake us.” Sesshomaru made the decision to be as open as possible, without revealing the miko’s secret. “She has seen this: a time when youkai are no more, and humans cover the earth with villages that are so large, their breadth cannot be walked in a day.”

“Is her vision proven?” Kimi’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“Yes. Many other things she has said have been confirmed to my satisfaction.” Kimi was unmoving, but Sesshomaru could see her mind working at a furious pace. “She calls it ‘extinction’. The death of an entire species.”

“You believe that the lack of pups is the cause?”

“As do you,” Sesshomaru confirmed, unwilling to allow her to pretend to be unconscious of the implications. “Other factors - the disease, this war - may accelerate it, but that is the root of the issue.”

“Your miko can bring life to those that are barren.” The Lady spoke slowly, considering each word in her statement.

“Hn.” In a moment of amusement, rare under the circumstances, he elaborated, “Although she claims it is just as often a flaw in the male that causes such problems.”

“Of course,” Kimi sniffed delicately. She waved away the topic in favor of returning to the discussion of their enemy in the North. “What have your scouts learned?”

The room was cast in the shadows of late afternoon when he reached a description of what Eiji had found as he attempted to track the miko. A few ill-placed footfalls by Gakuto had made an impression on the earth, rather than being cushioned by snow. It was enough to send his best trackers in the right direction - farther to the east than Jun had directed them, but Gakuto might have changed directions, or Jun might have been confused by the storm. The trackers were still out, pinpointing her path and location, although Sesshomaru was nearly certain he knew where she had been taken.

“Your miko has power,” Kimi said slowly. “What are her chances for escaping the North by herself?”

“Her reiki, although great, has been strained by recent events. I do not doubt that she has the capacity to purify even a daiyoukai - but not in her current state.”

“It isn’t just a daiyoukai she needs to worry about. If Ryukostokken has any idea, however ill-formed, of her value, to you and to all youkai, he will have her under considerable guard. No miko is strong enough to eliminate an entire castle of youkai.”

“She is rare, and not constrained by what should be.” Sesshomaru felt intense pride in being able to make such a statement.

“What of her training? What weapons does she favor?”

“Bow,” he answered shortly. Kimi already knew that; any who had heard of the Shikon Miko knew of her purifying arrows.

“You have not taught her the use of any other weapons?” Kimi arched a brow reproachfully, and let Sesshomaru’s hesitation speak for itself. “You have neglected something so important, my son? If you would mate her, how would she protect herself? No,” her mouth tightened in anger, “do not tell me that you have truly followed in your father’s footsteps and chosen a human woman who is incapable of surviving in the youkai world?”

"I will let no harm come to her," Sesshomaru ground out between his teeth. "I will do my duty, and ensure the downfall of my enemies and the security of my people. There has been treachery in the West, and it may not yet be rooted out. At my side, she will not need to protect herself." He wanted to close his eyes against the pain that twisted inside him, squeezing out his air and making his blood pulse painfully. He focused instead on his anger, his rage. Gakuto and his new master had dared to touch what belonged to Sesshomaru - subverted his defenses. They would pay. He met his mother's calm facade with one of his own.

"How will you do that? By leaving her defenseless in the North, among your enemies? By leaving the West undefended while you take your army, unprepared and without time for strategy, to the North? Or will you go alone, into territory you have not seen with your own eyes since you were a pup, and throw yourself on Ryukostokken's blade?" Kimi closed her eyes, her scent smelling of irritation, disappointment and...Sesshomaru sniffed in surprise. Worry. "Why have I been so blessed with a son who has learned all the wrong lessons?" she lamented.

She flicked a long, silky strand of hair over her shoulder in irritation. "Even if you do bring her back - alone or with the assistance of your army - what then?" Kimi did not wait for his reply, "You will, at best, be weakened from those acts, and the North will be poised to attack. Will you leave the miko, newly mated, to protect your pups with only her untrained reiki? Or will you wait here, guarding your den jealously, while the dragon destroys your lands on his path to you? Perhaps Ryukostokken will meet you before you can enter his stronghold. How long can he delay you, on his own Lands? How long can the miko wait for you to reach her with enemies all around her?"

If Kimi agreed to his plan, Kagome wouldn't have to wait that long. Sesshomaru would be able to go to her far in advance of the army. *She must survive. Mother must agree so that I may go to her, save her, crush those that took her and bring her back where she belongs. If I cannot, if Mother does not-* Sesshomaru would not allow himself to finish the thought. *The miko will survive and return to me.* He prepared himself to ask, as proposals and demands would not be well-met, that Kimi to lead the West in his absence, but was diverted before he could begin.

"There is a better way, Sesshomaru." Kimi sighed, and her son's frustration mounted. "If you can see it past your clouded emotions and enormous ego."

"Ego implies that I cannot kill the dragon. That is incorrect." He gritted his teeth to keep from snapping at his own mother. Such disrespect should not be tolerated, but he needed her. Sesshomaru vowed that once the miko was returned, he would endeavor never to repeat such a situation - needing another for help.

"And his army? How many can you kill, Sesshomaru? Ten? Twenty? One hundred? How many trained youkai can you fight, for how long, before even *you* make a mistake? Go to her now, force your way into the North and you risk yourself, the West, and her. She cannot be lost! You are nothing if not a great strategist, my son, find another way. Do not lose the thing you desire most, the greatest hope for us all, because you can see only black or white. This or that. You have tried so hard to not be Inu no Taisho, that you have become his worst faults!"

Sesshomaru struggled to contain his emotions. No longer did the scent of amused disinterest or cool irritation fill the room. The youki barrier was all that kept the entire castle from knowing the rage, the bitter grief, the desperate concern that exploded from both mother and son. "Father-"

Kimi interrupted him with a sharp motion of her hand and a deep frown. "You think your father made a mistake. You believe that if you leave the West to go after this woman, you will follow in his footsteps. You are wrong, and you are right. And neither in the way you think. Your miko is more than just a mate, more than a female. She has value to our species. If you claim the title of Alpha to us all, you will see that and plan accordingly. You have the opportunity to strike at the dragon whelp at the seat of his power, to steal his prize and bide your time, growing more powerful and forcing him to meet you on your terms. You must do this, for the good of your pack, of the West, of *Japan*."

Her frown relaxed and her tone shifted to the idealistic coercion of a counselor. "Use your incredible logic, Sesshomaru. There is another way. You need not risk your own life, and you may still save your miko. You have learned the wrong lessons from your father. He was right to go to her, but wrong to sacrifice himself when it was unnecessary. If he had openly claimed her, he could have summoned his army to fight Ryukotsusei and gone to her himself. Better yet, he could have used stealth and cunning from the beginning and kept his new mate guarded at the Western Palace while he planned a war against the Dragons. That was always his failing, the *Great General*," her anger and disappointment soured the air. "There was no one who could defeat him in combat, but he preferred to rush into battle rather than choose the field that yielded a more thorough victory. I had thought you had learned better."

Kimi took a deep breath, turning her face away from her son before she continued, "You have punished his memory long enough, Sesshomaru. He did not choose them over us, he chose her over me. Toga did what he needed to do, *finally*. What an Alpha should do. It took him a disgracefully long time to realize that he could not have us both, that I did not want a male who looked to another, and then even longer to understand that Izayoi, her protection and that of their pup, was what made him worthy of the title Alpha." She took a deep, painful breath. "It was the right choice. I should have never been his mate, I was not meant to be, but we both put our misguided sense of duty above our instincts. We were miserable at the end, my son, and the only thing to come from our union that was good, was you."

"He failed in that he did not trust her to protect herself - he did not give her the tools to do so herself. You have told me of your miko's strength. You speak of her as one speaks of a true mate, the other half of your spirit. You are strong, Sesshomaru, so trust her to be strong. But do not make the mistake of risking all that she means to the West so that you may spite a memory, to spite a false sense that Toga turned away from us. Do not try to claim to me that you mean *the West*, because you speak of the sting to *your* heart, not to your people. If you deny your actual reasons, then you are not only wrong, you are a fool." She closed her eyes and breathed deeply to regain her calm facade.

Sesshomaru felt as if he should do the same. If, in past years, or even hours, he had been asked if he harbored resentment towards his sire, he would have responded negatively. As his mother spoke, he was uncomfortably aware that the opposite was true. He still blamed the Great General. He blamed

him for so many things: for his mother's pain, for the war that exploded in the wake of sealing Ryukotsusei...for his father's own death. In some well-hidden corner of his mind, he had felt cheated. He would never again have the opportunity to learn from his father, to show him how great the son had become, to at last defeat Inu no Tashio and prove his superiority in the inu way. He felt the revelation physically, like a blow to his chest. It knocked the breath out of him, and with it the misconceptions that had held him back from going to the miko.

Kimi continued, calmly, "If you face the North by yourself, you will lose. The loss may be the greatest leader the West has known, or only your miko. Either will be our downfall. Put aside your fear of becoming your father. Put aside your anger and your ego." She tilted her head and turned her ear towards the doors. "Your scouts have returned. They have found many signs of the traitor and your miko: blood, vomit, a footprint. Your miko is at the Northern Palace."

He was torn between too many tangled emotions: worry, confusion, and dawning understanding. If his father had been right, if Inu no Tashio had made the correct decision to save Izayoi and Inuyasha... If his mistake had been in his strategy, the same strategy Sesshomaru had been following - one that might cost his own life, then... *then how can I berate his memory?* Realizations, painful in their intensity, hit him hard. The miko was everything... his future, and that of the West - of all youkai, even. The strength of an Alpha, of a Lord, was measured by how he protected his pack, not just his subjects. Denying himself, his desires, did not make him a better leader. He was an alpha, the Alpha of all of Japan. His desires were in the best interests of the West. *Father did not abandon me. Perhaps there is another way.* Sesshomaru observed that her cool, golden eyes melted a fraction, as though she could not repress the care and concern she felt for her son.

"You do have a choice, Sesshomaru. You may stay here and let your anger and fear of becoming someone, a father who only existed in your mind, dictate your actions - but you will not be fit to be called Saidai Mao, nor Lord, nor Alpha, nor even inu. Or, you can follow your instincts, as youkai are meant to do. Temper them with the logic and strategy of a daiyoukai; save her and return to the West. You can listen to your beast and recognize that you want this female; more than that, you love her, and you can cast aside all other things as less important and go to *her*, but she will not appreciate your action if you are not with her once she is safe. Die at the hands of the North and you will fail your female, your pack, and the West."

Kimi took a deep breath and her mask slipped completely. Sesshomaru saw not only her concern and care for him, but pain, worry, anger, and shame. The latter he knew was for his actions - for the false logic he had used to justify them to himself. No matter how deeply she felt that emotion, it could not match the bottomless pit of contempt that he felt for himself. Contempt he would wash away in the heat of battle.

"You," Kimi spoke slowly, calmly, as though commenting on the weather, "were wrong." Her eyes found his, and Kimi tilted her chin up in a sign of challenge, "What will you do, my foolish son? Are you Alpha? Or a simple dog?"

"She is mine, will always be mine," he said, as calmly as he was able. His head was clear, his mind

compartmentalizing his feelings for the miko and his instinctual desire to let the blood of his enemies steam upon the ground from a newly forming battle strategy.

“You will go to her, then?” There was a resigned disappointment in Kimi’s voice.

Sesshomaru threw aside all intrigue and bared his plan completely, “If you will stay and lead the West, *we* will bring her back - quietly.” He *missed* her. The tightness in his chest that increased when he spoke of her was almost unbearable. He was angry that she had been taken; he was angry that his defenses had been breached. He was ashamed that he had failed to protect one who should, who *would* call him Alpha. The miko was more than a vassal to defend and protect. She was more than a pack member to avenge. She would be his mate. A mate was more than a bed partner or the mother to his pups: mates were a part of one another. She had been joined with him for those hours while she healed him, and he *would* have her with him in that way again. He missed her as he had missed his arm when Inuyasha had cut it off, as he would miss his heart if it was ripped from his chest.

As he had sought to destroy Inuyasha for a time, as he would feast on the blood of any who challenged him, he would seek out those who had taken *his* miko and end them once she was secured back in the West. His teeth and claws would sink into flesh and break bone; his dokkasou would eat away at their corpses. He was the Killing Perfection, and he would deny any who opposed him, who touched *what was his*. He would deny them their lives.

“Stay, Mother, and oversee the defense of the West.” His calm facade was firmly in place, and he scented her pleased satisfaction growing as she realized his plan. “Hisao and Kento will assist you, until the rock brothers and I have returned with Kagome.” For the first time in days, the snow clouds had parted.

Chapter 21: A Miko's Worth

Kagome stumbled behind the guards that had come to fetch her shortly after dawn broke, glittering on the water far below her window. She was exhausted, her eyes felt gritty, and her back was stiff from sleeping against the stone wall of her room. *Cell, idiot, it's a cell. You're a prisoner, and every time you heal one of these - these bad guys, you are helping the enemy.* She sucked in a deep breath and tripped on the last step, falling into the soldier in front of her. Her palms slapped against his armor, but he didn't do more than slow her fall as he jumped out of her way to avoid touching her past that first, accidental brush. Her knees hit the floor and a painful shock reverberated up her thigh bones.

She gritted her teeth to keep from crying out in pain, or yelling at the coward that was too afraid of purification to catch her when she fell. She was stuck in the situation, at least for the time being. She had to wait it out until an opportunity - to escape, or attack, or *something* - presented itself. She had been afraid, with Gakuto and Arashi, that her power would fail her if she attacked. She had been afraid, in front of the Dragon Lord, that her reiki would not be enough, even if she was completely well. Then she had begun the healing, and her body tired quickly. Her well of power remained low, but she could feel Sesshomaru's youkai inside her as well, warming her and helping her power to recharge. No matter how much reiki she could feel humming inside her, she wasn't certain she could have purified a single, average demon in her current state. That rankled.

Kagome had just determined that she wouldn't stand around helplessly and wait for a rescue anymore; she had concluded that sometimes, discretion was the better part of valor. Strength was good, she still wanted to do everything she could not to let the dragons know she was afraid, but she also needed to get the hell out of the North. Escape was her priority, and if she brought honor to the West in the process, that would be a nice bonus. Honor, however, wouldn't mean much if she was dead.

She straightened her shoulders as they approached the reception room where she had been the day before. So far, she had only healed injuries that were created expressly to test her. She could argue that she hadn't actually made the dragons any stronger - her power had just continued the status quo. That wouldn't last forever, though. Eventually, Ryukostokken would order her to do something that would harm Sesshomaru, directly or indirectly, and she couldn't do that. She *refused* to do that.

The doors opened, and she was roughly prodded into the room with the handle end of a spear. Kagome was grateful she had been working so hard to control her emotions. She probably would have peed her pants otherwise. In the center of the room was a dragon. *Smaller than I imagined it would be*, she thought wildly. It was the size of a family van, and covered in dark yellow scales the color of old brass. Its head swung around towards her as she stepped forward, peering at her with one huge orange eye. If Kagome hadn't been very aware of how small she was in comparison, how soft and munchable, she would have sworn the beast looked afraid. *What on earth does a two ton dragon have to be afraid of?*

Ryukostokken's youki flowed across the room, a blatant reminder of who was in charge in the North. The Lord himself stepped around the dragon and greeted Kagome with an oily smile. "Step forward,

little human. This is a great day for you.”

Another prod to her back made Kagome’s eyes narrow, but she refrained from telling the guard where to get off. Anger was beginning to stir within her again, and she could almost feel Sesshomaru’s cold fury as well. She wanted to borrow his mask, as she had before, but she couldn’t seem to manage it. If she was calm, she would think about the fangs the length of her hand and wings that would crush her if the dragon had a mind to do so. If she was calm, she would think about Ryukostokken breathing smoke on her face and digging his claws into her skin to see her flinch.

Kagome wasn’t calm, she was temperamental. She was full of passion and life and a quick anger that could frighten her best friends. She needed to be strong, but she couldn’t be Sesshomaru. She had to find a way to survive, to irritate, if not defeat, their enemies, and she had to make it her own.

“A great day,” the Lord repeated. “This is the day you prove your worth to the North.” He laughed and the sound made Kagome’s skin crawl. He held out his hand, and a sword, the blade as long as Kagome was tall appeared in his hand. The edge was serrated near the hilt, and honed to a deadly edge near the tip. He spoke, in grating hisses, and the other occupants of the room drew back to the walls. The dragon flinched, but at a second command, it extended its wings. The leathery skin of one appendage brushed against her ankles. “Shianma,” he caressed the two-handed sword lovingly, “will help you decide your fate, Miko no Mao.” He hefted the weapon and braced his feet. “Either a great day for you, or a pleasurable day for This One.”

His flat, black eyes slid over her skin with eager hunger and Kagome wanted to slap his face. *How dare he?* As a fifteen year-old, Kagome would have blushed in mortification and shame, tried to hide from his disgusting interest. The four years she had spent in the feudal era had changed her, matured her. She wouldn’t hide anymore.

“A great day?” She said, with as much sarcasm as she could manage. “The day will be great for me when Sesshomaru uses your foul head as a chew toy.” She smiled.

Ryukostokken bared his teeth with a growl. As quick as his displeasure had come, it disappeared. “This One had not expected such defiance. Perhaps you will fail, and This Ryukostokken will enjoy breaking you.” He leaped, in a high arc that seemed to defy gravity. His form slowed and hung in the air, elevated above the heads of those gathered below. It was not truly a jump, but a prelude to flight. Lamplight flashed across the surface of his weapon, and time stood still.

Kagome felt every pulse of her heart, each rasp of breath as it moved through her lungs. Her empty stomach tightened. She licked her dry lips. There was fear there, deep inside her, so much that she knew if she allowed it to surface it would overcome her. She recalled an image of Sesshomaru to combat that terror. Tall and proud, she doubted he felt fear. Shippo and Rin came to mind as well. They had been afraid, but they kept going. She bit the inside of her cheek, tasting blood, and focused on the present. She would not give in. The moment before Ryukostokken struck, Kagome realized his intent. Her mouth opened in horror, but for a suspended instant in time, nothing happened. Then a scream of pain, too vast and deep to come from any human throat, pierced her ears. The wing fell, and

she was sprayed with a light rain of blood. The heavy bone and muscle thumped against the floor, twitching as though trying to reconnect with the body, but the sound was drowned out by the wail of the dragon.

Ryukostokken landed gently in front of her, blood spattering his kimono and hands. He met her eyes, and brought his blade to his mouth. A long, greyish-pink tongue lapped against the metal, tasting the energy of his own vassal. Kagome's stomach churned, even though her mind was blank. His black hair danced around his shoulders as he licked, cleaning every drop. When he finished, he smiled at her, his teeth washed pink with blood.

"Heal her, Miko," he ordered. "Heal what This One has destroyed."

He tipped his weapon towards her, tracing her obi with the point and drawing a slash through the rich silk. The blood spray from the wing beaded on her jaw and dripped onto her collarbone. She could taste the coppery red flavor on her lips. Ryukostokken had cut off the wing of one of his own subjects - just to test her. She wanted to jab out his eyes. She wanted to cry. Kagome wished she had an arrow, just so she could shoot him, then pull it out and shoot him again. She wanted to close her eyes and wake up back in her bed at home, and find it had all been a terrible nightmare.

He walked around her, and leaned over her shoulder to whisper in her ear, "Show This One your worth, your value to the North." The pressure on his sword increased, and Kagome felt it prick her skin.

She stepped forward to get away from his blade, her knees shaking, but her voice was steady and strong with her disgust and anger, "My worth is my own, asshole."

He followed her forward, his anger causing his youki to pulse with malicious intent. "You are human." His breath was hot on her neck. Before she could lean away he spoke again, breathing smoke into her face that smelled of decaying meat. "You are nothing, unless youkai allow it." He snapped his teeth at her, making her flinch, involuntarily. "You will do as This One commands. Your only choice is in how you will serve." The sword prodded her again, making another dart of burning pain on her lower back. Then he strode away from her, taking his place on the dais, near the dragon's head.

"Poke me again, you sick sonofabitch," she muttered, finally shaking herself out of her stupor. "Where I come from, they still hang people for this."

Her attention was drawn to the dragon. Its sounds of agony had grown quiet, but its eyes were wide and its breath quick. As she drew closer, she could see that something had been applied to the wound, probably the same poison that had been used on the soldiers the night before, which did not allow it to close on its own. The dragon was in terrible pain, had been disfigured, and might never fly again, because of *her*.

How would it feel, to be able to fly, and then have it taken away? Kagome pictured Sesshomaru, soaring over Japan on his cloud. She couldn't imagine how painful it would be for him if that ability was hampered in some way. She walked closer, taking careful steps to not tread on the dismembered

wing or slip in the blood that was still running onto the floor. Her power was flaring under her skin, begging for release. She could have easily turned it on the Lord - and then had the fight of her life on her hands as she was trapped in a stone room with twenty or so assorted soldiers and administrators. A vibration, like a low moan, rumbled in the air. *Trapped with youkai soldiers, Lord Asshole, and a hurt, pissed off dragon. Great Plan.* Instead of attacking like she desperately wanted to do, she called her power softly. Her hands flared into pink light. The dragon flinched away, and Ryukostokken quickly reprimanded it by smacking the hilt of his sword against the beast's nose. One orange eye and two small black ones followed her movements as she closed the distance and examined the wound.

Kagome let her hands hover over the gash, ten inches wide and more than four feet in length. That had been done, because *she* was there, because Ryukostokken wanted to test *her*. It was her responsibility. She closed her eyes. The wound was burning the dragon with cold as the drop in temperature where the air entered the dragon's body met the intense heat of the fire inside the beast. Its thick hide was what kept it warm, insulating the chemical heat that stirred in its belly. Once the scales and skin had been pierced, its body heat leached out into the cool air of the room. Muscles and tendons had been severed cleanly, as had the strong, hollow bones that supported the beast's weight in the air. Kagome could sense the nerve endings - raw and shooting pain signals to the brain with every breeze or twitch. She started with those.

Nerves. Long, thin threads of axons, wrapped in connective tissues and bundled together like cables with a protective coating. *Blood vessels.* Tissue and smooth muscle shaped into a flexible tube and spreading like tree branches into tiny capillaries. *Bone.* Marrow and osseous tissue twined and branched like coral formations - full of tiny holes to make it lightweight but capable of immense support. *Skeletal muscle. Myogenesis.* She searched for and found germ cells and stimulated growth. Layers of keratin built one upon the other to create skin.

Kagome was distantly aware of sweat beading on her forehead and under her arms. The ache in her back grew more intense as she worked. After nearly an hour, she stepped back. A section of wing, two feet across and twelve inches wide, had been regrown. The flesh was still new and soft. She glanced at the orange eye. It had fallen to half mast, and the head rested on the floor, tongue out and panting. It was still in pain.

"Good," Ryukostokken drew her attention with his pleased tone. He grinned at her, showing his fangs, and licked his lips. "Complete it."

Kagome's temper flared. "This isn't Kentucky Fried Chicken, you creep," she replied. "I don't have an extra wing under a heat lamp, just waiting around for this occasion. It takes time."

He frowned at her unfamiliar turn of phrase, but it did not deter him. "It *will* take less time. A youkai can heal on his own - given centuries. This One has tested others of your kind - and been severely disappointed in the power of those mikos. Even with incentive," he grinned and ran his tongue along his fangs as though remembering a favorite treat, "they were not able to accomplish...what was necessary for their survival." Kagome wanted to stab out Ryukostokken's eyes; it was clear that the lives of those priestesses he had captured depended on healing youkai, and that the Lord had had no use

for them when they failed. “If you do not do it faster, then you serve no purpose. You will finish before This One returns.” He tossed a command to his administrator as he left, “If she tries to leave, or ceases to work, cut off her foot. This One has no need for that part of her.”

Kagome glared at the spot where he had been standing, but the combined moan of the dragon and the way the administrator gripped his weapon made her turn away. The injury was awful. No matter what the dragon might have done in service to the North, it hadn’t deserved such mutilation at the hands of its leader. Injury for no reason other than to make Kagome use her reiki... The miko would heal it, because she felt responsible for its pain. But the moment she found an opening, she would burn a hole right through Ryukostokken’s face. If it resulted in her death, so be it.

“Shhhh,” she whispered. She ran her fingers lightly over the pebbly skin above the wound. The scales were hot and smooth, like river rocks. An orange eye blinked at her, warily. “I’ll try to be gentle.”

Hours later, Kagome slumped to the floor, exhausted. Black spots floated at the edge of her vision. Her reiki was quiet and still, not even sparking when several soldiers crept closer to push her out of the way with their weapons and inspect her work. The room was full of dusky shadows. *How long have I been at this?* she wondered. Before her lay two wings. The one Ruystokken had removed was dark brass and splattered with blood, cold and lifeless. Shiny, new gold scales covered the one she had grown and it thrummed with heat and life. The dragon was asleep - exactly what Kagome would be doing if she wasn’t surrounded by the enemy. The administrator looked over the wing, as perfect as she could make it, down to the deadly claw at the end, and sniffed at her.

“You will come with me.” He snapped his fingers and two guards came to attention. They poked her several times to stand, but between her exhaustion and the sticky, slick mess on the floor she couldn’t manage it. The administrator finally ordered them to carry her. One guard slipped his arm around her waist and lifted her to stand, while two more secured her - in front and behind.

“Take her to the Sunset Chamber.”

The administrator disappeared, and Kagome tried to wake herself up enough to think of a plan. If she could get a weapon away from one of the guards, she might be able to... *No way, maybe I’d get lucky and kill these three, but others would come, and I can barely walk.* If they had a dagger she could lift without anyone noticing... *Yeah, right. Pickpocketing is right up there in my skill set with fencing and judo.* Kagome thought of and discarded several ideas before she was unceremoniously dropped against the wall in her cell. She resolved when she got back to the West she would demand Sesshomaru give her some training. Or maybe Hisao. Hell, Kento probably knew more about weapons than she did.

The door closed behind the guards, and she relieved herself in the small pot provided for her and leaned her head back against the cold wall to rest. Only a few minutes passed before it opened again.

Ryukostokken entered, followed by a light-haired demoness in a pale blue kimono. Two guards came behind, holding chains. Kagome scrambled into a standing position, fear and anger giving her a burst of energy. The Lord had smiled while he hacked his own soldier, and it was clear he intended to chain her.

“Little miko,” he said with anticipation.

Kagome lashed out, but no matter how much adrenaline she had, she was no match for youkai reflexes. An iron bracer snapped around her wrist, and a sharp tug on the chain brought her to her knees. She managed to dig her nails into the thinner skin at the wrist of the second guard when he grabbed her. Her nails tore, embedded in the leathery surface.

In a matter of moments, she was secured, panting and struggling weakly, between the two guards. If she moved one way, the chain on the other side was pulled taut. The iron cut into her wrists. Kagome gritted her teeth and did her best to burn holes through Ryukostokken with her eyes. She wished she had a weapon, anything, to charge with her power and gut the bastard. Or if he would touch her, she would let her reiki loose, regardless of the consequences. Whatever he was chaining her for, it wouldn't be good. She would purify as many as she could, but she did not want to be at the sadist's mercy.

He licked his lips with corrupt expectation. "That's it, woman, struggle. This One enjoys the scent of your blood." He leaned forward, close to her face, and his tongue flickered out. "Yesss," he drew out the word and closed his eyes. The sound of his enjoyment made her skin crawl and her stomach turn. She was fully dressed, but his gaze and the way he licked his lips made her feel naked in front of him. Kagome wanted to claw out his eyes; she strained against the shackles, and finding no give, spit in his face. His response was a lightning-fast blow to her cheek with the hard lacquered sheath of his tanto knife. He growled, and wiped the spittle from his chin and looked at his palm. For a moment she thought he would strike her with his upraised hand, and she prepared her reiki. Instead, he smiled, and it sent a shiver down Kagome's spine. "This One enjoys your spirit, but breaking it will be even more pleasurable."

He circled around her and the guards, clicking his dagger in and out of the sheath. "You have been with the dog far too long; you do not know your place." A hiss of steel precipitated a cool blade pressing against her forearms where they were stretched high and bare, as though she would be crucified for the dragon's pleasure.

"Ha," she forced a laugh, "but I know yours. Right below Sesshomaru's boot." The eerie dancing of the sharp edge on her skin abruptly stopped. Her eyes widened and she gritted her teeth against the instinctive scream clawing up her throat as a white hot line of agony dragged along her arm.

His breath was in her ear, close enough to make her want to retch from the smell of whatever he had eaten - or roasted alive. "You will learn there are consequences for your actions, woman. You *will* mind your tongue." The dagger slipped along her other arm, drawing another line of blood. She couldn't help but whimper, anticipating the cut and the pain that would accompany it. "This could have been a great day."

He inserted the sheath between her back and the neckline of her shirt. She bucked, trying to bend away, but it resulted only in the cuffs cutting into her wrists and her clothing parting and loosening around her - baring her shoulders and upper chest. Fortunately, the angle of her arms kept it from revealing her breasts completely. He walked in front of her again, obviously enjoying the taste of her on his weapon before tossing it to the floor at his feet.

She glared at Ryukostokken, successfully containing the tremor in her voice, "I take it you weren't pleased with my performance with your dragon friend? No applause?"

"On the contrary," he practically purred. His eyes were half-lidded and his mouth parted slightly. Something in his face stopped Kagome's struggles and her sarcastic defiance cold. He was enjoying himself. The Dragon Lord was - Kagome thought she might be sick. Ryukostokken had a large bulge in his pants, clearly aroused by the pain he'd inflicted. He pressed a hand to his own growing erection and made a short sound, and the demoness stepped forward as if on cue. Her face was smooth and beautiful, her lips red and full. Her eyes were a solid white. The milky, swirling surface did not shift to look at what she was doing. Kagome realized she was blind.

"This One is most satisfied with your skill, Miko. The display of your power was...stimulating." He made short work of his obi, folding it and laying it carefully on the floor. "Your worth has been proven, for now. But This One will be forced to deny himself the pleasure of your body for today. Fate has not seen to grant This One your skill and your wet heat." He gave a malicious grin in her direction as he slipped out of his kimono and settled it on top of the obi. "Do not worry, This One will consider a solution so that he may have both."

The medical practitioner in her catalogued the pox scars on his face and arms, the strange distortion of his ribcage. The instinctive, survival-driven part of her was screaming. She very much doubted he had chained her and stripped so that she could examine him. He wanted her power, and thought that if she lost her virginity it would be lost as well, so he would not rape her. There were many, many other things that he could do. *So this is what fight or flight response feels like.* The inappropriately timed thought floated through her head as he untied his hakama. He seized the demoness by her hair, digging his claws against her scalp and pulled her back against his nearly naked body. He groped her through her kimono, and Kagome felt a surge of horror and anger welling up inside her. *He's going to rape her!*

"You have lived with the dog, so you are chained like a dog. Watch closely, woman. Pay attention, because This One will envision your body in place of hers."

His clawed hand found her nipple and pinched it between the sharp points of his thumb and index finger. The female bit down on a cry before it could escape, and red blossomed across her kimono where he had pierced the cloth and her sensitive skin. His eyes fastened on Kagome's breasts, and he frowned. He threw the demoness to the floor, and stalked forward again. This time she pulled back, kicking out to fend him off. He avoided her limbs, but her movements loosened her shirt further. The obi he had cut while he taunted her about the injured dragon could not stand up to the activity, and fell apart. Kagome felt her cheeks burn with anger and humiliation as her clothing parted, revealing both breasts.

The Dragon Lord licked his lips and caressed himself again as he stepped back, his eyes fastened on her breasts. "This One cannot claim you until you have fulfilled your new duties to the North. But you shall not be denied for long. See what will be waiting for you, the moment you hesitate to use your

power to aid This One.”

He reached down and grabbed the female youkai by the arm, hauling her to her feet. His free hand ripped through the pale blue kimono and the demoness struggled. It was a paltry, almost involuntary response, but the twisting of her hips and the way she bent away from him had painful consequences. Kagome screamed obscenities at the dragon, trying desperately to draw his ire away from the female with no success. He snarled, and his claws dug deeper into her hair until blood ran down her neck. His other hand flung aside the remains of her clothing, leaving her completely nude in the freezing room, and grabbed her throat. He squeezed, until her face went red, then purple.

She turned a dark shade of blue before Kagome could stand it no longer. “Stop, please, stop! You’re killing her!”

Ryukostokken met her gaze and held it while he dragged his tongue along the female’s shoulder. She shuddered, and closed her eyes, but did not attempt to move away. His hand found her other breast, and that one he squeezed as well, bruising the soft flesh and grinding his palm down, hard. His hips bucked against her bottom, and his mouth fell open, panting. His eyes were still fastened on Kagome’s breasts.

“Do not worry for her, little Miko. She has her place as well, and she is most satisfied with it. Are you not, Ko?”

The demoness did not answer, she could not, without any air.

“Let her go!” Kagome strained against her chains, reiki flaring painfully under her fingertips, but directionless without a weapon or an enemy within reach. She couldn’t sit by, she couldn’t watch him do it.

“Perhaps you are right.” He released his hold, and the demoness fell to her knees, gasping. Ryukostokken picked up his tanto while he considered his victim. “That was longer than the last time.” He stalked around the female, and then moved behind Kagome again, avoiding her kicking legs.

“Don’t fucking touch me, you sicko,” she snarled. His breath was on her shoulder, his eyes leering down at her bare flesh. Kagome froze in horrified disgust. His sheathed dagger appeared in front of her, rubbing across her sternum and under one breast to heft its weight before letting it fall back to her chest with a bounce. He trailed the cool lacquer over her nipples, already painfully hard in the cold air.

“What do you think, Miko? This One believes she has become used to such treatment. Something new then?” He did not wait for her response, but trailed the weapon across Kagome’s neck and returned to the demoness. He fell to his knees behind the still gasping female. He gripped her thigh with one claw, digging into the smooth flesh to pull her back towards him. Ko fought; she could not seem to prevent herself from doing so. Kagome strained at her own bonds, as though she could add her strength to the woman’s battle. It was not enough.

Blood, dark and thick, oozed from the puncture marks made by his claws and stained the pale skin of

her thigh. A palm between her shoulder blades pushed her roughly to the floor. When Ko's hand pressed against the wood to give her leverage, he seized it and twisted it behind her back, leaving the dagger on the floor at his side. Her cheek slammed down, and Kagome could hear the sickening crunch of bone. Her sightless eyes stared at the miko, her face expressionless, but her body still trying to pull away, to flee the assault she could not prevent.

"No!" Kagome screamed, and Ryukostokken pumped himself with one hand while he pinned Ko with his other. His legs straddled one of hers, forcing her knees apart and preventing her from kicking him. He breathed heavily in anticipation and parted his lips, showing the miko his fangs. His penis was ashy grey like the rest of his skin, and appeared too thick for the small female. He released himself only to part Ko's folds with cruel fingers. Kagome spit at him, desperately willing to try anything to get him to stop, to leave the woman alone. It fell short of its target, and the Dragon Lord laughed while his guards shifted uneasily, rattling the chains they held.

"Watch closely, Miko," he said. He stroked himself once more, running his eyes across Kagome's straining body, making her feel exposed. "When your power no longer serves the North, this shall be your place. Learn it well." He thrust into Ko, and she cried out, earning her a devastating blow to her ribs.

She was quiet after that, as was Kagome, although tears streamed down her face. Ryukostokken held her eyes, and when she tried to close hers against the sight, he dug his claws into Ko or twisted her arm harder. "Watch, Miko, or she will suffer more." The thrusting went on, and when it appeared that Ko had grown numb to the pain, Ryukostokken withdrew, and replaced his member with his dagger. The enameled sheath was smooth, but it was much longer than his penis. A haunting cry of pain was forced into the floorboards, and the Lord bellowed lustfully.

Kagome's voice joined Ko's in an involuntary scream. Bile rose in her throat – a mirror of the anger bubbling up inside her. Acts like that, what Ryukostokken was forcing on Ko, Kagome had never really believed that they happened. Assault on this magnitude was a frightening story, an exaggeration. It didn't really exist. People couldn't really be capable of such acts, but Ryukostokken was. The Dragon Lord debased the wind youkai in ways that Kagome would never have imagined, not in her worst nightmares. He defiled her in ways she would never be able to forget. Kagome wanted to kill him. With her own bare hands, willfully, eagerly, she wanted to end the Lord and his reign of terror.

The assault was not humiliating enough for Ryukostokken, or so it seemed, as he dislocated Ko's shoulder to keep her in place and free both of his hands. He replaced the dagger with himself, gleefully pointing out to Kagome that the blood was hot and made Ko's passage slicker. He spread her butt cheeks apart with his hands and rapidly forced the red-slicked dagger into that hole as well. Ko made a sound unlike anything Kagome had ever heard before. A muffled shriek of agony that resembled nothing so much as the desolate cry of the wind.

Kagome's power surged in a righteous tide that ripped her apart with pain. Her fury was pure, and fueled by the raw maliciousness before her. This was her calling, this was the most basic tenant of mikos – to ease suffering and end evil. She cursed herself, even and she continued to struggle against

her bonds. She should have trained harder, should have learned more about her offensive capabilities. Kagome had focused too much on healing since the threat of Naraku had been removed. She had foolishly believed that she would not need to fight any more. If she had been stronger, more skilled, she could have found a way to purify the degenerate psychopath to hell from across the room.

He spoke to Kagome while he raped the demoness. He spoke to her of his technique: what caused the most pleasure for him, what inflicted the most pain, the difference between the wetness of an aroused female and hot blood on his sick, debased erection. His eyes were always on the miko, sliding across her naked flesh with obvious hunger. He flipped Ko onto her back, leaving the dagger in place so that it was lodged tightly inside her and pressed deeper each time he rammed her into the floor.

He finally withdrew, both himself and his weapon, and sat the wind youkai up on his lap. Ko listed to one side, having difficulty struggling or even holding herself up with the wounds to her leg and her dislocated shoulder. He explained he did not want to finish too soon. A demoness could endure much more before death, or even passing out. He vowed that he would go much slower when it was Kagome's turn, he promised that he would not injure her beyond recovery the first time he 'tasted' her pleasures, nor the second, perhaps not for many months. As long as he had another, like Ko, to slake his appetite before he came to the miko, he felt confident he could stretch her rape, her pain, over many, many sessions.

The descriptions, the disgusting fantasies that he used to torture the miko and drive himself to greater arousal assailed her ears until she would have done anything to block out the sound. Kagome had seen death. She had seen torture and murder and savage violence. Ko's treatment was worse. It was not death, but a kind of living death. It was rape, not just of her body, but of her spirit. Ryukostokken was trying to break the wind demoness and he had nearly succeeded. She did not beg or plead, she endured. Kagome thought she had seen evil; she'd believed that there could be nothing on earth more vile than Naraku. Naraku who had used people, who took their hopes, dreams, lives, loved ones and had held them hostage.

Ryukostokken was *far* worse.

Something in Kagome changed in that room. A little piece of her, that part that was still the fifteen year-old girl who had fallen down the well and managed to wade through blood and destruction with a shred of innocence and naiveté intact, that small, untouched corner of Kagome darkened. *This is the world.* Her cell, Ryukostokken, Ko - that was what existed in the world: pure evil.

There was no circumstance, no backstory, that would make the Dragon Lord's actions excusable. There was no way to analyze and understand him. He wanted to cause pain - he reveled in it. He wanted to take everything that made those around him living, thinking creatures and twist it until there was nothing left but a shattered husk. Ryukostokken was the antithesis of Sesshomaru. Where Sesshomaru ruled to bring security to the West, Ryukostokken desired only to wield power over others, and he savored the pain of their broken wills in a way that made her spirit sick.

Ryukostokken entered Ko again, this time holding her on his lap so he could lick at the blood that

streamed from her nipples. “It is not as sweet as your taste, Miko.” He glanced between Kagome and Ko, frowning. In a blur of movement, he raked his claws across Ko’s face, drawing three long lines of blood over each eye, from forehead to cheekbone. Ko gasped and closed her lids over the milky white color.

“Better. Your blue ones will look beautiful filled with tears of pain, surrounded by blood. This One will like them best gazing up while your mouth is around This cock. Ko is already healing inside, tightening, but This One can imagine how much better it will feel with your pure flesh around him. This Ryukostokken will defile you, Miko.” He was panting, devouring Kagome’s body with his eyes while he thrust his hips forcefully against the female youkai. “Every part of you will be marked by the Dragon Lord, in a way it never was by the impotent pup. Perhaps This One will let him see you again, before I kill him.” Each word brought him greater excitement. “He will smell dragon on your skin, between your legs, in your mouth and inside you. You-”

His face twisted with a strangely high-pitched moan as he finished. Although Kagome felt a lifetime had passed, his dissatisfaction at the quickness of the violation was evident. Ko’s white eyes, cast pink by the blood dripping into them, closed with defeat. Kagome had to bite her cheek to keep from vomiting. Ryukostokken pulled out, giving the wind youkai a shove to send her sprawling away from him. “She heals too quickly after each encounter. If she was not so tight, This One would enjoy himself longer.”

He stood, wiping himself and his tanto on the remains of Ko’s kimono and leaving the wind youkai curled in a ball on the floor.

“Release the miko after This One has gone,” he said to his guards. “Do not damage her, I may wish to repeat this activity yet tonight.” He tossed the semen and blood covered blue cloth onto the floor and began redressing, his eyes still on Kagome’s restrained form. He smiled contentedly at Kagome, as if sharing a much sought after secret, “There is a new prisoner that will revive This One’s lust, with appropriate incentive. His mate’s pain will no doubt be sufficient.”

He folded his obi precisely, and stepped over to admire the miko’s exposed body once more. “If she does not survive long, This Ryukostokken will return and teach you more. Rest now, Miko. Ko will be ready again in a few hours, but it will be you, little human, who This One will think of when he enters her.”

He disappeared, and one guard held a spear at Kagome’s throat while the other removed her shackles. The moment she was free, she lunged after them. They were quick, and she earned a shallow cut on her shoulder from one of their weapons before they could close the door, locking her inside. Kagome beat against the wood, calling out profanities and promising death to the next person who came inside. Finally, she slid down. Her voice was lost, her throat sore, but still a dark, bitter feeling that she had not known since Naraku churned inside her. She hated him. Ryukostokken deserved to die. He deserved to *suffer* for every malicious act of carnage he’d heaped upon the denizens of Japan. And Kagome would *revel* in the moment he was finally brought down by his own arrogance and cowardice.

A quiet shuffle behind her drew her attention. Kagome opened her eyes to see the wind demoness, Ko,

pulling together the stained scraps of her clothing. Ko took no notice of her injuries, but felt around for something large enough to cover herself. Blood was drying on her neck and face. Her ribs were already bruising, one was clearly broken. Fresh red liquid seeped from the claw marks on her thigh, and down the insides of her legs, mixed with thick white fluid. *How many times has he* - Kagome cut off her own thoughts as her stomach cramped. She hadn't eaten recently, so her heaves brought up nothing but acid. Still, she wretched, trying to get the desperate, dark image of Ko and all she had endured at Ryukostokken's hands out of her head.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve and fumbled with her obi after gaining some of her composure back. "Here," Kagome said quietly. She removed her ornate shirt. Untucked, it would reach nearly to Ko's knees, she surmised. "It's pretty bloody, but it's all in one piece." Realizing that Ko could not see what she held out, Kagome crawled closer, trying not to sob when bloody, naked flesh shivered and flinched at the movement. She laid the cloth on Ko's lap and sat back, turning her head to give her privacy. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"What have you to be sorry for?" Ko's voice was gravelly, no doubt from her strangulation, but she still managed to inflict it with scorn. "The Denka takes what he wants, and has always done so. You have no effect on my circumstance. Why would you think yourself so important?"

"I'm not - I don't -" Kagome was at a loss for words. She understood Ko's attitude, as well as someone who had never been so intimately victimized could understand. "I was not apologizing," she said at last. "I was trying to let you know that I would do something to help you, if I could."

"Help?" Ko laughed shortly, ending in a hacking cough that brought pink spittle to her lips. She wiped her mouth carefully with a blood stained sleeve. "Can you bring my family back from Ryukostokken's pox? Can you turn back time and kill that monster before he returned to Japan? No? Then do not speak of things which you know nothing about." Her bitterness stung Kagome's heart, and made her hatred of the Dragon Lord stronger. He was the source of the disease; it disgusted her, and she was surprised she could feel any more contempt for the Lord than she already did. *What is biological warfare in comparison to brutal, repeated rape? What is rape in comparison to genocide?* She walked to the corner where a clay vessel and cup still sat, next to the chamber pot, and returned to Ko's side.

"I have water. I don't know if it is poisoned, but you are welcome to some if you aren't worried it-" The demoness grabbed the half-full cup Kagome pressed gently against her arm and gulped it down.

"It doesn't taste poisoned, but wait a few minutes and if I die, you'll know."

Kagome didn't know what to say. Ko seemed to have lost all hope for life, for a time when her pain and humiliation would cease. And yet, she didn't kill herself outright. She still fought, despite her situation. Even when it was clearly pointless, even though her body was acting without thought, she fought him. Kagome did not believe, she would not believe, that Ko had given up all hope - no matter what she said. If the demoness still had the will to fight against her rapist, even involuntarily, then she still had hope that the degradation would end - that she would one day escape. Kagome *couldn't* believe that Ko had no chance to escape. If the situation was hopeless for a youkai who could fly, then

Kagome might as well give in. She straightened her spine and pushed the disturbing images to the back of her mind. She would not give up hope. She was strong. Sesshomaru had said it: she was of the West. Even if Ryukostokken did *that* to her, she would not give up.

Kagome picked out the pieces of blue kimono that had managed to remain free of blood and semen and tore them into strips. She soaked a few in cool water, and folded it into a square pad. She considered infusing it with reiki, but she was already drained from healing the dragon, and Ko did not seem eager for her assistance.

“Here, this will help.” She slipped the cloth between the front gap in her former shirt and pressed it gently against the broken ribs. Ko hissed, and seized Kagome’s raw wrist in a bruising grip. “If you let me wrap it, the pain will be less.”

The demoness paused, then gave a brief nod and released the miko. Kagome worked silently. When she was done with her ribs, she cleaned the wounds on Ko’s leg and neck, and dabbed gently at the deep scratches on the youkai’s face. She poured herself a drink of water, and once she had rinsed out her mouth and drank, she handed the refilled cup back to Ko.

“So, why don’t you fly away?”

“You don’t think I would, if I could?” Ko stiffened in anger.

“Of course you would. So what keeps you from doing so?”

There was a long silence, which Ko broke with a curious tone, “Can you not tell that I am blind?”

“Yes,” Kagome spoke slowly, “does that keep you from flying? I thought you might navigate by smell, or something...” She trailed off, suddenly wishing she hadn’t started the conversation. Ko had been through, well, more than anyone, even her worst enemy, should have to go through. It couldn’t feel good to talk about how awful her situation was. Unfortunately, blindness was the least sensitive topic available. Kagome had a brief wish for the days when her most emotionally challenging conversation concerned an unavailable hanyou and his undead ex-girlfriend.

“I *can* fly,” Ko said shortly. She turned her head away and whispered, “I need another youkai’s eyes to guide me.”

Kagome felt a surge of hope. She glanced at the window, it was large enough for her, and Ko was slightly smaller. The sun was just beginning to dip along the horizon, it would be light enough to see for an hour or so yet. The snow was falling softer than it had in days, she was sure she could see where they were going. She opened her mouth, trying to find the best way to ask another prisoner to escape with her, but Ko was already shaking her head.

“Don’t bother. Even if I was healed enough to fly, and it will be a day or so with my ribs and shoulder like this, I need a demon. That is how I know where to go. They send direction to me with their youki - they let me see that way.”

“Oh.”

Both women fell silent, leaning against the wall. Kagome stared out the window, trying not to lose hope, trying not to let her desire to see Ryukostokken in pieces overwhelm her. He had too much to answer for. Sesshomaru would make him pay, she knew, but she wanted to be at his side when it happened. And she wanted Ko to be free as well. If Kagome escaped, but left Ko behind, she didn't think she could live with herself, knowing - having *seen* - what Ko went through at the Dragon Lord's hands. She shuddered. The silence was deafening, and she couldn't stand it. So she did what she always did: she talked. Kagome spoke of what she knew of air currents and the design of a bird's wing. She talked about biology and her difficulty with math classes, even when she was younger. She described her friends from home, and the silly coded notes they would pass to each other to avoid being caught.

Her throat was nearly raw when Ko interrupted her, “Why would you help me? You begged him to stop, I heard you, you...you cried for me. Why?”

“Why wouldn't I?” Kagome stared at her in shock.

“I am a demon, you are a miko.”

“So? What does that have to do with anything? Who could watch what he did and not react that way? I should have done more,” she chastised herself. “If I had a weapon, or if I had trained harder - I am so sorry I didn't do more, Ko.” She tipped her head back against the wall, feeling tears of frustration pricking at the backs of her eyes. “Sango would have killed the guards before they could chain her,” she muttered. She sank into herself for several minutes, trying to find a way she could have done better.

“Are you really *His* miko?” Ko asked quietly.

“What?” Kagome was startled out of her own internal examination. Her reiki was still there, exhausted, raw, but not completely consumed, and a little tendril of Sesshomaru's youki remained as well. It felt comforting to have something of him with her. She tucked it into place and focused on Ko.

“The,” her voice lowered and her sightless eyes flickered to the locked door, “the Saidai Mao. Are you his miko?”

“I am my own,” Kagome answered sharply. Ko's expression became withdrawn, and Kagome smiled in apology, even though she knew the demoness couldn't see it. “But I am of the West, now. I guess if I belong to anyone here, it would be him.”

Ko leaned away, and a gentle breeze stirred around Kagome, lifting her hair and tugging at her clothes. The youkai's eyes widened. “You *want* to be with him? Is he your-” she cut herself off and pressed a finger to her lips, nodding to the door. Nearly silent footsteps stopped outside, then continued on after a few seconds. Ko leaned close to Kagome's ear and whispered, “Will the West take revenge on the

North for this?" She gestured vaguely.

Kagome shook her head. "Not revenge," she spoke as softly as she could. "Sesshomaru will kill Ryukostokken, because he deserves to die." She stared into Ko's wide, milky eyes, thinking about the pox, and the many ways it could scar a patient.

"If you were to see your Lord, now, would you make certain of it?" There was something in her voice, something urgent and solemn that made Kagome reach out and grab her hands.

"Sesshomaru will end this, I know it."

"Come, before the light is too far gone," she seized Kagome's hands with the strength of a youkai and pulled her to her feet. Ko hunched over her belly protectively and walked slowly. Her limp was prominent, and fresh blood still trailed down the insides of her legs, but she leaned against the wall and held her open hand out the window. A leaf, still green in the center but curled and browned along the edges, floated into her palm. "Lie still, and do not use your holy power. I will command the winds to take you as far as they can, but with this storm you might not make it all the way across the water. Can you swim?"

Kagome blinked, uncomprehending for a moment. "Yes," she answered slowly, "I can swim, but-

"Good. Climb up onto the sill and-

"But you said you couldn't fly without youki to help you," Kagome blurted.

"I cannot. But I can call the winds. I cannot say for certain where you will land, but it will be as close to the mainland and as far west as I can get you. When you reach the shore, stay quiet, and keep moving south and west. Ryukostokken's troops are heading East, seeking a path to the Southern Lands through the chaos left in the wake of Kuren's assassination. There shouldn't be many soldiers for you to avoid."

"You – you'd do this for me? You'll be caught, he'll know you helped me escape. I can't, you'll be punished." Unbidden, the memory of his twisted smile as he thrust mercilessly into Ko came to Kagome's mind, making her head ache and her stomach churn. "I can't!"

"You will," Ko insisted, her face hard. "You will go, and you will make certain the Saidai Mao meets Ryukostokken in battle. Make sure he kills that wingless son of a whore!"

Youki swirled down Ko's arm towards the leaf, and Kagome seized her hand drawing it back into the room. "Wait!"

"Damnit!" she hissed. "Are all humans so stupid! I am trying to help you!"

"Just give me a minute," Kagome pleaded. She pressed her hands at the sides of Ko's head, and called

her power. Sluggish, aching, her reiki answered, flowing up to her hands and seeping into the demoness. Ko's eyes were scarred. Kagome could see the tough tissue wrapped around the nerves that sent electrical signals to the brain. The organs were alive, but filmy with mucus that built up from deformed tear ducts. She tugged, gently, and her holy power slipped along each fiber, sliding under the thick remains of Ko's fight against the pox and stripping away the scars. Footsteps sounded outside again, startling her, and her reiki surged. Kagome jumped back, and Ko let out a tiny sound of pain. The miko ached with remorse. Twin spots of red flesh, burnt black at the edges, fanned out from Ko's temples. The demoness stared at her. Pale green eyes wide with-

Pale green eyes.

"I can see you," Ko whispered. Kagome gave her an uncertain smile, relieved at least something had gone right and hoping the wind youkai would forgive her for the accidental purification. "I can see you," she repeated. A smile lifted the corners of her lips, and Kagome was stunned by her beauty. The smile broke into a grin, and Ko jumped. The air bent and swirled under her to give her extra lift. She immediately sank back to the earth with an expression of pain, holding her ribs and squeezing her knees together.

"Oh," Kagome said, "let me just-" A wave of dizziness overcame her, and she had to lean against the wall to keep from passing out. "Give me a minute and I'll take care of everything."

"No, you need to go. The guards will have sensed your reiki and report to Wei, the administrator. He will come to check on you."

"No, I can- I just need to-"

"You need to go, before they come back."

"They'll see your eyes and know I healed you." Kagome watched, stunned as air swirled in from the open window. Cold moisture clung to her cheeks and hair, and circled Ko's head before settling and thickening around her eyes. When it dissipated, they were milky white once more. "Oh, you shouldn't have-"

"It is just fog." With a wave of her fingers the whiteness fell away, revealing green irises once more. "I can call it at will when there is enough moisture nearby. Now come," she urged. Kagome pushed away from the wall, and the moment she was upright, dizziness struck, and then she was falling, blackness closing around her vision. A leaf cushion, smelling of autumn and buzzing gently with youki, was waiting to catch her, and it curled around her as she sank into it in exhaustion. The last thing she saw was Ko's pretty green eyes. "Stay quiet, and remember this: black for treason, blue for danger to your allies, red for attack. Say it." Kagome mumbled the words, uncomprehending, but obediently memorizing. The light was fading, and Ko's lips pressed against her forehead. "If you are of the West, Miko, then tell your Lord you have made allies today. And tell him Ryukostokken should suffer for what he's done."

Chapter 22: Eloquence

Kimi listened with one ear to the distant sound of childish whispers while Kento finished his report. Hisao continued to ignore her, in a manner barely toeing the line of acceptable behavior. He quietly studied the maps and scrolls spread across the low table, as though it enhanced his understanding of Kento's suggestions. In reality, his shoulders were angled just enough to let her know he would not deign to give her his full attention. When his opinion or any additional information was required of him, he spoke tersely - and directed his gaze to the intricate silk hangings displayed on the wall behind her.

Kimi repressed a sigh, but allowed herself a calculated smile. Sesshomaru's advisors were brilliant at their roles, and experienced beyond their years. *Still so young*, she thought wryly. Hisao, the Captain of the West, was acting like a pup that had been left to care for a disliked spinster aunt. Kento, who had always been far more politically and socially cunning, gave no indication that he did not hold The Lady of the West in all the high esteem that she deserved. At the same time, he smoothly avoided topics that he felt should be reserved for Sesshomaru's consideration. He was sorely mistaken - both in his assumptions and his tactics.

The Lady absently sent a light touch of youki to the restless little female snuggled in her mokomoko. The pup calmed outwardly, but her sorrow and distress still left a bitter taste in the air. It was the final weight to Kimi's decision. As much as she enjoyed toying with others, there was work to be done, and foolish posturing and bruised feelings impeded her actions.

Kimi fixed a cold stare upon her son's advisors. "Kento, send your underling to report to This One. Hisao, your second in command will take your place as captain. This One relieves you both of your duties."

Her casual statements were met with a silence that Kimi savored. *The calm before the storm*. She did so love to disrupt patterns, rearrange them as she wished. She had not realized until after Sesshomaru had left, but she dearly missed the daily intrigue of court. Perhaps, once the miko was returned, she would stay to see what machinations she could put into place. Sesshomaru would, obviously, benefit from her assistance - although, like any perennially ungrateful pup, he would deny it. The miko, too, would no doubt be thankful for guidance in the difficult times ahead of her. And it would all be extremely amusing, of course.

"Kimi-sama, if I may humbly-" Kento began with a deep bow and a tilt of his jaw to expose his neck.

Hisao interrupted him with much more concise language, "Not a chance in hell will I leave the West entirely in your hands - not after you convinced him-" He broke off abruptly, snapping his teeth together. His nostrils flared in anger, and Kimi was sure he was absorbing any scent cues he could pick up. She prepared herself and lessened her youki barrier a fraction. The moment her chilling fury reached the two inu they both straightened, emotion wiped from their expressions, if not their scents.

"Our apologies, Kimi-sama," Kento started again, "we do not-"

“You most certainly do not,” she said curtly. She noted with satisfaction that the secretary nodded in acceptance and lapsed into obedient silence, hands folded into his sleeves. Her gaze returned to the captain, who was struggling to tone down the burnished metallic scent of his resentment. Kimi carelessly flung a loose strand of hair over her shoulder, her fingers brushing against the Meido Stone where it lay against her chest. She could feel Hisao’s eyes on the amulet and she leaned forward with heartless intent, a tiny smile flirting at the corner of her mouth. “However, if you would prefer to take your chances in hell, This One can arrange it.” Kimi, had she been a lesser youki, would have rolled her eyes at the captain’s unsuccessful struggle against subservience. Finally, he bowed and tilted his head slightly, conceding that she was the alpha in the room. “This One will not extend a third opportunity to serve.”

The Western Lady had not been in the palace since the death of Inu no Tashio - before either of the males in front of her gained their current rank. Their ignorance of her authority was not unreasonable, but nor was it forgivable. She found it ridiculous that such displays were necessary for those who were clearly subordinate - socially, politically, and in measure of youki power. At the same time, it was comforting to know that her son, always so distant from others, had inspired such loyalty - friendship - from two honorable inu.

Still, there would be time later to insinuate herself into Sesshomaru’s personal matters and assess his young advisors more thoroughly. Once the West was properly secured and the dragon whelp had been painfully ripped from any sort of existence...but then again, Kimi was not a patient female, and she had always excelled at multi-tasking.

“Now that such distasteful matters of status and responsibility have been determined,” she said, “This One wishes to move on to more pleasant considerations.” She paused to pour herself another cup of tea and take a small sip. The fragrant liquid muffled the tension saturating the room and the action gave it time to dissipate. “Tell This One of the prisoner, Gekien. Has his torture been sufficient to determine if he plays a part in treasonous action?” Hisao and Kento did not look to each other in astonishment, but Kimi suspected they only barely restrained themselves. She smiled into her cup. Knowing things was interesting, but it was exceedingly fun to throw out tidbits like a lit firework and see what happened.

Kento, as expected, recovered first. “My Lord ordered that the former healer recover from his wounds and endure interrogations only, until he was ready to see to punishment and...encouragement...himself.”

“And what of the results?”

She watched carefully as the captain shed the last of his animosity before he spoke, “Although Gekien has not done himself any favors with his continued slurs against humans and Miko-sama, in particular, he has not incriminated himself or any others of espionage. I recommended that more stringent mechanisms be used immediately to determine what he knows. However, Sesshomaru-sama wished to be present and had not found the opportunity prior to his departure.”

“Males should never have been meant to rule,” she murmured, “so clearly unable to deal with multiple issues at once.” She shook her head in recrimination and continued, “This One’s most generous offer to relieve some of Sesshomaru’s responsibility, for a time, has been graciously accepted. There is no longer any excuse for such idleness, Hisao.” She caressed Emi again with her youki and smiled at the pup while she decreed, teaching the young one an important lesson in etiquette, “It is most inhospitable of the West to allow Gekien to languish without attention. This One will see him immediately after breakfast. Hisao, before you attend your scheduled duties, have a respectable set of needles prepared. Kento, see that the servants procure a work garment for This One - it would be wasteful to soil such elegant work.” She smoothed one pale hand across the intricate embroidery of her kimono. Torture always put her in a mood to purchase new clothes. “Your mate will come to the palace this afternoon, Kento. This One will discuss the needs of the pack with her, after defense plans have been reviewed.”

Incredulity, grudging acceptance, even admiration mingled in their scents, and Kimi was torn again between irritation and amusement. *The young ones are almost too easy to manipulate*, she thought with a pointed glance at the captain. “Hisao, bring back your initial plans for securing the border once you have completed today’s training session with the soldiers.” She dismissed them with a wave of her claws, and called quietly at their retreating backs, “Do send in the little ones, on your way out.”

Kimi refreshed her tea and urged Emi to take a few sips of water before the pup snuggled back into the miko’s robe, still whining periodically for the female who had taken her in. The shoji screens of the small reception room - hers for centuries before she exiled herself - closed behind the advisors, and the Lady was left to consider the small room and the tasks ahead of her while she waited. She tapped her claws against her teacup absently. She did not think that Sesshomaru would be gone long. Two, perhaps three days at most. In the meantime, it was imperative that the West projected an impenetrable front, and continued to seek out and strangle the traitors’ whispers that were leaving the palace - bound for the ears of their enemies.

The opening of the door brought her out of her musings, and she meticulously noted every detail as the two entered and approached her. The human girl, her son’s ward - *daughter*, she reminded herself - walked hand in hand with a two-tails. Kimi found it difficult to judge his age, as kitsune grew sporadically as they increased in power, but from the way he protectively wrapped his youki around Rin, she guessed he considered himself to be the more mature of the two. He was well-groomed, although his hair was too long for the childish bow and his clothes were a size too small. He met her eyes, not fearlessly, but determinedly. Kimi felt the beginnings of respect for the little fox, although she admitted that she had always had a soft spot for tricksters.

The girl pulled him to a stop a length away from Kimi’s cushion and bowed deeply; the male was only a beat behind in the respectful gesture. “Welcome, my Lady. Rin is most happy that you have come to the palace. Rin hopes you have been well.”

“Indeed, human.” Kimi kept her face carefully neutral. “Come here.” She dropped the kit’s hand and approached readily, stopping within arm’s reach. Kimi snatched the girl’s arm, more gently than she would have, remembering how fragile such creatures were, and ignored the sounds of protest the other one made. “You are still far too thin to eat,” she declared.

“Hey!” shouted the kit.

At the same time, Rin replied, eyes round and smile wide, “Oh, Rin will do better, my Lady. Rin will eat lots and lots, but Sesshomaru-sama says you must not eat your pack.”

“Hn,” Kimi sniffed, and ran her hands through the thick brown hair that hung down onto an exquisite orange kimono. “Pack? You, perhaps, but what is that one?”

Under the eyes of both females, the kit paled, then squirmed, then firmed up his expression into bold determination. “I am Shippo,” he said, then stumbled, his eyes downcast. “Higurashi Shippo, but my pack isn’t here.” Kimi marveled at the tangible proof that the miko had taken in a demon as her own child; the reports she received were, if anything, understated. Grief and frustration were thick in the kit’s scent, and his love for the miko was obvious. Kimi had already been eager to meet the one who inspired Sesshomaru to take a mate, but now her curiosity intensified considerably.

“Shippo-kun doesn’t know you are a good demon yet, my Lady. Rin has told him that Sesshomaru-sama is good, and Kagome-sama knows that too, but Shippo-kun isn’t sure.”

“Rin!” the kit whispered, blushing and frowning.

“It’s okay, Shippo-kun,” Rin continued. She turned back towards Kimi and met her eyes seriously. “We want Kagome-sama to be okay, and I know that Sesshomaru-sama will bring her back, but Shippo-kun thinks he must not want to, since he waited so long.”

“She’s human, Rin,” Shippo muttered. He glanced up at Kimi, hurt and anger evident on his face. “The servants say you wouldn’t let him keep her, that you came to the palace ‘cause you didn’t want some filthy human in your pack.” His face was growing redder, and Kimi stared, fascinated to see what would happen. “He’s stupid! I don’t care if he is your son or a Lord! He’s dumber than even Inubaka, and he shoulda, should have...Kagome’s all alone.” His voice died down to a whisper, and tears threatened to fall from his green eyes. “She saved him, and Mama’s gonna die if he doesn’t help her. Why won’t you let him - make him - help her?”

Kimi crooked one finger, and followed it with a pulse of youki that pulled the young male closer. He was trying bravely to stifle his tears, and Kimi seized his shoulders, forcing him to meet her gaze. “You should never accuse your alpha, little kit,” she said sternly. Then she swept the boy down to sit at her side, inviting Rin to do the same.

It had been too long since she had held a pup, so many years since Sesshomaru had been small enough to want to sit with her and let her run her claws through his hair. She had not realized she had missed it. She made up her mind then that she would stay at the castle for at least a few decades. The West would benefit from her presence, and her instincts would benefit from having young ones to nurture and help mold.

“Do not confront a youkai stronger than you, unless you mean to defend your life, little Shippo,” she continued. “However,” she pulled the bow out of his hair and eased her claws into the furry mass on his head, “my son is, indeed, an idiot.” Rin sucked in a breath and Shippo sat up to stare at Kimi. The noble inu held his gaze, finally quirking one brow in question. “Do you think he gets his reasoning skills from me?”

“Nooooo,” Shippo drew out the word uncertainty.

“You are correct. That, he inherited from his sire. Foolishness when confronted with the desire of his heart. *I* am much more intelligent. What does your mother do, when you make incorrect choices?”

“She-” Shippo glanced to Rin to gain courage and gulped. “She makes me fix my mistakes, my Lady.”

“Hn,” Kimi nodded and urged both children to stand. She picked up Emi and led the way to the doors. “She may also be intelligent then.” Both young ones sucked in air in surprise.

“Did my Lady-” Rin began.

Shippo spoke over her, “He went after her?”

“Indeed.” She allowed herself a small smile at the surge of excitement and happiness in their scents, and continued into the hallway. “This One shall dine with you, and then you will return to your studies until you are summoned.” A chorus of ‘yes, my Lady’ rang in the hall and the children skipped ahead, quite forgetting proper decorum, toward their breakfast. Kimi scented the inquisitive attention of the pup in her arms, and glanced down, considering her seriously. “And you, my little one,” she murmured, “you shall join me while I exercise my needle skills. Perhaps the nice smell of blood will bring back your appetite, yes?”

The pup leaned into Kimi’s mokomoko and the Lady shrugged. “Perhaps not. In any case, it is never too soon to begin learning a useful skill. Pay close attention, little pup.” She gestured with her fingers as she spoke. “You must only insert the point this far - less if there is a nerve - and then....”

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Inuyasha shook the blood from his claws and held out a hand to Kouga. The wolf spit out a tooth, and then stood, cracking his joints and shaking loose the tension of battle. The wooded path they stood on continued behind them through a narrow mountain pass for another thousand feet before abruptly descending in switch backs towards the Nikko Valley. Ahead, vegetation became sparser as the mountain rose and rocky soil made the few trees grow gnarled and deep-rooted. Inuyasha flashed a grin, considering the wreckage he and his companion had wrought.

Pines lay in splinters, their white wood drenched in the ichor of a dozen bodies. One half-transformed dragon had been impaled with a thick branch, pinning a leathery wing to an undersized, scaly body.

Wolves, most injured, only one mortally so, picked their way through the mess to stand by their pack leader.

“Getting bolder, coming this far south. It’s like they don’t think we’ll defend our ground,” Kouga said. Inuyasha grunted, distracted by the hole in his arm that had been charred by dragon fire. It hurt like a sonofabitch, but more importantly, his healing would be slowed by the cauterization. Kouga continued, “Or maybe they just don’t know there is anybody left in the East. Maybe they think they got all the powerful demons at Kuren’s palace.”

“Keh. If they don’t know already, they will soon. That asshole that got away yesterday was hightailin’ it back north. Them dragons are gonna be gettin’ an earful about us.”

Kouga agreed with Inuyasha’s assessment and began looking over his pack while he talked. “We won’t have as much success with our ambush tactics. They’ll be more cautious once they are aware they might meet resistance.” He pulled an acidic fang out of a smaller wolf and studied the tooth. “We should check in with your monk and see how the field preparation is going. If he is on schedule, we can split up. I’ll take the wilder demons through the mountains, and you and what’s left of the Eastern guard can work up the coast.”

It was a plan they had worked out soon after Inuyasha had arrived with orders from Sesshomaru. The Eastern soldiers that had been stationed outside of the castle had survived the massacre, but the pox took a heavy toll on their numbers. Miroku and Sango had administered Kagome’s dried medicine as soon as demons were brought to them, but still, fewer than twenty percent of the original forces survived. The wolves had been instrumental in finding and bringing in the soldiers, while Inuyasha had gathered all of his old allies and any independent demons in the East. The two leaders had little serious friction between them since Kagome had finally put Kouga in his place, and found that their preferred style of battle and planning was similar. Both relied heavily on instinct and experience in a fight, and favored surprise and brute force over complex strategy.

Although, Inuyasha found himself considering his options more often than ever before. He had never had anyone really depending on him before. Sure, there was Miroku and Sango, but they could take care of themselves and they were always ready to take on an opponent. Kagome and Shippo had needed his protection, but they’d always been with him, every step of the way, never out of sight if he could help it.

Sesshomaru - *that fuckin’ bastard* - had placed a lot of responsibility on his shoulders. If the asshole was to be believed, the whole West was counting on him. And not just the West. Inuyasha had seen with his own eyes the palace of the Eastern Lord. It was brutal, worse than anything he had ever seen before - and that included Naraku. If Ryu-shit-for-brains was capable and willing of that scale of brutality against a youkai rival, Inuyasha had a pretty good idea of what he would do to a village of humans. To Edo. To anything in the East too weak to stand up for itself against that kind of power.

Inuyasha had been that kind of weak once.

When he was a kid, right after his mother died, he had seen what a man, or a youkai, could do when there was no one to stop them. It had been a long time since Inuyasha had been forced to take a beating, or watch someone innocent be killed. He did not want to relive the experience. He straightened his shoulders, managing to contain a wince when his fire rat brushed against the burned flesh on his arm. Inuyasha wiped the blade of Tessaiga on a clean patch of grass and replaced it in the sheath, shading his eyes to look up at the sun. It would set in a few hours, and the crescent of the moon had already begun to rise.

Crescent moon.

Inuyasha's eyes widened and he swiftly took inventory of his own body. He swore to himself. In the pressure and constant action of the last few weeks, the moon's cycle had fallen to the back of his mind. That had happened a few times before, and it'd put both him and his companions in immense danger. Keeping the secret of his human night had always been a priority, but with an entire army against them, with everything riding on his ability to lead and fight, it was more important than ever.

"Five days," he barked. Inuyasha sprang up into a tree and glanced back at Kouga's confused face. He gritted his teeth and elaborated. "I need to report to my asshole half-brother, then I'll swing by Edo and check in with Miroku before heading up the coast. I'll get the first squadron in place in five days, and then I'll keep heading north."

"Good idea," Kouga nodded. "Lord Sesshomaru might have some more information for us too. Send a runner if you have something for me." Inuyasha took off, bounding above the treetops, before the wolf prince could finish. His shouted, "Good luck, dog turd!" echoed off of the mountain.

The hanyou increased his speed. He had three nights and three days to get to the Western Palace, grab Kagome, and make it back to the well before the night of the new moon. Kagome would have to stay in Edo afterwards while he headed up the coast - or if the bastard wanted her right away... Inuyasha snorted. *'Course he'll come after her. It's Kagome. She can't be left alone for an afternoon without getting injured or kidnapped.* He knew too that, although he hated to admit it to himself, Sesshomaru cared too much for the future miko to let her leave his side for long. They would be lucky if the mighty Lord of the West didn't throw a fit about her going for a visit through the well. Inuyasha grinned to himself, even as the cold winter wind stung his wound and his heart began to pump harder with his increase of pace. Kagome would put Sesshomaru in his place, and that was a scene that was worth leaving the battlefield for.

He hoped the arrogant, tattooed dog was there when he arrived. Inuyasha couldn't wait to remind him to treat Kagome well. And 'offending' full-demon noses with the scent of a hanyou all over the castle would be its own reward. He grinned again, and launched himself into the air. The asshole was a fucker - sure - but there was no one he would rather irritate.

Chapter 23: White Knight

The stars were bright. Kagome stared up in confusion for a few moments. It shouldn't have been so dark. The sun hadn't yet set when she was talking with Ko... *Ko*. Kagome's eyes widened. Ko had said she would help her escape. *She had a leaf and then...*

Kagome tried to sit up. Her transport rocked wildly, spinning enough to make her reach out to grip the sides. That was a mistake. Dry, curled leaf crumbled under her hands. She let out a little cry of alarm, and froze, half-lying and half-sitting. The leaf - nearly six feet long - was shaped like a taco shell: open on both ends and angling up at the top. Gradually, gently, she lay back down and the flight began to steady. Kagome willed her heart to stop pounding and tilted her head as far as she could to look out the open end of the leaf. The storm clouds, present for so many days, had disappeared. It was lucky the high sides of the leaf and youki-fueled wind shear had kept the worst of the snow and bitter cold away. She was dusted with a light crust of the frozen white flakes, and her face felt numb, but it could have been much worse - deadly - if she had been exposed to the elements for very long.

The darkness curved from one end of the leaf to another; the sky was distinguished by pinpricks of stars and a fat crescent moon. Kagome sighed, gently, so as not to disturb the delicate balance of her glider. Ko had done it. She had somehow managed to get her out of the dragons' castle, just as she said she would. Kagome worried her lip. The wind youkai was still there, back in the Northern fortress, with the most reprehensible monster she'd ever had the misfortune to meet. Her eyes hardened. She had to go back. Ko deserved to escape as well - perhaps even more than Ryukostokken deserved to die. Kagome owed her that, and it was the right thing to do. As soon as she landed, and figured out where she was, and got back to the Western Palace, and talked to Sesshomaru...

Kagome wanted to moan in despair. It was overwhelming; she would have never believed she would think it, but she *almost* missed the 'kill the bad guys, steal the shard, rinse and repeat' quest for the Shikon. In comparison, a pending war with a psychotic killer required more strategy and finesse than she had ever had to employ with Inuyasha. Kagome laughed to herself. That was the real difference between Inuyasha and Sesshomaru. Easy simplicity versus stunning complexity. The brothers would fight the same battles, protect their packs and their honor, never consider giving up, but their methods seemed as different as black and white.

She glanced up at the stars and moon again, and frowned. The leaf had leveled out, mostly, and the rotation had stopped completely - which was great news for her stomach - but she thought she might be going slower. Kagome listened to the wind around her. She sighed in frustration; she just couldn't tell how fast she was moving. Hesitantly, she reached out with her reiki, hoping that the youki that kept her afloat might have a tiny bit of information about where she was, how far she had to go, or how fast she was travelling. And maybe she could nudge it to flatten out so that her blood would stop slowly draining to her head and she would no longer have to worry that she might suddenly begin to slide out the open end of the leaf.

She closed her eyes, smiling a bit at the last little curl of Sesshomaru's power that was still wrapped around her protectively. She tugged, gently, and it relaxed just enough that she could tap a small portion of her energy and send it outside herself to probe her surroundings. Kagome had a split second to gain the impression of cool silver currents before her reiki came into direct contact with that air. The leaf dropped, and like a skydiver without a parachute, Kagome felt the sudden increase in pressure and the air below rushed up to bend the leaf around her. "No!" She couldn't help but sit up and cry out, and her reiki mimicked her - flaring wildly. Quickly, she reigned her power back in, Sesshomaru's youki tying it up tightly, but her drop did not slow at all.

"Please, please, please," she whispered. Her holy energy was clamoring at her to do *something*. She pressed her hands against the leaf, straining to hold back her own instinct for self-preservation, knowing that the only way she would survive a descent from such a height was if youki assisted her. *Ko said not to use my reiki*, she reminded herself with a mental slap.

One hand accidentally broke through the delicate paper of the dry leaf, and Kagome screamed. Still, she held in her reiki. A pulse of cool air sent her transport spinning, forcing her to close her eyes or throw up. Another, stronger blast hit her from below. Her descent slowed for a moment, and then she was falling again. Another, hard burst of wind pushed her up and angled her forward as well. The process repeated, making Kagome's stomach churn with fear and motion sickness.

The unnatural gusts of wind - Kagome knew they had to be youki-fueled and sent a blessing to Ko - grew less frequent and intense as time wore on. If Ko was losing the ability to sustain the wind, it was only a matter of time before she fell. Without youki to hold the shape and size of the leaf, it would shrink, leaving her in a dive. *Think, Kagome, think*, she ordered herself. She needed to be lower, or it wouldn't matter if she dropped over water or land - the impact would still kill her. If she landed in the water... *Just don't land in the water*.

She inched out and turned her head to peek around the edge of the leaf - and almost immediately regretted it. Bitterly cold air stung her face and threatened to freeze the liquid in her eyes. She pulled back quickly, only able to make out that the black below her reflected the moonlight, *the ocean*, and in the distance it became flatter and lighter. *Please, by all that is holy, let that be snow*. "If it isn't land, I'll always have thought it should have been," she muttered. *For about three minutes, until I fall into a hypothermic coma and drown*. She briefly considered trying to flip the leaf over and use it like a parachute. At the touch of her hands, however, the dry edges crumbled. Only the very center was still green enough to be pliable and support her weight.

Shaking with cold and fear, Kagome judged the distance to the land and the ocean, whispered a blessing for good luck, and punched her hand through the leaf. With two holes in the bottom, the currents holding her up were less effective, and her downward momentum increased. The land was drawing closer, but she couldn't be sure if it was enough. Kagome's teeth began to chatter and her legs felt numb. Cold air stung her exposed face and hands, but she refused to lie back down. She judged the shore to be less than a mile away, although it was difficult to tell in the darkness. Kagome tried desperately to remember anything from geography class. She hoped that wherever she was had a minimum of sharp rocks and basalt cliffs - preferably none.

She counted to sixty, and guessed how far she had travelled; glad she had managed to get some studying done between shard hunts - especially time and distance equations. Her rate of speed was too slow, both in forward momentum and descent. Swimming in freezing water was a bad idea, but she knew how to swim and how to build a fire. She did not know how to keep afloat with a broken pelvis, which was likely if she was more than two hundred feet above the water. *I'm not going to make it to land, so how do I survive a fall into water?*

She had no way to make the wind stronger, or the leaf faster. But she could increase her rate of fall. *Not too much - just enough. Too much and I'll break something, either my spine or my ride; not enough and the leaf will disappear before I am ready.* Kagome stared up at the moon, knowing what she should do and calling herself crazy. *This is so dumb, so dumb. Shit. Just do it. Goddamnit! Just do it!* She punched her hand through the leaf again, and then again. Wind howled into the rents in the thin tissue, screaming past her and heralding a rapid drop. A heartbeat behind, the youki wind buffeted her, tearing through the side of her transport and slamming directly into her.

Kagome was much, much closer to the land. She could clearly make out a snowy beach and the uneven shape of an icebound forest. Crumbling, leafy ash left a trail in the air above her as she became more exposed. She was also closer to the water, but it wasn't enough.

She couldn't hear her own sobs of fear and desperate frustration over the sound of her plummet. Tears and snot ran down her face, freezing against her skin. Something tugged inside her and she felt the pull of Sesshomaru's tendril of youki on her reiki, urging it to the surface. She hadn't figured correctly, or something else was conspiring against her - as usual. Her last thought before she slammed into the water, feet first, pink light blazing around her, was, *Damn, Inuyasha should have let me study more.*

ooo

Ko leaned back against the wall in the small cell, gasping for breath and holding her aching ribs. She had lost it. Her youki was almost completely expended; she didn't have enough power to sustain flight - even if she could find the miko again. If her leaf lasted ten minutes without her energy, it would be a miracle. She tilted her head to listen to the wind, waiting for news of the one who had escaped. She had flown to the mainland many times and knew how long the journey took. She hadn't carried the miko far enough; she was going to fall into the ocean.

The demoness didn't know many humans, and none well, but she was aware that a human was far weaker than a youkai. It was unlikely that the miko would survive if she landed over the open water. She was not too far from the shore, less than a league, but the waters were cold, and humans needed warmth. Ko closed her eyes against a tidal wave of despair. The miko needed to get word to the Saidai Mao; he had to attack Ryukostokken. The Western Lord was perhaps the only being strong enough to defeat the dragon, and the longer the North was left to prepare and plot, the more difficult the upcoming battle would be.

The storm had slowly died out while she worked to help the miko escape. No more snow fell outside and the demoness could see the stars. For the first time in decades, *she could see the stars*. Footsteps sounded on the stairs and Ko quickly summoned mist through the window to cloud her eyes as she listened to a muffled conversation.

“I should have been woken immediately!” Wei’s angry voice was unmistakable.

An apologetic guard replied, “I am sorry, sir. Your personal attendant said that you did not want to be disturbed until morning. I waited as long as I felt prudent.”

“You waited until another guard had the balls to deliver our Lord’s summons and do your work for you. You are not only a coward, but an idiot. The tree youkai I was questioning has been here years and he is not going anywhere. Hence the term prisoners,” the mocking condescension was audible in his voice. “It would have waited for something this important.” There was the sound of flesh hitting flesh, and a restrained snarl. “You can consider your mistake while you spend the next decade cleaning latrines,” the administrator snapped.

The door slammed open, and Wei stood in the entrance, two guards at his back. “Bring them both. My Lord wishes-” He sucked in a deep breath in surprise and snarled in the language of the dragons. Ko had been held captive long enough to make out his words, “*Search the castle, find the human!*” One guard dashed off and Wei stalked into the room. “Where is she?”

“Drowning, I assume,” Ko said dryly. It was the truth, and not the truth. In her years under Ryukostokken’s rule, she had learned to walk a careful line. To protect her secrets, she had to be honest enough that youkai senses would not discover a lie, and vague enough that she gave nothing away. If she was too vague, an intelligent demon would suspect her. *Lucky for me, there aren’t too many of those around.*

With the fog clouding her eyes she couldn’t see, but Ko had years of practice at blindness as well. Wei leaned back from her, stirring the air slightly and scented so strongly with frustration and fear that even she could smell them. Ryukostokken didn’t have the superior nose of an inu, but he would taste the administrator’s fear as well. Few things sparked a predator’s interest like fear. Wei was in trouble; responsibility for the guards, and ultimately their prisoners, was his alone. Ryukostokken would not be pleased. Ko held in a vengeful smile.

“She jumped out the window?” The administrator shoved Ko out of the way to lean out of the opening in the wall and peer down at the waves. The sound of their crash against the rough stone of the cliff base was loud in the absence of the storm.

“I heard her leave,” Ko said, wiping all emotion from her voice.

Wei snapped his teeth at her. “Why didn’t you stop her, you useless whore?” In response, Ko pulled her hands away from her body and carefully straightened her legs, revealing what she knew to be a massive bloodstain on the white shirt the miko had left her. Her insides were still ripped apart from

Ryukostokken's treatment. They would take days to heal completely. She tilted her face to the side, revealing the burn marks left by Kagome's reiki - which Ko knew would be taken as signs of a struggle. The dragon did not comment, but turned sharply and left, issuing orders to the remaining guard, "Gather as many soldiers as can be spared; scour the rocks for any sign of her."

The door was left partly open behind them, as Ko was given free reign to move through the castle. A blind wind youkai was incapable of leaving, so there was no reason to lock her in. She released the mist from her eyes, grateful to see once again. The miko had done that for her, given her sight, and much more. The human woman had struggled against Ryukostokken when she had no reason to hope. She'd helped Ko when there was no benefit for her to do so. *She is strong*, Ko decided. *She may have a chance.*

ooo

The stifling heat of the earth irritated Sesshomaru. He wanted to run, to fly, to expend some of the furious energy that was building inside him, had been since the moment the miko was taken and he had forced himself to remain inactive. The power of the rock brothers made movement not only unnecessary, but also dangerous - even for a being of his caliber. They bent the earth and stone around themselves and their Lord positioned between them. The lands moved around them, rather than they moving over the lands. It was a fast, efficient means of travel, if confining.

More importantly, Sesshomaru reminded himself, it was stealthy. Under normal circumstances, the underground travel of the rock youkai was more than sufficient to avoid detection. It was the same method they had used to infiltrate the North two decades earlier and destroy the prisoner camp where Ryustokken kept his food. For this expedition, the daiyoukai had ordered additional precautions. He was determined that even someone who knew the methods of elemental movement would not sense their departure or passing - another safeguard against the espionage he suspected was still at work in the West.

Eiji and Eiichi had wrapped their youki around him and had pulled him slowly into the rock floor of the hot springs, underneath the castle and far from prying eyes. It had taken an hour to descend to a depth Sesshomaru had deemed acceptable, and then they had begun moving forward. The heat of the deep earth pressed against them as the weight of hundreds of feet of dirt and stone weighed down on them. Sesshomaru estimated that several hours had passed since they had begun - several more since they had travelled under the border of the Northern Lands. He gauged their travel speed and the distance between the Western Palace and the waters of the Tsugaru Strait.

With a quiet word, he stopped their progress, "Up."

The rock demons obeyed, slowing the ripples of the earth around them until they came to a standstill. Beads of sweat formed on their brows; Sesshomaru judged them to be working hard, but nowhere near exhaustion. They released additional youki, infusing the layers of stone beneath them and parting the ground above, and they began to rise. Sesshomaru continued to fulfill his role in their plan, masking his presence and containing his massive power. He surpassed even his usual control; except for sight,

no sense - demon or otherwise - would note his presence from more than a few feet away. Rock demons, to those unfamiliar with their abilities, were often mistaken in passing as spirits of the earth. The Western Lord was counting on Ryukostokken's intolerance to have kept his patrolling soldiers unable to recognize the particular sensation of elemental youki when it was nearby. The location had been carefully chosen: far enough from the landing site for Northern ships to avoid soldiers, but still minimizing the distance of the water crossing.

As they neared the surface, Eiji reigned in his power and used the impenetrable skin of his hands and the strength of his arms to part the soil over their heads. Eiichi sent one last bolt of energy below them, eliciting a tremor from the earth that would propel them the rest of the way, before hiding his own youki. The ground parted, sending crumbles of dirt and puffs of dust and snow scattering around them as they emerged.

Sesshomaru was immediately greeted by the sight of the crescent moon - the sign of his mother's house - and a tug on his youki. He reigned it in, suppressing his energy and scanning the ice-encrusted rocky beach and black waves of the ocean. He reviewed his strategy. They would rest briefly, then return to the earth, moving even deeper to cross under the sea and reach the stronghold of the North. Once there, the brothers would search out the miko through the stone that was Ryukostokken's castle. Sesshomaru felt certain she would be on an upper floor - height was an easy way of containing humans - and he would climb the exterior of the castle, without assistance from his youki, to reach her. His lip lifted slightly in a minute display of disgust at the indignity of scaling fortifications like a common human thief. If all went well, he would not have to kill many guards before he found her and brought her back to his own soldiers. *Once underground again, we -*

His skin tightened and his youki heated inside him, rolling and gathering itself - ready to take action. Something was wrong. Some detail was incongruous and it disturbed him. Still unwilling to stretch out his power and risk alerting a patrol, Sesshomaru instead pushed his other senses to their limits. Turning in a slow circle, he listened to the woods further inland: every tree branch that creaked under a burden of snow and creature that stirred. His ears focused on the rough wash of cold saltwater on ice-slick dark stones. His eyes scanned everything while he inhaled deeply, trying to find what was out of place.

Trees and snow. *Pine and clean, cold water.* A wary owl. *Feathers and warm meat.* Smooth stones and black waves. *Frozen earth and wet salt.* The moon, the sign of his house. Distant stars that winked and disappeared behind a lone cloud. Winter on the ocean. *Crisp tang, warm salt, cherry wood-* Sesshomaru froze, tilting his face in a manner he had never done before, would have scorned if he saw another so poised. He lifted his nose to catch a delicate breeze. *New, sweet cherry wood. Magnolia blossoms. Sour melon.*

"She is here," he growled in a low voice. The rock brothers stood at attention, their inferior senses scanning the area around them. She was across the water, he knew, but without his youki, he could not tell where. Another scent reached him, hidden, but not well enough. "So is the enemy." His blood pounded in his chest; his eyes grew hot. She was close, so close, and he would have her again. *Reveal yourself, alert the enemy, and it will mean nothing,* he admonished himself.

He signaled his soldiers, and the rock brothers stepped silently away, seemingly melting into the shadows between the tree line and the beach. Footsteps were muffled by deep drifts of snow. The approach of a youkai - strong, but not a daiyoukai - grated on his senses, but he remained still. Only his head turned, his eyes seeking out the wayward dragon patrol that had stumbled upon them. Pale violet eyes caught his, and widened. Fear and shock saturated the air.

Before the dragon could open his mouth, he was silenced by the violent wrenching of his neck between the powerful hands of a rock demon. Eiji smoothly, slowly, parted the snow and soil under the body of his brother's victim using a minimum of youki. Eiichi waited for the body to be almost entirely below the ground before he wrenched the head again - removing it completely and ensuring that the dragon could not heal. Both parts of the corpse were pulled into the earth, swallowing the evidence of the dead patrol and the scent of his murder. Eiichi used a fallen branch to dust the snow back into place, leaving no sign that anything had happened.

Sesshomaru stepped to the edge of the water, the tide nearly kissing his boots, and waited. The scent was slowly growing stronger, but still he could see no craft upon the waves, feel no youkai presence carrying her to him. He waited, motionless at the border of the sea, breathing her in and trying to balance his own desires against the path of conquest he had to walk - one that seemed to grow narrower and more treacherous with each footfall.

The rock brothers returned to their stations behind him. Minutes ticked by, and he glanced upward once more, judging the time by the moon. For a brief moment, the dark cloud he had seen before passed in front of the bright crescent, and he recognized it for what it was. Not a cloud, but a transport not unlike Kagura's feather - large enough to carry a human.

Anticipation clawed at his insides, easily tramping down worry and the heart-clenching *rightness* he felt at knowing she would be with him again soon. The conveyance continued on, dipping and bobbing in a reckless path towards the shore before it plummeted. Moments later, a brief, thready scream grated on his ears. His youki rose up, ready to form his cloud and go to her. Ruthlessly, reluctantly, he forced his power away rather than risk alerting any demon nearby to his presence. He snarled in rage, instead ripping off his armor and leaving it on the beach with his boots and mokomoko before he surged into the ocean. Sesshomaru's nose told him of the sour anxiety the miko must have felt as she fell.

He swam on the surface, straining his ears and eyes to track the dark shape against the darker sky as it crashed toward the water. Sesshomaru watched her break the surface in a brilliant splash of pink light before he dove.

The water soaking his clothing attempted to hinder the powerful movement of his limbs. It pushed and pulled against him, trying to steer him into currents that would carry him away from Kagome. Weak moonlight filtered through the waves, giving him just enough direction to know up from down. He surfaced only once for air and to track the miko's location as she sank, reiki slowly dimming like a signal fire threatening to go out.

She will most likely inhale the water, his logic told him dispassionately. While his mind struggled to remain focused, his instincts were threatening to overtake him, urging him to release his youki and transform, to reach her sooner. He barely managed to repress them, swimming as quickly as his smaller form would allow - cursing the imperative to conceal his true form and desiring to force nature itself to submit to him and give back what was his.

Faster! He reached the area where she had entered the water; he did not stop for air before diving, deep, deep - following the faint glow of her power. He seized the arm that trailed her descent, desperate to bring her back to the air. He pulled her tightly against him, the remains of the leaf that had transported her, and the faint youki that fueled it, dissipating in the ocean. He kicked hard, his anxiety burning in his lungs and mind until they broke the surface.

He took a deep breath, but heard no similar sound from the miko. Fear, unfamiliar and sharp, raked along his gut with sharp talons. He glanced at her face as he swam back to the shore, holding her above the water with one arm. Her eyes were closed, her mouth slightly open and dripping with seawater. Sesshomaru, even without using youki, was a great deal faster than any human. He refused to doubt that he would be quick enough. He could feel the slow, weak pulse of her heartbeat in her belly, under his arm - but no breath. Humans needed more air than youkai, he knew. Experience with Rin and travelling with the miko during the hunt for Naraku taught him they also needed warmth and dry clothing.

His feet touched the ground of the shore and mokomoko immediately twined up his leg to coil around the miko, holding her close. The rock brothers collected his armor and boots and followed him off the pebbled beach, wide-eyed and with barely concealed anxiety. They stopped at the edge of the trees, behind a large root structure that blocked the rising cold wind which plastered his wet garments uncomfortably against his body. Sesshomaru laid her on the ground, outwardly calm and inwardly shaken as he studied her pale flesh and grey lips. He listened and watched for the pulse under her skin. Her blood did not pound, but slipped through her veins quietly, sluggishly. Terror, stark naked and colder than even the sea, gripped him. Still, she did not breathe. His hair slipped over his shoulder, dripping icy water onto Kagome's slack face while he raced through every possible means of making her breathe.

"My Lord," Eiji murmured, breaking the silence he had commanded of them before they left the castle. Sesshomaru did not spare him a glance, but sat down, drawing her between his bent knees. The thin silk of her undershirt was wet beneath his hands as he gripped her arms, careful to avoid the strange angle of her limb that indicated a break, and propped her up so that her stomach and chest pressed against his leg and her face leaned towards the ground.

Eiji's eyes twitched between the forest and Sesshomaru. "My Lord, another patrol is coming this way from the dock the dragons use. They will have sensed Miko-sama's energy."

"Their youki is concealed, but even this snow cannot hide their footfalls from the stone," Eiichi elaborated in a whisper. The more impulsive brother shifted impatiently. Sesshomaru did not respond, but carefully modulated his strength, and hit the miko.

“Sesshomaru-sama!” Eiji sounded shocked. Eiichi actually moved to grab his hand, faltering when met with the daiyoukai’s poisonous glare. Assured that they would not attempt to interrupt, Sesshomaru returned his eyes to Kagome and hit her again, in the center of her back, directly between her shoulder blades. On the third, more desperate, strike, she vomited. Sea water and bile poured from her mouth in a choking cough. One of her hands ineffectually clutched at his knee where it pressed into her belly and tremors coursed through her. Finally, she drew in a shaky breath. Sesshomaru breathed again as well; he had not realized he had been holding it.

He picked her up, both to ease her shivers and settle his own racing pulse, cradling her against him and wrapping mokomoko around her. His brows drew together and he clenched his jaw. She was safe from his enemies, now that he had her, but there were many other ways a human could die. He had to get her warm and dry - soon. There was also the growing scent of other youki approaching. Under his bare feet the snow began to melt. He swiftly stalked into the woods, looking for a patch of ground where the snow was not so thick, and their departure would be less noticeable. Sesshomaru nodded shortly to signal it was time to leave. The rock brothers were at his side in an instant, silent once more and straining to feel the echoes of patrols moving across the earth. One carried his armor, the other his boots, as they each touched one of his shoulders and began sinking into the earth once again. He had been irritated by the hot press of earth on their way north, but the brittle ice forming in Kagome’s hair, the cold that seemed to emanate from her, made him eager to return to it.

Her eyes fluttered weakly before focusing briefly on his face and her speech stuttered, “I k-k-knew you would c-c-c-come, Sess-s-s-ho-ma-ru-u-u. S-s-s-saved me.” She sagged bonelessly against him, a tiny smile lifting the corners of her mouth. As the light dimmed to nothing Sesshomaru studied the miko’s pale face, her lips blue with cold. “My kn-kn-kn-knight in shining ar-r-r-mor.”

The Western Lord did not respond, but pressed her closer to his chest. There was too much he wanted to say - too many things she needed to hear. She was foolish. He was a fool as well. He needed her. She was forbidden to ever come so close to death again. She was without parallel - awesome and beautiful and *damned fortunate*. She acted fearlessly, even while she was drenched in the scent of terror, in a way that made his heart stop and his stomach flip. Unable to calm himself enough to speak, he only whispered against her temple, “Quiet, Miko.” His voice came out far weaker and tinged with a plea that he had not intended. He tried to will the heat of his body to seep through the wet cloth of his clothes and hers to warm her chilled skin. His youki clamored against the restraints he set on it, desperate to sink into her and bring back her flush - she had looked pale, even greyish. He ground his teeth together in frustration. He could not - not until they were far from the Northern patrols, and potential spies, to eliminate any chance of his youki being detected.

He had not saved her, not truly. His sardonic realization tilted his lips in a small, unwilling smile. She had somehow managed to save herself. He brushed his nose against her half-frozen hair and let out a sigh that was part exasperation and part amazement. The only defense his human woman had was untrained holy power, and she had proven nearly incapable of using it without self-injury. Her vulnerability, and her lack of concern for it, was staggering. He breathed in her scent to steady himself before straightening.

The miko had somehow escaped Ryukostokken's imprisonment, at the seat of his lands, without weapons or reiki. He reconsidered the battered, youki-fueled leaf that had carried her nearly to safety. She had apparently found allies in the most unlikely place in Japan, and made her own way back to him. Sesshomaru's lips tilted into a wry smile. The woman was utterly impossible.

There was a time when Sesshomaru would have been insulted that his brilliant strategy had been subverted... but that time had long passed. He was not certain which feeling would win the battle inside him: pride over her accomplishments, anger that she had nearly drowned herself, or the shaking release of the fear that had nearly choked him when he saw that she did not breathe. Something nearly as unfamiliar to him as fear - gratitude - rose to the top.

He was grateful to Kagome for her open nature that drew humans and youkai alike to her side like a moth to a flame. Grateful to his mother for her timely intervention. Grateful to Ryukotsusei for building such poor dungeon chambers during his reign and to Ryukostokken for guarding his prisoners so meagerly. Sesshomaru's ego, merited though it was, admitted that he had played only a very small role in the rescue of the miko. It was a strange sensation - gratitude. It unsettled him, tugged at his honor and his heart. He had no control over it, nor the actions of the one that prompted it, so it seemed. With unfamiliar submission he gave into the realization that he might be forced to become comfortable with gratitude. As long as Kagome was in his life - *forever*, he reassured himself - he would have things to be grateful for.

While a part of his mind considered the surprisingly effusive turn of sentiment, his more logical half was reviewing his intended's injuries and assessing her condition as he had seen it before they went underground. There was a shallow claw wound on the side of her face. Sesshomaru had little doubt about how she had received it, but it smelled of nothing but her blood and the sea, which was preferred. If he had scented Ryukostokken on her, he was not certain he could have continued with the plan, rather than turning and seeking out his enemy to rend him limb from limb.

The idea that any creature would act so blatantly, so *personally* offensive to the West made his blood boil. Kagome's kidnapping, the potential dire outcomes of that, would have been catastrophic for the West and Japan as a whole. The brutal closeness of her treatment was innately dishonorable and the seal on Ryukostokken's fate. Even if he had not sent soldiers to attack villages in the West, Sesshomaru would have hunted him down and bled him dry for his malfeasance.

Her cheek was deeply bruised; a small cut split the skin high on the bone. Her wrists were raw and purple as though she had been shackled. The sleeves on her forearms were ripped and stained darkly. Her right arm hung awkwardly; the skin was not broken, but he suspected the bone had fractured on impact with the water. Her footwear and outer shirt were missing, but the rest of her clothing was mostly intact. He knew it was possible to utilize his energy to assess another, to warm and soothe them, but had never attempted it, deeming the act far too intimate and unnecessary. For Kagome, he longed to send his youki into her to better know how she fared, and to soothe any injuries she had acquired during her imprisonment, but it had to wait until they were out of Northern Territory and far from prying senses.

The soil was cooler, the dirt rimed with frost so close to the surface. The daiyoukai began to reconsider his decision not to travel deeper, where the heat of the earth would have warmed her body. They travelled closer to the surface than before, to increase their speed and allow occasional replenishment of their air supply. Humans needed to breathe more often than demons, and they required cleaner air. Sesshomaru would not jeopardize Kagome's health further, but he had formulated many plans to deal with such circumstances. Eiji and Eiichi were already putting one of his many contingencies into effect. Kagome's injuries demanded that they head to a safe haven just inside the Western border, instead of going directly to the Palace.

Sesshomaru pressed his nose against her forehead, letting his breath warm her skin and feeling her shivers as though they were his own. Her scent was watered down, but still soothing to his youki, while her obvious injuries and low temperature had his bestial side pacing. His body alone produced enough heat to keep her temperature stable, but he would have to warm her from the inside out to reverse the effects of her near drowning and prevent death. Unfortunately, he knew that she was susceptible to death from many other fronts. She had numerous visible injuries, and he would not know if or how severely her organs had been damaged until he could examine her more closely.

The pocket of air around them was growing stale again, and Kagome's shivers had ceased long before they reached a safe location to ascend. Sesshomaru was worried that although she no longer shook, his miko was no warmer either. Her pulse had continued to slow while they traveled, and her chest barely rose with each breath. When the ground above parted, he breathed deeply, and shook the miko awake so that she would take in more air as well. He had to restrain himself from using too much strength out of concern. They had arrived just outside of a cave complex - one he had used before. "Kagome," he said softly.

Her damp clothes showered tiny particles of salt on his naked feet, mixing with dried crust of seawater on his own skin and clothing, and her eyelids were heavy with exhaustion. Her lips were blue. As a young youkai, Sesshomaru had seen humans that had died of exposure. He had overheard mourners describe their deaths as peaceful, 'like falling asleep'. Regardless of the manner, it was still death, and he would not allow it to claim her.

"Kagome," he said again, more insistently. He shook her harder and her eyes opened wide. "You must not sleep." He pushed a controlled measure of youki into her. Immediately, some of his tension eased as his power stirred her to wakefulness and began the long process to warm her. Her reiki reached out to him in a sluggish hello, a small bit slipping under his own skin, and despite the danger still present he felt a surge of determination and confidence. The sensation of being with her, being so close that they were inside one another, was more fulfilling than anything he had experienced - even regenerating his arm.

"Um-'k, Sesss- esso-maruu." Her tongue seemed to get tangled around his name, and Sesshomaru's concern spiked.

His eyes snapped to the rock demons. "Eiji, secure this place. Eiichi, fire and food for the miko," Sesshomaru bit off his orders. Eiichi obeyed him without question, although his concern for the miko

was evident in his expression, and disappeared out of the mouth of the cave. Eiji hesitated, as though reluctant to allow his Lord and future Lady far from his sight.

“s-kay,” Kagome slurred, burrowing into Mocomoko and offering a stilted wave to the guard, “I’m ffffffine.” Eiji nodded and left, although Sesshomaru could smell the demon’s disbelief; it laced his own scent as well. He did not acknowledge either as he continued inside, ignoring the miko’s clumsy attempts to arrange her clothes.

The location had been carefully chosen to provide maximum protection from the elements and any aerial patrols the dragons might send over the border. Sesshomaru had been inside the temporary den before, and the series of bends that led down, deeper into the mountain, created an ideal bottleneck for attackers. He carried the miko to the third and final chamber and sank down to the ground with graceful efficiency, settling her in his lap with her shoulder and hip pressed against him. Kagome pulled at her shirt, and he wondered if she was well enough to be irritated by the salt chafing her skin.

“Cannn’t wear this to sssschool, Sesss-mar...take off.” She struggled when he tried to pull her hands away, before collapsing in exhaustion. Sesshomaru’s fear returned. He knew Kagome had not been to school for some time. If she believed she needed to be at that place she was severely disoriented. Her continued garbled attempts to communicate to him that she needed to take off her clothes confirmed his suspicions that the cold was harming her mind.

He gently touched her face with his claws, brushing her damp hair back from her eyes and sank more of his youki into her. “Be still, Kagome.” Her good arm fell back to her lap, but she continued to shift around - paradoxically requesting to remove her clothes with increasing incoherency and pressing closer to his heat. He examined her power carefully; her reiki was tired and the levels of energy low, but not dangerously so. Her body was exhausted, but the injuries from her captivity and fall were mostly superficial. Even the damage to her arm was not insurmountable for a human to recover from as long as their basic needs were met. His greatest concern was for her temperature. She never felt as warm to the touch as a youkai would, but she was cool now - even to the core. He threaded additional youki through her, trying to warm her organs and muscles from the inside while he examined her body on a deeper level. She had healed him with her power – he refused to believe he could not do the same for her. Her muttering subsided and her eyes drifted completely shut.

The raw, green energy he injected raced along her limbs, creating a thin, hot coating of youki between her skin and muscles. The remaining tendril, all that was left from the cocoon he had made for her reiki days ago, rejoined with the rest of his power and brought him knowledge of her body and reiki that was nearly overwhelming. Every bruise and strain, thirsty tissue, and exhausted muscle were catalogued and the pain and tension she felt because of them was made clear to Sesshomaru in vivid detail. Her temperature was not as low as he had worried, but it was apparent that humans had a much narrower range of tolerable heat than demons. The pressure pushing her blood through her veins was low, and the veins themselves had restricted. He came to know, as her body already seemed to have accepted, that if she was not warmed soon, she would begin to lose her extremities. Her organs were all still working, but her body was preparing to cut them off from nutrients in a final effort to stave off loss of heat.

As his youki slipped deeper and he gleaned more of her, it occurred to him how strange a human was while at the same time it fueled his determination to prevent her from harming herself. Without her permission, her body had determined what was essential for survival and would allow, even actively kill, parts of her in order to maintain a chance of saving the whole. And yet, his intended was not the same as other humans. Her wellspring of power was combating the self-destructive instincts to restrict the flow of blood. Reiki swirled within her, healing damage that had been done to her lungs, heart, and liver from cold and lack of blood.

However, reiki was not youki. It did not burn - at least, it did not appear to generate a heat that Kagome could feel, despite its scorching effect on demons and the gentle warmth Sesshomaru felt in its presence.

He gradually pushed her power aside with his own, increasing the heat of his youki and pouring it through every tissue, each tiny unit that made up the flow of her blood. Hesitantly, her reiki gave way, and then re-concentrated upon the next most serious concern to her health. The massing of pink holy energy drew his attention to her broken arm, and Sesshomaru was fascinated by the display. The bone had snapped cleanly; the two ends offset from one another and tearing into the soft tissues surrounding it, drawing blood. He could sense the pain emanating from the wound - pain which would have taken her breath had she been fully awake and her senses not dulled by cold. He did not understand how humans could endure such pain - and he had seen her go on fighting with injuries much more severe. He had watched her smile and worry over others with wounds that made a simple break seem paltry.

Like humans, youkai felt pain. However, unlike humans, their injuries healed quickly and the pain rarely lasted long. Instinct and decades of training allowed demons to endure a great deal by focusing their senses outside the pain until a wound was cured. But Sesshomaru had never experienced anything as all-consuming as the distress Kagome's body was undergoing. Even the loss of his arm, excruciating as it had been, had not affected him the way he realized it would have crippled her. Where he was capable of removing pain from his mind while his injuries sealed themselves, humans seemed to go on in spite of the pain. Sesshomaru felt a tiny, irritating flicker of admiration for his half-brother's stamina during their sparring sessions. Perhaps the hardness of Inuyasha's head ruled over the sensitivity of his human blood.

Her reiki stroked down the length of her arm, attempting to speed healing by increasing blood flow to the area and encouraging the growth of the strangely porous bone. This too, was like youkai, but not. He had examined demon bones quite closely and knew them to be far denser; if they had such strange air pockets within their skeletons, they were too small to see, even with his excellent eyesight. Despite the furious activity of her reiki, it did little to assist in her recovery. Until the two damaged ends were realigned, her power would do nothing but increase bleeding and irritation. He flexed his jaw and cradled her elbow and wrist, dreading the pain she would feel if she woke up, but knowing what had to be done.

As lightly as he possibly could, he shifted his youki to secure both halves tightly. Then, with his clawed hand on her arm, he set the bone with a *snick* that grated on his ears and made him thankful she had fallen unconscious. He used his power to hold the two pieces in place while her reiki surged forward to begin the healing process. Satisfied that her holy energy would be sufficient to finish what

was necessary, he caressed her from the inside out with his power. He stroked along her heart, quickening the beat. He pushed against her lungs, forcing her to breathe deeper. He slid along her arms and legs, infusing every part of her with himself, until he was satisfied that none of her would refuse him and that his youki would speed his intended's recovery.

His eyes opened - he didn't remember having closed them - and he considered her calm profile. Her hair hung in a messy disarray across his chest and arm. He traced the delicate line of her jaw with his gaze, following the arch of her neck to the steady beat of her pulse at the hollow of her throat. She was mortal.

He forced himself to acknowledge the truth of that assessment. It hurt; painfully, frighteningly, it hurt. He had sworn to himself that he would not lose her, not to his enemies nor to the death that came naturally to her kind. He had nearly made a liar of himself, and that was unacceptable. Sesshomaru was always honest with himself; he had no need to lie or justify his actions. He would not fail in the task he'd set.

Sesshomaru had thought to finish his business with the North and then devote himself to a solution to the impermanence of her life. That was a luxury he could no longer afford. Kagome was in danger, more than he had realized. More than his ego had allowed him to consider. He had thought to extend her life and youth to match his, but finding a way to bolster her against simple human frailty had become a priority the instant he recognized how close and constant mortal injury was. Even with her enormous capacity to heal, her reiki could not have fixed her arm by itself. If he had not been there...if it had been her spine...Sesshomaru's nostrils flared as he blew out a breath and forced his mind away from unrealized possibilities. She had not died. She would not die. It would only paralyze his ability to make decisions if he dwelled on the thousands, millions, of ways she could be harmed. It also brought into stunning clarity the knowledge that Rin would face the same fate, if he did not intervene.

As soon as they returned to the castle, he would begin the search for a cure for the unfortunate aspect of humanity. Setting the matter aside, the daiyoukai frowned at the smell of seawater still coating her. Sesshomaru knew the salt would dry out her skin, and he assumed her organs as well considering how much she had consumed. The wall beside him was wet with meltwater that pooled in a shallow depression on the floor before trickling out underground. Sesshomaru shifted her in his lap and ripped the sleeve from the miko's already damaged shirt, tearing it into strips. He soaked one in the pool, squeezing out the salt water, before wetting it again against the wall.

"Kagome." He pressed the cloth against her lips, wringing the cool water into her mouth. "Drink," he ordered. Her eyes had been closed throughout his triage and treatment, but the cold liquid in her mouth revived her. She licked her lips and even sucked on the cloth before sagging back against his shoulder.

"It hurts," she complained and cradled her arm against her chest. "I j-j-ust want to go to s-s-sleep."

"Hn," Sesshomaru was desperate to keep her awake, despite her obvious pain as blood flow was restored to her broken arm. She was shivering again, which would help her body generate heat, but she

needed to stay alert until the fire was going, so that he could be sure she would not relapse. “Tell This One how you escaped.” His tone, purposefully arrogant and cold, made her frown and narrow her eyes.

“You donnn -don’t think IIII could ddddo it? *This* One,” she mocked, “issss ssstronger than ssshe loooooooks.” A violent shiver racked her body and made her wince as her elbow knocked against his ribs. He was grateful that her reiki seemed to be dulling her pain to a manageable level while it mended the bone.

“I do not doubt it, Kagome,” he said softly.

She smiled a little, and confided, “I hhhad *some* hhhhelp.”

“Of course you did.” He did not intend to insult her, although she seemed to take his words that way. Rather, it was a compliment. Only his miko could find assistance in the home of his greatest enemy. Eiichi entered with an armful of wood and two fish. He made quick work of spitting the food and began building the fire. If not for his youkai grace, he might have sliced off a finger with the kindling. His eyes were on Kagome as often as the wood, and his frown and furrowed brow gave away that he was far more concerned with the miko’s condition than his duties. Sesshomaru understood his preoccupation, although he would not accept it if it delayed Kagome the comfort of a warm fire.

“I c-c-could have done it-t-t-t on my o-o-own, m-m-maybe.” The miko sighed, her irritation fading again and sleepiness radiating from her. “Ko is rea-a-lly n-n-n-nice. S-s-s-she sh-sh-shouldn’t have s-s-stayed...with that-t-t-t...w-w-w-with that...” Her eyes closed, although her mouth was still moving, mumbling, “r-r-rapist.”

A stick clattered to the stone floor and Sesshomaru glared at the rock demon with hot eyes. His claws remained gentle on the miko, but his youki flared - crashing into his guard. Eiichi barely managed to stay standing, would not have been able to if his heritage did not allow him to root himself into the floor. She shifted in the daiyoukai’s arms, frowning and muttering incomprehensibly.

The rock demon, his scent layered in shock, rage, and pity, restacked the gathered wood and tended the fire without comment until it was steadily burning. Sesshomaru gestured for him to leave the chamber, and hardened his youki into a barrier that would protect them both from attack, as well as giving the miko privacy. It would alert any in the area of his presence, but he was far enough into the Western Lands and the risk was justified.

He knew she had not been raped. His power still flooded her body; he knew her injuries. However, she would not have called the Dragon Lord such a thing unless she knew it to be true. *She must have...* Sesshomaru growled. She had mentioned a female called Ko. If Ryukostokken had injured the gentle spirit of his intended, marred the innocence that made the miko who she was, then the Saidai Mao would take extreme pleasure in ripping the cock from his scaly body and feeding it to him. Then Sesshomaru would kill him.

It took a garbled moan from the miko to draw him back to himself, but he managed to push aside his thoughts of vengeance and focus again on her well-being. He reluctantly set her down, and stood. Once her immediate needs were met, his own discomfort reminded him that he should see to himself before he made her colder. A brief blast of youki dried his own clothes and Mokomoko. He detached his tails and coiled them on the ground near the fire. Her clothing was stuck to her skin, stiff and cold where it had frozen, wet and melting where she was pressed against him, all of it chafing with salt. With careful claws, he sliced away the knotted string of her pants and removed the ruin of her shirt. She wore only her modern underwear beneath her clothing, but he brushed aside the interest seeing it always generated to focus on her well-being.

The material was fitted, and the clasps difficult. He cut through both garments carefully, and the great daiyoukai found himself admiring her form and imprinting it on his mind for recall at a more appropriate time. He set both vestments aside to pick her up and blow the hot wind of his power around her, as well. He lay her down in his fur, and quickly covered her chilled body with his. Pressed skin to skin, the tails of Mokomoko curled around to cover them both. Sesshomaru tightened his hold on her, pulling the miko against him and burying his face in her hair.

The tightness in his chest did not ease for many long minutes. Not until the fish had cooked enough that he had to reach out and shift them to prevent burning. Not until the darkness of night was made greyish by the dawn. Then, her skin finally felt warm against his. She breathed easier, her heart beat stronger. Sesshomaru closed his eyes and breathed in her scent: sleepy, content, and far from death.

She was his. He would not leave her unprotected again.

Chapter 24: Selfless Act of a Daiyoukai

Sesshomaru knew the moment she began to wake. He had listened to her breathing for hours, followed the gentle pulse of blood in her veins. He relaxed fractionally with each degree of increase in her temperature. Her breath stirred against the hollow of his throat and her limbs twitched slightly. He held her tightly - for a few brief hours giving in to the need to shelter her above all else. His arms tensed. The smooth, soft skin of her cheek rubbed against his collarbone and she mumbled insensibly.

His mother had reminded him that Kagome would be in danger every day she was at his side. Kimi had told him to trust that Kagome could protect herself, if given the tools to do so. Her words, spoken out of experience and the deep, but oft-concealed love for her son, nevertheless grated against his protective nature. Kagome was his - she would always be his - but he had to trust that she was worthy of being the Lady of the West. The Lady was not just the Lord's mate, she was the tenacious protector of all in her pack - of every life in the West. She was strong, as her Lord was strong. Sesshomaru knew Kagome had those qualities, it was one of the many reasons he had decided that he would mate her. His challenge would be to allow her to become everything she was capable of being when he desired to prevent any harm to her.

As the Saidai Mao he had been alone, depending on no other, for centuries. He had armies at his disposal, allies that would aid him - had aided him - when called. He had defeated threats to the superiority of the West: the remnants of the Northern army after InuTashio's death, and the invasion from the mainland. When neither his sword alone nor his skill in leading an army was enough, he had engineered alliances to defeat his enemies - Naraku and the pox. The irony of being brought to his lowest point by an enemy so small he could not see it was not lost on him; nor was the use of reiki, youkai's greatest threat, to overcome it. His most stubborn hindrances had been turned to his advantage as his allies: Inuyasha and Tessaiga, even Kagome with her ability to withstand his poison had been brought to the West to add to his greatness.

Through her deep, recuperating sleep he had come to the frightening realization that the power she had over him was far stronger than any enemy. Her pain...her death...he forced his bestial nature down at the thought of such a possibility. Without her he had been the strongest, highest among demons. The rightful sense of honor and pride that usually accompanied a reflection on his power was noticeably dimmed. An uncomfortable shadow of something...humility, perhaps...fell across his ego. His mother had shown him the truth: with her he could be even greater. They had not yet mated, but it did not matter. Kagome was already a part of him; her energy was within him, as his was in her. That was as it should be. It was *right*. The intense connection - the desire he had for her that went beyond lust for her body or power, beyond an alliance or even friendship - was not something he could name. Although the emotion was unfamiliar he knew they were tied together by feelings as well. Having glimpsed what she had brought to him, what they would be together, he knew that without her his name, his titles, *he* would be...diminished.

It was a sobering and formidable reality.

For a time, in the moments before she woke, he nearly hated her. He hated what he had become. Softer, weaker, *vulnerable*. Ever truthful with himself, that black feeling turned inward. In the past, when the things he held close were threatened - his lands, his honor, Rin - he had reacted with anger. Furious, bitterly clear rage had allowed him to overcome any challenge. Kagome had touched something else inside him. She had broken some barrier within him that kept him from feeling too deeply. His concerns, cares for his people, even his daughter, had grown with what his miko had freed. But with it had come the possibility, the fear, which could paralyze him with indecision and wrack him with guilt. A daiyoukai, the Saidai Mao, could not be ruled by fear.

If she had only healed Rin and then gone back to her time he would not have experienced such fear. If she had not come to the West, he would be dead, he also realized.

She stirred, derailing his thoughts momentarily, as her reiki shimmered and caressed his youki in a pleased greeting. Her lips brushed against his skin and his concerns faded. He was calm in a way that he had never been before, even with his cold mask and unbreakable logic. She had made him vulnerable, but she had also given him something he had never known he was missing. She was his mate, the one intended for him, made for him. She made him complete. He refused to give her up, so he would find another way to control, if not erase, his fear: he could make her stronger. She was a part of him and he would not be without her.

Sesshomaru breathed deeply of her scent and his lips twitched in a smile at how his fate had been forced upon him. In order to walk the path of conquest - to achieve perfection - he would have to admit his own weakness. He would have someone to protect. The Great Dog General, so like Inuyasha with his loud laugh and fierce emotions, would have teased Sesshomaru mercilessly if he were still alive.

Those he cared about could be exploited against him, that was true. But a pack was always stronger than a single youkai. It was why they banded together. It was why they took mates and had pups, why they forged alliances and sought to strengthen kin. He had long believed that he was stronger alone. Even after joining Inuyasha's motley group and witnessing how the individuals - all would have been murdered by Naraku had they remained alone - gained strength in their reliance on each other, he had viewed any permanent connection as unnecessary to augment his strength. However, time and again, his crude and untrained brother had risen to previously unknown levels of skill to protect his pack. The humans had pushed beyond the limits of their own frailty to swing the battle in their favor. Even the kit, weak and ineffectual on his own, had strengthened the group.

Sesshomaru did not conceal the small snort of disgust and mingled amusement as he recalled how his miko had controlled Inuyasha, into a face full of dirt, and how that control had been exactly what the hanyou needed in his most desperate moments - when his blood overcame him. Perhaps even those things that seemed to be detriments were actually benefits. Not that Kagome would ever control *him* in such a disgraceful manner. It was not necessary, and he, of course, would never allow it.

The daiyoukai settled his thoughts, content with his conclusions, and buried his nose in her hair. He was pulled from the deliciously comforting inhalation of her scent by movement.

She stretched, her dull nails pressing against his chest and her toes burrowing into his leg. He forced himself to loosen his hold, to reach out for the kimono left to dry over a rock near the fire. The white silk was stiff with salt, but warm. Mokomoko shifted and he had the garment over her shoulders before her lids were fully open. Dark blue eyes blinked at him. She opened her mouth to speak and a strange look came over her face. From her scent, even layered under his own and the dried remains of salty ocean, he could tell she was confused, anxious, and still harboring fear.

He forestalled her questions, although he wanted to reassure her as well, in favor of her physical needs. "There is an alcove behind you where you may relieve yourself, and a stream of water that you may wash and drink. Food has been prepared for you."

"Ah-" Her voice was scratchy and she coughed painfully into her sleeve.

"Your throat will be sore from the seawater, Kagome." He brushed his thumb across the hollow between her collarbones. His voice - he surprised himself with how easily a gentle tone came to him - was soft, "You should not speak until you have something to drink. Do you need assistance standing?" He was prepared to help her up, to carry her even, if she gave the slightest indication that she was in pain or merely too tired. He had to force himself to wait for her response - to let her decide if she needed his help, rather than coddle her as he wanted to.

She shook her head, the sweep of her hair tickling his skin and hiding her face. He breathed deeply as she sat up away from him, and slowly stood, stretching her muscles. He felt each wince she made like a thorn in his chest. The borrowed kimono shifted, exposing a myriad of bruises and cuts - half-healed from his attentions but they still looked painful. He could feel the tug on his youki as she drew on both her power and his to control her trembling and steady herself. She held her injured arm close to her body, hunching over it as though to shield it from further harm. Her own scent of magnolias and cherry wood was muted by a swirl of emotion that fluctuated and changed so quickly he could not pick out any single one beyond pain and discomfort. He felt a frown mar the skin between his brows as she stepped out of sight, and he did not bother to conceal it. Kagome, his miko, was nothing if not full of emotion and fire. Sesshomaru pulled on his pants and loosely knotted them. She would have been justified to scream at him for allowing her capture, to accuse him in a shrill voice that would hurt his ears - stinging his nose with shame that he did not go to her sooner. He expected tears over her experience. Anger at her treatment. Fury, terror, guilt, shame, exhaustion, relief. None of those things were easily distinguished by his nose.

When she returned, to wash her hands in the small pool and cup them against the water running down the wall, he focused on what he could see instead. The wound on the side of her face - clearly made by a sharp claw - was nicely scabbed from his ministrations and the bruises were already beginning to turn. His fists clenched at the sight, anger building again that he had to push out in a long breath before he could continue his examination of her. The cuts on her arms were healing as well. Her spine was slightly rounded and her gait slow, not like her usual straight posture and quick step but explained by the strain of her escape and near drowning.

She seated herself by the fire, tucking her legs under her properly and mechanically eating one of the prepared fish. Her face was blank, calm. She did not smile or frown. Her lips did not tremble or her cheeks flush. Her borrowed kimono was wrapped loosely around her, and he was nearly shocked at her lack of care for her own modesty. When he reached her eyes...

He felt it like a physical punch to the stomach. Her unusual blue eyes stared at nothing. She barely blinked. There was no sparkle, no hint of sadness or joy - no spark of anger. No life. Pain spiked in his chest, followed closely by a return of his rage. Sesshomaru would not allow Ryukostokken, the craven filth, to dim the incredible, bright *life* that Kagome exuded. Mocomoko went with him as he put youki into his movements and flashed across the cave, settling her into his lap before she could realize what was happening.

“Sesshomaru? Wha-?” She was obviously confused, but no other strong emotions brightened her scent or moved her features. Sesshomaru knew what he had to do. Logic was irrefutable, and it would be in Kagome’s best interests - but he felt pain on her behalf for what must be done.

He interrupted her, instilling undeniable command into his voice, “You will tell This One exactly what happened.”

“Sesshomaru-”

His tone to allow no room for argument, “Begin with your arrival at the infirmary.”

Her strangely calm expression made him want to comfort her, to cradle her close and press her against him, to rumble in the language of the inu that he would not let anything hurt her, that he would not make her ever think on what had happened again. But that would not help her. After a brief pause, she acquiesced. At first, her tale was spoken in a monotone, and the murky pool of her emotions continued to frustrate and worry him. He breathed deeply when she related how Gakuto had thrown her, hit her. His own fury would not help Kagome. He sank his claws into her hair, loosening tangles and soothing himself with the motion. With each word, every action she described, a coil of white-hot rage within him was wound tighter. A small part of that anger was at himself, at his stubbornness. The vast majority was for his enemies. Their blood would be on his hands, he promised himself.

The first crack in her dead expression came as she described how the northern soldiers had been injured to test her powers. Pepper and salt, blended together, rose above the bland wash of her scent. *Anger. Sadness.* He knew her, understood that she would feel such emotions. Anger for the treatment of another being - even her enemy. Sadness for their pain. The sour taste of her guilt followed close behind. Sesshomaru wrapped his free arm around her, discarding her half-eaten fish and holding her closer to him. His miko *would* feel guilty that another had been forced to suffer as part of her own imprisonment. He did not speak, unwilling to interrupt her retelling, but did his best to soothe and encourage her with his actions.

He tried not to focus too much on her words. He feared that if he heard and understood all that had happened, he would not be able to control himself. His vengeance, revenge for *her*, was not as

important in that moment as helping Kagome to expose the wounds to her spirit so that they could begin to heal. She continued, and her scent grew stronger; not just the scent of Kagome, but that of her emotions burned his nose and nearly made him regret forcing her to tell her story. A rumble started in his chest and Sesshomaru felt a heat growing behind his eyes as his youki swelled with fury over her state. She was angry, yes, but also ashamed and...*grief stricken*.

Camphor overwhelmed her scent as she spoke about Ko, a wind demoness the Dragon Lord used to torture Kagome's mind. The miko's body was stiff with tension and his skin grew wet with her tears. His claws gouged deeply into the rock floor as she clung to him, crying, "I couldn't stand to watch, but I couldn't look away!" Sobs shook her hunched shoulders and made her nose run. She choked on her own tears, gasping for breath even as the outpouring continued. He rubbed soothing circles on her neck while she exhausted all of her pent up emotions, finally subsiding into sniffing and heavy breathing.

"She was so brave," Kagome whispered. Sesshomaru felt each word, every detail of her humiliation and the demoness' pain, like acid under his skin. It burned and stung, causing more damage the longer he had to listen without taking action.

Ryukostokken had invaded her spirit - soiled the innocent naiveté that was as much a part of Kagome as her bright smile and selfless heart. It was something she had held onto even through the horrors she had seen while chasing Naraku. Sesshomaru had to remove his hand from her hair to dig all his claws into the stone floor of the cave or risk tearing something apart. *I will skin him alive*, he snarled to himself.

As strong as the salty scent of her tears was, it battled sharp pepper for his attention. Finally, she sat up straight, her eyes red and puffy from crying and her skin blotchy. She wiped at her nose with her sleeve; her mouth was pulled down into an angry frown. "I wanted to kill him, Sesshomaru. I *want* to kill him now." The sharp scent of turnips and dry mace blended with the sour smell of her guilt - but nothing was as strong as her anger. The familiar pepper of it deepened and sharpened. It burned his nose and sent licks of fire along his tongue. With a sense of sadness over the loss of a part of her innocence, he categorized the scent of togarshi chilli seeds as hatred. She sat on his lap, her face mere inches from his and growled as a pink glow sparked at her fingertips where they clutched his shoulder. "You have to help me go back. I will burn him into a pile of ash if it is the last thing I do."

The furor, the intensity of her words and expression brought both a sense of pride and of concern out in Sesshomaru. He struggled with himself for a brief moment, torn between sheltering her from the action she wanted - perhaps needed - to take, and allowing Kagome to fulfill her potential: capable, determined, and committed to making difficult decisions. A part of him was saddened at the knowledge that a little bit of his miko's innocence had been taken, and could not be regained. He quickly resolved himself. He *did* trust her. She shouldn't, didn't, need his constant protection - as much as that irritated his instincts. She did need his support, which he would give without equivocation.

"Ryukostokken will die," he agreed. He pulled his claws loose from the stone and stroked her hair. He met her gaze with promise, trying to will his own reserved intent into her. "We will not allow this to go

unanswered,” he held his breath, knowing that as he had not wanted to put anything before Kagome, she would not wish to put any one friend’s safety below that of a stranger, “but there is more to consider than one youkai female.” Kagome’s anger flared, and Sesshomaru cupped her cheek to forestall her argument. “The Ko you speak of is most worthy of any assistance the West can provide, but we must also consider the northern armies, and how to make certain our enemy is defeated - permanently - with as few lives lost as possible.”

“Ko-”

Sesshomaru interrupted her before her words could put distance between them, “Your friend stayed so that she could help defeat Ryukostokken.” He softened his tone so that his next words would not be too harsh, “Do not let your feelings overshadow her duty - her revenge.” He watched her struggle for a moment, her scent wavering between anger and sadness. The tightness around her eyes and mouth lessened as her hatred gave way to sorrow.

“I know you’re right.” Her good hand fisted against his chest briefly before she sagged, deflated, defeated. “I *believe* you, Sesshomaru, but...every day that she stays there, he is hurting her, violating her - all over again,” she whispered. Her eyes closed and tears leaked out, leaving salty trails on her skin. “I can’t stop seeing it.” Her voice broke, and she began to tremble. “I can’t stop picturing him over her, raping her. He didn’t touch me, but I can’t stop feeling his hands on me. His eyes. I-”

Sesshomaru did not let her finish, but silenced her with the press of his mouth against hers. He would not allow the reptile from the North to make her feel weak. She could not take back the innocence that Ryukostokken had ripped away, but he would not let her lose her passion, her fight, her fearless desire to live and protect those around her.

“Kagome,” his voice was lower, throatier than he expected. “Do not give him this power over you. You will not let these memories define you.” He spoke, his lips brushing against hers with every word. When he pulled back, he gently forced her chin up so that he could meet her eyes. “His touch is nothing.” He paused for the briefest of moments, considering how he could best rid her of those memories without taking her control, “I will replace it.” His free hand followed the edge of her kimono, his claws dancing along the edge, but he did not look away from her. Her will had been overridden by the Dragon; he would give it back. “Will you allow this?” Her lips were parted, her eyes wide and blue - wet and bloodshot from tears. She stared at him for long seconds in which he wondered if he had made an error. Humans, females regardless of species, were not something he often dealt with. Emotions, delicate feelings, had always been suppressed by him - brushed aside as foolish and an unimportant distraction. Hers were not. He found himself in the unfamiliar situation of desiring to excel at something that he had no experience with - comfort. Her eyes fluttered shut, and a new scent of sweet carnations brushed at his senses.

“Yes,” she whispered, “please, Sesshomaru.” His heart surged to life at her words, her trust, and his cock quickly followed. Sesshomaru frowned, even as he leaned in to trace the line of her jaw with his nose. This action was not about his lust. It was not even about their future mating. This was for Kagome, only her. His desires would wait.

She stiffened slightly as his nose met the cut on her cheek, left by Ryukostokken's wooden dagger sheath, but Sesshomaru did not pause. With long, firm strokes he licked along the wound, coating it with his saliva, and then continued to work on the deep scratch on the side of her face. The numbing and healing properties of the inu quickly began working, drawing out a soft sigh from Kagome. When he reached her temple, he pressed a soft kiss into her skin. He used the claws tangled in her hair to tip her head back further. Her mouth parted slightly, and he traced the open edge with his tongue. Her lips tasted of salty tears and cooked fish. Cold mountain water and *her*. He breathed deeply, re-memorizing her scent, noting every slight change from when last he held her at the castle. His free hand gently repositioned her injured arm to lie on mokomoko beside them and smoothed the silk over her ribs before slipping between the stiff fabric and her skin.

Fresh cut cherry wood. Her skin felt drier and frailer than it had been the last time he held her. *New, dewy magnolia blossoms.* Her whole body was thin; his fingertips could trace the bumps of her ribs. Concern, care, and his protective instincts flattened his palm across her torso. *Fading camphor.* His large hand spanned from the indentation in her belly to her breast. The tips of his claws rested against the lower curve and he paused, inhaling to make certain that he was not pushing the intimacy quicker than she would like. The wet, muddy, slow smell of shame still clung stubbornly to her. He pulled back slightly so that he could watch her face as he parted the folds of her kimono.

He had seen her naked in the springs, had changed her garments once, but never before had she been bared so openly to his eyes in the light. The pale almond of her skin darkened on her shoulders and arms, disappearing into her sleeves. The full, heavy weight of her breasts was thrust towards him. Her dark pink nipples pebbled under his gaze and tempted him to taste, to suckle, to bite - *not too hard, just enough*. He tore his hungry eyes away and followed the indentation of her waist to the swell of her hip. She was fuller there than he recalled from their time battling Naraku. In the intervening years, she had aged - as humans did. She had become a woman, and his lust, his instincts, responded to the sight of her body. He knew she had been made for him.

He did not linger on the neat, dark patch of hair between her legs, knowing that if he did he would struggle to keep from taking her as he wanted. Instead he lifted his eyes, gold against blue, and whispered the thought that she needed to hear - as much as he needed to say it. "Beautiful. Beautiful Kagome." Tears welled in her eyes again, and if he hadn't experienced the strange contradiction of human emotions before, if he hadn't smelled the gentle tide of sweet, fresh carnation that she emanated, he would have worried. Instead he admired the pink of her cheeks and the strain of embarrassment that remained with her, despite her determination, her need.

His palm slipped down to span her thigh, his thumb brushing briefly against her core. Her eyes widened, and he continued his reassurances, his truths. "Strong," he stated, squeezing the lean muscle of her leg. His fingertips followed the crease of her hip and ghosted behind her to grip one sweet globe of her bottom firmly. "Passionate." He was rewarded with the taste of satsuma oranges and the sweet cinnamon spice of her desire. He reluctantly abandoned that flesh to stroke his way to her sternum. With her heart under his palm, his thumb and smallest finger each brushed against a nipple and her excitement increased before he even spoke. "Caring. Loving." He held her eyes and skated across her

breast, down her arm, to interlace their fingers. He pulled her hand up and examined it. Her wrist was bruised, rubbed raw by what he estimated must have been a metal cuff, and the soft skin of her inner arm marred by a long shallow cut. He licked the wounds and kissed her palm, reminding himself to attend her other wrist later. The skin across her knuckles was dry as well, cracked in places. Her nails were short and blunt - so unlike a demoness. Her reiki thrummed deep under the surface, answering the unconscious call of his own youki. He had to steady his own voice before he spoke again and temper the growl that wanted to break free. "Powerful." He pressed his lips to each fingertip, tasting their texture with the end of his tongue. He was eager to nip and lick, but held himself back.

My Kagome.

He released her hand, folding it over his shoulder. His hands met behind her head, cradling it as though she was the most precious, the most rare thing in the world. She was. "Intelligent. Cunning." He kissed her forehead, then trailed his lips down, across her nose, until they met her own. "Kagome." He did not whisper, and the strong, low tone reverberated against the walls of the cavern. She nodded against him, her arm snaking around his chest to hold him, grip him, and pull him down for her kiss. He reveled in it. The taste of her. The sweet smell of *his* miko, his *Kagome*, free finally of the shame.

"Please, Sesshomaru," she spoke into his mouth. Her breath was hot against him and stirred a desire to swallow her words, to take everything that she would give him and return it better, *more* - with everything he had. "Touch me. I want to only think of you." He reaffirmed his control, knowing what she was asking and swearing to himself that he would do whatever was necessary, whatever she needed, *and only that much*.

My miko.

He distracted her with a kiss as he sat her upright so that he could remove the kimono from her shoulders. Mocomoko was already there, curling against her bare back and head to warm her and wrap her in his scent. He shifted so that she was nestled more firmly between his thighs, perpendicular to him, her hip pressed against his erection. He bent his knees, allowing her to lean back against one while the other parted her legs. Her limb closest to the fire slid to the floor to be wrapped in white fur. Her other, injured arm, remained gently immobilized by Mocomoko. Exposing her core released a powerful burst of scent that flooded his mind and freed the low growl that he had been struggling to hold back. He pressed deeper into her mouth, learning the inner curve of her cheek, the smooth, dull shape of her teeth, the warm demand of her tongue. When he pulled away, licking at her lips, she tried to follow him. Her sounds of displeasure over the end of the kiss both excited and amused him.

My intended.

"I think of you, Kagome." He touched her, caressed her, learning the feel of her body. One palm cupped her cheek, while the other smoothed along her arm, her ribs, found the curve of her breast and gently squeezed. He kissed the corner of her mouth. "I read reports of my lands, and I wonder what your opinion would be." He ran his tongue along her bottom lip and kneaded her breast, drawing a breathless gasp from Kagome and biting back his own groan. "I hear Rin's laugh and want to know if

you caused it.” He sucked gently, pulling the delicate, red skin into his mouth. He released it only to kiss her again, plunging his tongue inside her with more force than he intended, but she did not seem to mind. His fingers found her nipple and he rolled the berry between them. “My brother grows stronger. He takes on responsibility and I know that it is your doing.” He pinched, and a quiet, keening sound vibrated in her chest. Sesshomaru felt an answering growl building inside him. He leaned his face into hers, pressing his nose against her cheek and breathing hard.

“You have done what no other would ever attempt. You have slipped my defenses, Kagome. Without trying, you have ensnared me. And I am willing. I think of you - no other. I think of you and I admire your strength.” His hand slipped down her belly, caressing her hip and leg before his claws drew circles on the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. “I hunger for your passion. You do nothing without giving everything.” His whispers raced ahead of him along her jaw to her ear. His mouth followed, tracing the shell and nipping at her lobe. Her fingers tightened on the back of his neck and he listened to her heart pound.

His claws - he had never been so aware of how dangerous they were, not even when he was using them to kill - traced along her outer folds. Cinnamon and oranges flooded his nose, washed across his tongue in a citrus spice that sent a thunderstorm of desire crashing through his veins. Her fingers tangled in his hair. Her mouth had fallen open, and she pulled in breathless gasps as he pressed his lips against her cheek. “I smell your scent on my clothes, in my fur, even when you are not near.” He used the claw of his thumb to remove the fine point from his index finger and tested it for sharp edges. He slid his claw, the smooth outer curve carefully fitted against her skin, between her lower lips. She moaned, and her head fell back further, exposing the column of her neck.

She was wet for him. The thin honey of her desire seeped around his digit, coating his skin and making him long to bury himself inside her. He bolstered his restraint, biting his own cheek - drawing blood to keep himself focused on his goal. He wanted Kagome to feel, to know, that she was more than a pawn. More than a weakling to be kidnapped and used as bait. She saved herself - she was not some helpless hime, destined to wring her hands and wait for another to decide her fate, determine her worth. She would be the Lady of the Western Lands, mate of the Saidai Mao. He wanted her to know that she was *desired*, *cherished*. He pressed firmly, and his finger slipped inside her. Sesshomaru closed his eyes and for a moment did not breathe.

She was tight. Hot. Wet. Her body gripped him as if she never wanted to let him go. She was untried. Even if he had not already known she was a virgin, the way her walls seized around him - indecisive whether to push him out or pull him in - would have told him. His cock jerked. His youki rose. Kagome moaned, “Sess-ho-mar-uuu.”

He breathed out, and when he inhaled again the taste of spices and magnolias was thick in the air. Mindful of his claws, he pressed forward again, forcing her to sheath him up to his second knuckle. He wet his thumb in her juices and applied pressure to the bud hidden between her legs. Kagome made a mewling, pleading sound, her breath coming faster, her legs shifting restlessly. Sesshomaru was distantly surprised he could hear her over the pounding of his own blood. His mouth left her ear to lick a path down her throat. He found her pulse, surging wildly under the skin at the joint of her neck and

shoulder. He laved, allowing the slightly rough texture of his tongue to excite the sensitized flesh, arousing her further. She shuddered.

“I smell you, Kagome.” His voice had grown rough as he rode the edge of his control. He breathed against her and kissed her. His thumb circled slowly, building her to a climax that he knew she had never reached before. She tossed her head, her inky hair dancing across mokomoko and tangling in his claws. “Magnolias.” He licked the sensitive spot on her neck again and pumped his finger slowly. “Cherry wood, freshly cut.” He pressed his lips to her skin, wet with his saliva, and ran the dull edge of his claw along her bundle of nerves. She cried out, soundlessly. “I breathe you in,” he paused, baring his fangs to graze against her, “and you may undo me.” He crooked his finger and stroked, surely, firmly. She seized around him, her walls fluttering and clenching. Her eyes were closed and her mouth open on a scream that was lost to the power of her pleasure.

Sesshomaru pulled away, forcing himself to withdraw his hand and remain content to merely stroke her hip. She was beautiful. Her skin glowed with a sheen of sweat; her cheeks and chest were flushed pink with blood. Her lips were swollen and red. His eyes fell on the bruise already forming under the skin of her neck and he was nearly overcome with fierce pride and hot lust. Kagome turned into him, curling against his heat. She was struggling to open her eyes, and the scent of her exhaustion and shyness grew, muddling the fading spice of her desire. The daiyoukai clenched his jaw, reminding himself again that he had done this for her. There would be time later for him.

“Shhhh,” he brushed her hair out of her eyes with his nose, nudging her for a kiss. “Relax, sleep. When you wake, we will be home.” She fell asleep quickly, murmuring against his bare chest. As Sesshomaru prepared them to leave, he cradled her closer to him. There would be time later for much more.

Chapter 25: Measuring Contest

Inuyasha paused to catch his breath; the air in the mountains was thin and he had been pushing himself for almost twenty-four hours without rest to reach the Western Palace. He leaned against an outcropping of rock, scrubbed free of snow by a bitter wind, and stared down at his brother's castle. He could only just make out the regular lines of the walls where they had been cut from the mountain. The bulk of the main structure was still hidden from his sight by the natural features of the area and white drifts.

The hanyou rolled his head, stretching and popping his neck, and sighed. "Bastard has a good defensible position," he admitted to himself, grudgingly. The surge of jealousy and anger that usually accompanied any consideration of Sesshomaru's position and power was missing. He was still envious, and his brother irritated the piss out of him, but Inuyasha was surprised to find that he no longer hated Sesshomaru. The daiyoukai was still a bastard, and they would never be friends. He snorted, *not that Kagome won't try*.

He straightened and began an easy walk to loosen his muscles. Kagome was the reason he had let go of that hate, not that he would ever admit it to her. She was his first friend, his best friend, and no matter how many times he had cursed her or called her weak she had never left him. Even Kikyou - the memory sparked his grief, but it faded quickly - even when he stupidly wavered between the two women, and he knew that it had been beyond painful for Kagome, the girl from the future had still trusted him. She had faith in him.

For a half-breed that had never known kindness outside of his mother or the dead priestess, Kagome was like the first sunny day of spring after a long winter. It had taken him two long years to realize that she loved him, and would always love him, even if they were never more than friends. It was her compassion - her friendship - that had brought Miroku and Sango into his pack and even the little runt, Shippo. Before Kagome, he would have avoided or even killed the same people that had become his closest allies and friends. She had shown him there was more to life than survival, more to people than hatred, fear, or mere tolerance.

And now she was with his brother. Inuyasha shook his head in a mixture of irritation and grudging amusement. He stretched out his tired legs and began to run. Only Kagome could have done what she did for him, and he was grateful. If she could make Sesshomaru accept other people - make him *friendly* - it would be a miracle but it wouldn't surprise him in the least. That was Kagome. However, if the daiyoukai hurt her feelings, and *fuck* did that woman have a lot of feelings, Inuyasha would make sure she still got Sesshomaru's heart. Even if he had to rip it out of the asshole's chest to give it to her.

He pushed personal thoughts aside while he ran the last few miles to the castle and reviewed everything he needed to tell Sesshomaru about the movements of the Northern troops. It would have been a long way around to the front gate, so he opted instead to climb down one of the narrow crevices in the mountain that led to private gardens. He hoped he got the one near Rin and Kagome's room, to save him the time of explaining himself - or punching his way through guards that weren't expecting him,

but if punching was required he could do that too. It would irritate Sesshomaru if Inuyasha roughed up some of his guards, so the hanyou figured that wouldn't be all bad either. He could smell three distinct guards watching the castle from above. The wind was in his favor, blowing his scent away from the palace, but they would spot his red clothing against the snow easily, if they were looking.

Unfortunately, Inuyasha's luck had never been great. He jumped down the last twenty feet to land in a low snow drift, which was covering a cluster of barberry shrubs. "Fuck!" he howled, springing out of the bushes to sit on a bare patch of ground. His feet and ankles were on fire. Where his bare skin had been almost numb from cold before, the flesh had been torn open and pierced in dozens of places. Inuyasha gritted his teeth and held his bleeding feet up off the ground. Thorns, some more than two inches long, jabbed deep under the skin and clung to his pants. He cursed, sniffing, and his nose was almost overwhelmed by the scent of pieris flowers and his own blood. He frowned, ripping out the first thorn he could reach and sniffed again.

The plant was definitely a barberry, irritatingly thorny, and common enough in Japan, but it also smelled like the poisonous pieris flowers. He breathed deeply again, brow furrowing in confusion. *Pieris and amber. Lavender. Cedar.*

"Generally, guests visit through the front door, rather than dropping in."

Inuyasha surged to his feet, and then almost fell over in pain. The thorns dug deeper, and he could feel their poison slipping into his veins, but it was ignored in favor of the youkai standing before him. It was Sesshomaru's mother. *Obviously*. Even if he didn't have a nose capable of picking out her scent and finding the threads of similarity to his half-brother, he could clearly see the resemblance. Pale skin, white hair, magenta markings and a blue crescent moon. Her clothes were finer than anything he had ever seen - even what he remembered of his mother's wardrobe. Her expression was...not even remotely cold. Amusement quirked the corners of her mouth and something else, surprise or shock, raised her brows.

He was unable to respond with anything but a stare. Even his usual gruff manner failed him. Inuyasha was inept in most social situations, and the tiny amount of etiquette he had cobbled together from his mother, Kagome, and Miroku had not prepared him for meeting the Lady of the West. The first, cuckqueaned, wife of his father. The mother of the asshole that had tried to kill him and steal his sword - repeatedly. The female that would be related to Kagome one day soon, if Sesshomaru got his way.

Another youkai, Inuyasha easily recognized the hawk blood in her scent, flew down the crevice to land a few feet away from him, sword drawn and clearly unhappy that her defense had been breached. Inuyasha only got Tessaiga half out of the sheath before the Lady dismissed her guard. With a warning look that Inuyasha was too off balance to properly sneer at, the hawk disappeared back the way she had come.

"This One is quite proud of the garden, particularly the more rare plants. It took three centuries to successfully crossbreed barberry and pieris shrubs, but the combination of flowers and fruit is quite pleasing." She seemed to glide across the snow-dusted ground as she approached the crushed shrub. "It

appears to have taken significantly less time to destroy.” She turned back to face him, expectantly, and Inuyasha felt his mouth open, but no sound came out. They stood like that for several long moments, until a thorn worked its way to a nerve in the hanyou’s foot and the resulting acidic burn made him wince. *Why the fuck would anyone want to make a thorn bush poisonous? And then call it pretty?* “This One had occasionally thought of your demise, son-of-my-mate, but never did This One consider it would come so...commonly. Death by flora seems a bit underwhelming for one who has lived a life such as yours.”

“I ain’t gonna die, Lady,” Inuyasha finally managed through gritted teeth. “So don’t get your hopes up.” He kept one hand on Tessaiga, but he was aching to sit down and pull the rest of the thorns out of his skin. He refused, however, to relax his guard in her presence. Something like guilt was squirming around in his gut under the irritation at her strangely passive attitude and caution at the obvious threat posed by her enormous youki. Even heavily restrained as it was, Inuyasha was vividly aware that she was nearly as powerful as Sesshomaru and most likely almost as dangerous. Maybe more so. The guilt was eating at him, however...it was Kagome’s fault. He wouldn’t have even been considering how the Lady must be feeling if it weren’t for his friend and her constant talk of emotions. He blamed Sesshomaru as well. Before the bastard had brought it up, it had never occurred to him that Izayoi was the *other* woman. His mother had replaced this female in InuTashio’s life; Inuyasha doubted that she wanted to see his face and be reminded of that fact.

“Sorry,” he blurted. Her brows rose further and Inuyasha could feel a blush starting on his cheeks. He scowled.

A smirk pulled at her mouth. “Apologizing for not dying? How considerate of you.”

“For the fuckin’ bush, wenc- er, Lady. I wouldn’ta-” He blew out a sharp breath. “Fuck it. Never mind.” He took a painful step backwards, eager to be done with the weird conversation and out of her presence. “I came fer Kagome.”

The Lady considered him pensively, then her face suddenly cleared into calm politeness. “This One apologizes as well. You have received a poor welcome. Come, your injury will be tended.” She swept past him and through the open shoji screens into the palace. Inuyasha took a hesitant step and bit back a howl of pain.

“I don’t need fuckin’ tending,” he muttered.

“Nonsense,” her voice floated out to him, and Inuyasha cringed. He spent so much time around humans, he occasionally forgot how sharp youkai hearing was - especially inu. Hobbling, he reluctantly followed her inside. Despite his pain and discomfort regarding socially interacting with other youkai - particularly this one - it did not escape his notice that she had forced him to either refuse her ‘hospitality’ or walk on his own thorn-filled feet.

“Sadistic bitch,” he whispered under his breath as he made it to the doorway, bloody footprints on the ground behind him. A perfectly smooth, pale face appeared before him, far closer than he was

comfortable with. He sucked in a breath and planted his feet, preparing for battle. She smiled, a feral smile of enjoyment that did not comfort him in the slightest.

“Of course.”

ooo

Kimi summoned a servant to tend to the hanyou's feet and kept her expression amused while they waited together in her reception room. She tucked her hands into her sleeves so that she could grip her forearms to keep her fingers from shaking and conceal her discomposure. *It is not him.* She felt the need to repeat the phrase to herself, although it had been obvious to her eyes and nose after the first startled moment of finding Inuyasha in the garden. *Still...* She found herself having to conceal not only her scent but also the sound of her heartbeat from the young male. *He looks so like Toga.*

Her mate had worn his hair the same way, flowing down his back when they were first mated. And his eyes had been golden warm, just like Inuyasha's. *As though every chrysanthemum in Japan had been melted and their color preserved in his eyes.* They held themselves in the same casual way - an easy strength that spoke of unconscious ego, well-deserved.

The pup was far too brash. She wished she could attribute that to living among humans, but blunt words and bold action had been given to him by the InuTashio. His scowl and vocabulary, however, were all his own. He was both shorter and thinner than his father, his shoulders were not as wide. Although - Kimi was painfully aware of exactly how old Inuyasha was - he had a great deal of growth ahead of him, even for a hanyou. He had not yet fully matured, but it would no doubt be upon him soon and with it a growth spurt of both size and youki. He was dirty, although none of it was more than a few days old, but his hair was well-groomed. His hands were just as broad and calloused as Toga's had been, as though he, too, handled his sword on a daily basis and used it for more than mere training. He was not his father, no one would mistake him for the former Lord. And yet...Kimi sniffed discreetly.

Agar. Sweet woodruff. And the musky, shaded earth smell that had been Toga. Sesshomaru carried it in his own scent as well, but she had grown used to that reminder, had recognized it centuries before her mate had died, centuries before he left her heart. She had not ever expected to have her memories, her emotions, tugged on by the scent of another. She had never expected to actually meet Toga's bastard son. She wanted to hate him. In fact, she had spent many years, many decades, hating the human woman that had ensnared her mate. Hating the pup that Toga had died to protect.

Hate was a difficult thing to hold onto. It took enormous energy to fuel and keep smoldering, particularly given a great deal of time to reflect. Kimi had that in abundance as she secluded herself in her sky palace after Toga's death. At first, she went a day without cursing Izayoi's name. Then several days without thinking of the human or her hanyou pup. As her self-imposed exile continued, she faced the hard truth that Toga had not left their home one day and gone to Izayoi's the next. Her mate had not abandoned her loving arms in a fit of spite. They had loved each other once, but their bed had cooled long before Izayoi was even born. Their relationship had become one of old friends relegated to distant

acquaintances. Toga was in the wrong to try to have both Kimi as his Lady and Izayoi as his lover, but the situation was not created by him alone.

Kimi grappled with her control and took absent note of the pup's emotions, his anxiety and embarrassment. His irritation, guilt, pain, and frustration. He apparently did not know how to mask his scent. *Interesting, and rectified easily enough, if properly trained.* The thought struck Kimi as strange...and unsettlingly attractive. *Son-of-my-mate. He might still have Toga, the West might still have the InuTashio, if I had been able to let go of false pride and step aside for Izayoi without being asked.*

A servant arrived, a young female that had attended her before. The little inu blushed prettily while she carefully tended Inuyasha's feet, despite his rough protests. Kimi could scent her interest, but was surprised that the hanyou smelled of nothing more than mild attraction under other emotions. In a male that age, with such a lovely specimen, Kimi would have expected more. As it was, he expressed no more interest than Sesshomaru would have done in his youth - which was a strange feat in itself.

Kimi wondered if he was infatuated with the miko. They had traveled together for years; Kimi's spies had often related tales of his dedication to her, and hers to him. He had said he was there for the miko; clearly he did not know she had been taken. Inuyasha's interest would cause problems for Sesshomaru, and by extension the West. Taking a human for a mate was extremely unusual, more so for a daiyoukai. Making one the Lady of the West - mate of the Saidai Mao - that was another thing altogether. If Sesshomaru was determined to go forward on that path - Kimi repressed the urge to roll her eyes, *of course the stubborn pup was going forward* - then he needed all the help he could get to smooth his way. Kimi had already decided to stay at the palace after he returned and lend her expertise; she would give her son assistance in this area as well.

It was startling to her, how little it hurt to think about being close to Inuyasha. She had met Izayoi once, and the deluge of hatred she had felt for the pretty human had nearly overwhelmed her. The woman's son, however...he was also Toga's son. Despite all that had happened, or perhaps because it had happened so long ago and ended as it did, she still held her mate in a place of warmth in her heart. The hanyou could not be allowed to continue on as he was, especially if he had some intentions towards the miko. Kimi would rectify the situation immediately. While at the same time protecting the entire West from invasion, managing her spy network, and dealing with three depressed pups.

She smiled to herself. *A mother's work is never done.*

"Prepare a room for This One's guest," she ordered the servant as soon as the girl was finished with Inuyasha's feet. She bowed and backed away, still blushing and throwing glances towards the hanyou as she slid the screens shut.

"Don't need one," Inuyasha barked shortly. "I'm leavin' soon as Kagome is ready." He crossed his arms over his chest defiantly, but did not stand. Kimi was thankful for small blessings. If not for the pup's injuries, he would no doubt have immediately raced away to search for the human girl and Kimi would have been forced to restrain him to prevent a commotion. *Perhaps I should poison more guests.*

It would certainly make political celebrations more interesting.

“This One assures you, she is most certainly not ready,” Kimi said dryly. Technically, the girl was either still being tortured by her captor or was mid-escape with Sesshomaru. Either way she was not prepared for a journey with the hanyou.

“What the fuck does she have to pack?” he growled in frustration. “It ain’t like she don’t have clothes at home - more than any normal person needs. Show me where she is, or I’ll sniff her out myself,” he warned. “I ain’t carryin’ all her shit just to turn around and come back two days later.”

“Such a short time?” Kimi did her best to keep her voice politely disinterested, but the hanyou was more intelligent than to be fooled by such a ruse. She would have been severely disappointed if he fell into her trap. Inuyasha’s body went still and his spine stiffened, as though he had realized he said more than he intended.

“We’re done here,” he said shortly. He met her eyes, but his expression gave nothing away. His scent was also unhelpful, irritated and wary - nothing that was not expected. “I need to talk to the bast- er, Sesshomaru, anyhow.”

Kimi was torn between the desire to continue to bait the pup, and a need to pull him aside and explain where he had gone wrong and how he could have more skillfully manipulated the conversation. Instead, she set aside her own fun for a later date. It was in the best interests of the West. Although it had taken her nearly a full day to wring the truth out of Sesshomaru’s advisors, Kento had given her the broad overview of Inuyasha’s mission in the East. Kimi had been shocked that Sesshomaru had placed such trust in the half-brother whom he had labeled a disgrace and claimed for his own kill. Upon reflection, she was quite proud of her son. He had overcome his personal feelings to make a decision that benefited his people. It was a sign of his skills as a leader, and that he was finally putting some of his resentment towards his father aside.

If Sesshomaru could treat the hanyou as a valued packmate, then Kimi would have to do the same. Even a distant relation deserved her excellent guidance and advice. She would have offered the same to Kento if he had been in need. And Inuyasha was definitely in need. Her mind made up, Kimi smiled. Inuyasha would be steered away from trouble, to help Sesshomaru’s cause, and towards self-improvement, to help himself. Something eased in her mind, perhaps the last whispers of hate or guilt for her treatment of Izayoi. The woman was gone, but Kimi could help her son. It would be an adequate diversion between reports, paperwork, and the occasional information gathering exercise. She made a mental note to see if the hanyou would take to interrogation better than Emi had. Thankfully, most of the pup’s vomit had landed on the prisoner.

“That will be rather difficult at the moment, son-of-my-mate. Sesshomaru is not in residence at this time.” She halted his protests with a smile and a raised palm. “He has left This One to rule in his absence. You may report now, as if he were here.”

“Like hell,” he cursed. “I don’t know you, Lady, but the asshole doesn’t just turn over power. And

unless his tail is on fire, he don't have shit for excuses for runnin' away right now." Kimi was very aware of the white of the pup's knuckles on his sword and the tension in his legs, ready to leap into action.

"This One assures you, his reasons are--"

"I. Don't. Give. A. Fuck." His eyes narrowed and he got to his feet. Kimi was not immune to the wave of intimidation that rolled off of him and her own eyes narrowed. Despite his youth and lack of training, Inuyasha was a survivor. A killer, when necessary. He had not lived on his own for as long as he had without developing a strong intuition for subterfuge. "The next words outta your mouth better be directions to Kagome, and she better be okay, or I am gonna tear this place apart lookin' for her. Startin' with you." The hilt of Tessaiga move fractionally; light gleamed off of an exposed inch of the transformed blade. She hoped his lessons on surviving in the wilds translated to understanding when he had crossed behavioral lines. They were pack - Sesshomaru had decreed it - and she was determined to be the alpha in the room. Negotiations were not going well, so Kimi resorted to releasing a bit of youki to put the pup in his place. Cool autumn winds, soaked in amber and crisp needles, blew against the hanyou. His eyes narrowed further, but he gave no indication that he was swayed. Kimi expended more energy, gradually increasing the force of her power in an attempt to push Inuyasha back to his seat and elicit his submission.

He braced his feet and gripped his sword, but did not draw. His eyes darkened, the gold rimmed with pink, and a snarl twisted his lips, but he did not bow over. Nor did he attack. At some point, Kimi's focus switched from subduing him to testing his limits. A huge portion of her youki was concentrated on him before he even moved back a step, but her anticipation of victory was short-lived. He squared his shoulders and walked forward, until he was an arm's length away. His face was contorted with a growl and his claws lengthened and ready for attack. She had not attempted to injure him with her youki, but the weight of it would have sent most demons to their knees.

Astonished by his display of strength, Kimi broke into a smile just as the doors were thrown open. Kento stood panting in the hallway, back bent slightly under her oppression. Hisao walked steadily behind the secretary, shielding himself with his own energy, but still clearly affected.

"My Lady," Kento said with a bow. "Is there anything I--"

The secretary's polite interruption was ruined by Hisao's blunt assessment. "Inuyasha-san! Do you have a death wish? Apologize to Kimi-sama!"

"I ain't sorry," the hanyou ground out. Hisao muttered expletives under his breath, but not so low that she couldn't make them out. Inuyasha's eyes remained locked on the Lady, and she maintained their invisible battle of wills for a moment longer. The sudden reclamation of her youki made Kento sigh audibly and Hisao relax his clenched fists, but Inuyasha's posture did not change. "If you want to dance, Lady, I'll make the time." He leaned forward slightly, aggressively. The behavior was that of a youth challenging for authority of a pack. Before the demon courts had been established, it would have resulted in the death of one or both participants. Even under Sesshomaru's rule it still sometimes did.

She doubted he was consciously aware of his actions, but she was, and her instincts were screaming at her to make the pup prove his worth. Kimi, the last female silver inu, did not submit to any who were not her superior in power. She overrode those instincts with a control that had been honed long before she had become Lady of the West. The hanyou continued, barely restrained from threatening her outright, “But you ain’t got shit I haven’t already seen and beaten, so cut the show and tell me where Kagome is.”

“Inuyasha-san!” Kento reprimanded.

“Moron,” Hisao spit out.

“The miko,” Kimi paused, making certain that she had his attention, “has been kidnapped by enemies of the West. Sesshomaru is retrieving her.” She waited, preparing herself to leash the pup with all of the youki at her disposal, utilizing Kento and Hisao if necessary to physically hold him. Once again, he surprised her.

“Why the fuck didn’t you say so?” He muttered an oath that made Kento’s ears turn red and Inuyasha abruptly leaned away from her. If Kimi had not scented the concern still lingering on the hanyou, she would have thought he cared nothing for Kagome.

“You are not concerned?”

“If those assholes put so much as a scratch on her, I’ll gut them and let Sango make shuriken from their claws,” he vowed with deadly intent, red flashing across his eyes. He blew out a long breath, and regained his control. “But Kagome gets kidnapped all the time. She knows how to leave a trail and how important it is to keep her mouth shut ‘til somebody comes for her.” He grimaced, “If the fucker left fast enough, he’ll find her before she even gets tied up.” The silence in the room was unfortunate, but unavoidable. Kimi wished she had more time to get to know the hanyou’s mind before having to manipulate him in conversation. His scowl was thunderous, “How long?”

Hisao frowned and Kento opened his mouth, “There are many extenuating-”

“How long did the prick wait?” His hand had fallen off his sword, but his fists were tight to the point of his claws drawing blood from his palms.

“One night. Two days.” Hisao spoke bluntly, and the deep timbre of his voice carried over the hanyou’s growls. “We received your message of the threat against Rin-yojosan. Lord Sesshomaru did not feel he could leave the West until another was in place to lead.” Kimi could smell the whirl of emotions, too quick to process, that filtered through Inuyasha. With an ability to see past his feelings and understand reason that she did not expect, he remained quietly frowning while he considered new information.

“It nearly killed him to stay,” Kento said softly.

“I doubt it,” Inuyasha responded thoughtlessly. Kimi wondered at the relationship between the two

brothers. Sesshomaru trusted him enough to call him pack and put the East into his hands, but still Inuyasha's first reaction was animosity. Absently, she reminded herself to probe the situation further, when circumstances allowed. She wanted to know the son of Izayoi, and to find the similarities and differences from her own offspring. "Rin..." The pup swallowed hard, and his face closed into an unreadable expression as he focused on Hisao, "...the kid and the runt are okay?"

"They are," Hisao confirmed with a nod.

"Although they are most distressed by Kagome-sama's absence," Kento added.

"The miko's new pup has been inconsolable," Kimi said, carefully watching for a reaction. "The little inu has vexed this one most severely, crying for her mother." The hanyou's eyes widened, and then he scowled again in resignation.

"Course she took in another one. Damn wench can't let anything alone." He shoved his hands in his sleeves, signaling the end of the conversation, and a drop of hostilities, and turned to another topic. "How long's he been gone?"

Kimi took his meaning and refocused his attention. "Sesshomaru left last night. This One will listen to your report, and make use of any intelligence so that the forces of the West will be prepared when the Saidai Mao returns with the miko."

Inuyasha looked like he wanted to argue, but Hisao and Kento stepped in, easing him into a discussion of the Northern raiding parties he had engaged, rumors of troop movements, and the status of preparations in the East. Kimi listened intently, assessing not only his report but also the male himself. Inuyasha was not Toga. He was brash and crude. He had only the most rudimentary technical skill at strategy and espionage. His expression seemed perpetually set in a frown. He did have a raw aptitude for battle and practical experience with negotiations, with youkai and humans, under extreme circumstances. With some refining, he would bring honor to the West. It had not occurred to her prior to Sesshomaru's announcement that he had accepted his half-brother, but something in Kimi was satisfied by the idea that both of Toga's sons could make him proud.

"Ryu will soon know of your movements in the East, if he does not already," Kimi mused once Inuyasha's telling was finished.

"Ryu?" Kento questioned. The other two inus also raised their brows at the familiarity.

"This One has seen him sucking his thumb; he shall be called whatever This One sees fit." She waited a beat for any of them to deny her right to denigrate the Dragon Lord, her junior by many, many centuries, before continuing, "We will convene again after dining. There are other sources of information to be tapped, and This One will hunt." Hisao and Kento stood and excused themselves. "You," Inuyasha's attention was focused on her immediately; she doubted it had ever wavered, "shall visit the kitsune and young Rin and join them for the meal. Then This One will require your presence until the Saidai Mao returns."

“Whatever,” Inuyasha huffed as he turned to leave. “Kento and Hisao trust you, so I’ll share information. But if the asshole ain’t back by midnight, I’ll go get Kagome myself.”

“You will not leave without This One’s permission,” Kimi stated flatly. She held her anticipation in check while she waited for his reaction. He did not disappoint her for vehemence, although his threat lacked variety, he made up for it with scorn that any courtier would envy.

“You go ahead and decree whatever the fuck you want, Lady, it means less that shit to me. We already did that dominance thing, and I ain’t impressed.”

“Inuyasha.” The pup paused at his name and looked back through the open doorway. “You haven’t seen the least of what I can do.” His eyes narrowed before he disappeared into the hallway, and Kimi allowed herself a broad smile. Returning to the Western Palace was proving to be immensely entertaining.

Chapter 26: Black Letter Day

His anger still boiling over, Ryukostokken ripped his claws from a guard that watched over prisoners. The dragon had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he was just as dead as the imbecile that had waited to notify Wei of the miko's reiki - of her escape. His revenge upon the dogs. His chance to be healed - to take and hold his true form once again - was gone.

She was gone.

Ryukostokken roared, flames erupting from his mouth and roasting the corpses scattered around him, and two prisoners still chained in the room. Their screams of agony did nothing to calm him, and the sounds quickly stopped as the heat of his fire roasted the iron that bound them to the interrogation tables. White-hot metal sank through flesh and bone and collapsed against the stone surface with a strangely crunchy clatter that sent bursts of scent into the air. His tongue flicked out. *Charred skin and burnt hair. Terror. Agony.*

Such things were normally pleasing to him. Pleasurable. He sank his fist into the half-burned, half dripping mass of the dead guard and spun, throwing the mess into the corridor and taking out another guard. What should have been pleasurable was not. What should have been a great day was not. What should have been the beginning of his triumph was-

"Denka-ue," Wei interrupted his thoughts and the Dragon Lord responded by ripping a metal restraining cuff from the wall and hurtling it in the administrator's direction. The fool had prostrated himself on the floor, and so the projectile hit a prison slave behind him. It exploded through the youkai's chest before he had an opportunity to look surprised and another body fell to the floor.

Ryukostokken grabbed Wei by the throat and held him high, shaking him to punctuate each word, "Someone has ruined This One's victory today. Someone has allowed the miko bitch to escape. Someone. Will. Pay." His claws sank into meaty portion of the administrator's neck. Smoke rolled from his nostrils and the smell of sulfur and methane choked those few still alive within Ryustokken's sight. "If she lives to go back to that pup - "

Wei attempted to interrupt again, and in a haze of red Ryukostokken nearly severed his neck. A hunk of gore ripped away in his hand and the administrator fell heavily to the floor. The Dragon Lord snarled, but before he could sink his claws in again, a gurgling voice stopped him, "She smells of you." His claws were only inches from Wei's heart, the tips already puncturing the skin and drawing blood. Heat surged behind his eyes and he longed to roast the incompetent retainer where he lay. He breathed deeply, tongue flickering out, gathering the poisonous gases in his gullet that would form flame once they passed his lips. His own scent slid across his mouth.

Concentrated, saccharine musk. Biting, metallic mica. Copper. Sulphur.

The pup would know. That realization dampened his fury, and reason had an opportunity to be heard.

He had been close to the miko. He had cut her, his clothes had brushed across her. She had slept in a room he often used for his pleasure. She would be drenched in his scent - no inuyoukai, not even the false Saidai Mao - would not notice. The miko had escaped. She might even live long enough to return to her dog, but he would know that another male had held her in his grip. Sesshomaru would know that a dragon had captured his weak little human plaything - cut her, hurt her. His scent would be on her back and breasts from the brush of his tanto sheath. When they met in person, Sesshomaru would scent Ryukostokken and know it had been he who touched the female. The Saidai Mao would live in fear that his precious miko would be taken again.

And she would be.

Ryukostokken relished the thought. Sesshomaru, horrified that the pretty little priestess had been held captive - that the Dragon Lord could have taken her body in ways that the pup could only dream of. She would be retrieved. When she arrived back at the Northern Palace she would be shivering and afraid, smelling of flowers and terror, calling out for her impotent lord that could not save her. Sesshomaru's nightmare could be made true. Ryukostokken would force her to finish the task he needed her to complete, then he would make certain that his pleasure, and her pain, were drawn out as long as possible - months, years, if his healers could make her live that long. She would see the obliteration of the West and would learn to bow before her new master. She would learn to enjoy his treatment - to long for it - before Ryukostokken would even consider ending her.

He bared his teeth in vicious enjoyment, making Wei and the last guard flinch. "Summon Arashi. Prepare Ko for This One." The miko had proved her value to him, and he would not let her get far. If she believed herself to be safe, the taste of her broken spirit would be that much more delicious when she was once again at his mercy. The bastard half-breed spy was irritating, and a stain on the pure bloodline of the Northern Dragons, but he produced excellent results. He would retrieve the miko, the Saigo Mao knew, and he would bring additional intelligence that would hasten the triumph of the North.

Wei sent the guard to find the spy and carefully rose from the floor. "My Lord," he said hesitantly, "the wind demoness is still unable to perform her duties. Shall another?"

Ryukostokken strode away in irritation, Wei scrambling to keep up behind him. Ko was by far his favorite toy; she was more difficult to break and recovered faster than younger youkai. However, the thought of regaining the miko stirred his interest. "Bring two or three others instead." He snapped out further orders as they walked to his private bathing chambers. The bathing tub, molded from basalt under dragon fire, was already filled with steaming water when he arrived. He disrobed and sank into the water, a frown marring his features. He would have the miko again, but he wanted her *now*.

"Wei." When Ryukostokken spoke the administrator snapped to attention. "Make certain the females selected for This One are human. Dark-haired and well-shaped. This One will practice for the miko's return."

"Denka-ue-" Wei began, but was interrupted by the entrance of a dragon soldier.

“Ryukostokken-denka,” he kneeled with his eyes cast down.

“You are not the half-breed,” the Dragon Lord noted in a flat voice. Wei and the soldier stiffened, their postures bracing for an outburst.

“Arashi has not yet returned, Denka-ue, but he sent a message for you.” He held out a folded paper, sealed with wax. Wei immediately took it and passed it to Ryukostokken before quickly stepping back again, out of easy gutting distance. Wax crackled and broke over the hot water. It took only a few minutes for him to read the short missive, but his anger rose even faster. Ryukostokken surged out of the water, his roar echoing off of the stone and alerting all in the Northern Palace to his displeasure. Fire followed, white hot and searing anything in its path. The heaving tapestries that sheltered bathers from drafts were engulfed in flames and fell to the floor.

The fire was cut off with a snarl of rage as Ryukostokken crushed the paper in his claw. His assassination squads had met resistance in the East. There were rumors that a demon had risen to command the remnants of Kuren’s troops, and had brought together the wild youkai as well. The Dragon Lord would have killed the messenger for that news alone, but Arashi added fuel to his wrath by informing him that the spread of the pox had ceased. Something, or someone, had prevented it from infecting much further south than the Eastern and Western palaces. The pox was his secret weapon, his means to eroding the strength of the other Lords and preparing them for defeat against his army.

Instead of three dead or dying nations, Hirimoto and the South were untouched, but no doubt on alert. The East had a new would-be warlord that he knew nothing about, and the West. The *fucking* West was still ruled by Sesshomaru. And that disgusting *dog*, that should be a rug to wipe his boots on, was healthy and whole *and had Ryukostokken’s miko!* Another roar of flames exploded from his maw, and the doors that had been hidden behind the now destroyed tapestries groaned and creaked under the onslaught. The iron hinges and pulls began to slump into disfigured orange slag as the heavy Katsura wood succumbed and broke into chunks of charcoal and ash. With the slam of his fist, Ryukostokken cracked the stone tub and swallowed his fire.

The room was silent, save for the crackle of burning wood and the heavy breathing of the Dragon Lord. Smoke drifted in the air, pulled outside through the gaping holes in the doors. Sunlight filtered in, stronger and brighter than the Northern Palace had seen in weeks. Ryukostokken’s fearsome expression grew darker. The remains of one door collapsed, and he could clearly see outside. The sky was blue and empty of clouds.

The storms were gone. His means of concealing his troops and harassing his enemies with difficult conditions and cold, starving refugees had disappeared. His pox had been stopped. The East was not defeated. The dog lived. The miko whore, the one who would heal him, had escaped. Ryukostokken stepped from the bath, lifted it with both hands, and threw it through the outer wall. His primal scream nearly drowned out the cries of the youkai in the courtyard below as four tons of rock plummeted to the ground.

Kagome felt the insistent tug of wakefulness trying to force open her eyes and buried her face in her bedding to avoid it. It was surprisingly hard under her cheek; she frowned to herself, wondering if Shippo had stolen her pillow again. A quiet rumble vibrated through her and warm breath brushed along her temple.

“Relax,” the order, given by Sesshomaru’s smooth, deep voice, sent a bone melting tingle down Kagome’s spine - immediately followed by muscle-freezing anxiety. “We are nearly home.” Her legs were draped over his right arm, while his left cradled her shoulders. Long fingers stroked at her elbow. Kagome was riveted by the dangerous tickle of claws brushing lightly across her skin. The same claws that had brushed across *other* skin. The same long fingers that had...she squeaked, which Sesshomaru seemed to take as a sign of discomfort due to the stygian atmosphere, rather than psychological distress.

“We will be out of the dark soon.”

The darkness was the least of Kagome’s concerns. It could not have been a dream. She knew that. The images were too vivid, the uncomfortable sensation of dried fluid on her thighs evidence that Sesshomaru had, indeed, run his hands over her naked body and touched her in a way that made her see stars. Her anxiety was growing into something akin to terror. She had asked the Saidai Mao, the Killing Perfection, Inuyasha’s *brother*, to make her forget. To make her *feel*.

A moan of disgust and guilt built up in her chest. She had left Ko behind and she had spent the night begging for Sesshomaru’s touch. They should be separate in her mind, somewhere deep inside she knew that. Knew that her enjoyment of his touch, that he had helped her forget for a brief time the horror of her captivity did not lessen what Ko had gone through. Holding her shame and guilt to herself and refusing to be comforted would not free Ko, it would not keep Ryukostokken from raping her again. She *knew* that what had happened with Sesshomaru did not trivialize Ryukostokken’s actions or her response to them.

Heedless of logic, her remorse intensified. She had been enjoying perhaps the most intensely pleasurable experience of her life, while Ko... Kagome’s stomach knotted. She felt like she couldn’t breathe - but she was breathing too quickly - gasping for air but no oxygen was reaching her lungs. Light grew overhead, stabbing her eyes through her lids. She could feel her throat constricting, but she could not calm herself. It was awful, mortifying, shameful, amazing, thoughtful -

Thoughtful? Sesshomaru? A wave of dizziness swirled in her head and reality turned itself inside out. For a moment, Kagome worried she would pass out. Then, when Sesshomaru’s voice broke the silence again, she *hoped* to pass out.

“Eiji, have the Miko’s bath things and clean clothing brought here. Eiichi, no other shall enter the pack springs.” Solemn responses of ‘yes, Sesshomaru-sama’ were followed by silence. Her breathing sped

up further, and black dots swam under her closed lids. He was taking her to bathe. Presumably with him. It was too much. The kidnapping, the torture...Ko's rape. Her escape and Sesshomaru's perfectly timed rescue. She forcibly turned her thoughts away from her experiences at the Northern palace and allowed the enormity of Sesshomaru's actions to block out everything else.

The...the.. Kagome's mind short circuited; it was the grain of rice that tipped the scales of her ability to cope. She barely noticed being set down to lean against a smooth boulder. Her brain kept flashing images of his face: golden eyes pinched with concern, magenta stripes that speared across sculpted muscle, pink tongue laving her wrist firmly. And, just before she had fallen asleep, she could have sworn she saw him licking a thin sheen of fluid from his fingers. *That wasn't...it couldn't be...* Sesshomaru would *not* do that. Her logic balked after so many unimaginable things happening in such a few days, and the Killing Perfection kissing her - calling her beautiful - *enjoying the taste of her cum* was at the top of the list of unimaginable things.

The soft crinkling sound of salt-crusted cloth falling to the ground snapped her back to reality and Kagome's face exploded with red embarrassment. She squeezed her eyes tighter shut and struggled to stand. Her mouth was open in a desperate attempt for air, her muscles shaking with exhaustion and oxygen deprivation.

"Do not-" The deep voice ended right next to her ear as Sesshomaru caught her before she could collapse to the ground, "strain yourself," he finished. Kagome leaned back, trying desperately not to touch him and gut-wrenchingly aware that he was nude. *This is Sesshomaru. That was Sesshomaru - with his mouth on my neck and his fingers buried inside me.* "Breathe," he commanded. His voice softened and he stroked her hair. "Deep breath, Kagome." He sucked in air with her, noisily, as if to show her how it was done. As sweet, clean oxygen flooded her system Kagome wondered if he had ever made noise unintentionally. The remembered sound of a growl, low and deep and sending vibrations from his lips to her neck and straight to the throbbing knot of need in her belly had her blushing brighter and squirming to get away.

"Calm yourself," he said. His hand left her hair to brush across her cheek and Kagome's body froze against her will at the touch. She wanted this. Had wanted it. The night before she was taken, she made the decision that she wanted to explore her attraction to the daiyoukai - his seeming attraction to her. She wanted to know if he cared for her. The pad of his thumb brushed across her cheekbone and startled her. Her eyes popped open and for a moment she was nearly blinded by the light reflecting from his skin and hair. "Relax, Kagome. You are safe."

A tiny, vertical crease marred the skin between his brows. Kagome was fascinated. He was worried for her. So worried that he allowed it to show on his face. Even if she was the only one that could or would see it, it was still significant. Whatever else happened between them, whatever what had already happened meant, Sesshomaru did worry for her. He was right. She was safe with him. She could relax. Incrementally, she felt the tension leave her muscles as she stared into his golden eyes. Her guilt, her worry for Ko and her anger at Ryukostokken were still present, but they settled in the background of her mind. Sesshomaru, no matter how concerned he was, was not someone to allow intimacies - or in her case, initiate them - on a whim. He was honorable, loyal, and protective.

She had time. Time to work through the feelings left in the wake of her experience in the North. Time to plan with Sesshomaru how to end Ryukostokken's reign. Time to consider what had happened in the cave and what she wanted it to mean. What *he* wanted it to mean. Her blush intensified, but her breathing evened out. It was awkward. So, *so* awkward.

What the hell was I thinking? She worried what Inuyasha would say. What Sango would think. Her friend would never speak poorly of Kagome, but Sango was a feudal woman and nice girls, in any era, did not go around begging men to make them orgasm until they blacked out. That brought on another wave of anxiety, mixed with so many other emotions Kagome was sure she would start screaming like a lunatic at any moment. Inuyasha would *know*. He would smell it, or see it on her face, or hear her heart beating like a dub-step album, and he would be furious.

Kagome tried to look on the bright side. She never really saw anyone at the castle if she didn't want to, outside of Sesshomaru, Shippo, and Rin. Sango and Miroku would stay close to Edo for the remainder of the winter. And Inuyasha might not be back for weeks. A little bit of the spirit that had allowed her to accept time travel and demons - to be the object of Naraku's sick obsession and nearly made the bride of a child lord, to roll with whatever crazy thing happened in her life any given week - returned, and Kagome offered Sesshomaru a hesitant smile. She had dealt with mythical jewels emerging from her body, a crush that longed for his undead girlfriend, and schoolmates that still thought she carried a dormant version of the bubonic plague. She could deal with this too. He hadn't brought it up, so she didn't need to either. Not until she had a handle on her feelings.

"I-" she cleared the roughness from her throat and began again, "I could really use a bath."

"Indeed." His flat observation had her frowning with irritation. She was sure she didn't smell great. She hadn't bathed in three days - unless she counted her dip in the ocean, and she didn't - but it was rude of him to bring it up. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but he spoke first, "You have salt in your hair, and the heat will improve your condition. Also," he paused while Eiji entered deferentially and left a basket of cloth and soaps near the water's edge. Kagome blushed enough for both males, who seemed unconcerned with the daiyoukai's nude state. He continued as soon as the rock demon disappeared back down the path, "I desire to assay your injuries." He leaned closer, and his lips quirked slightly. On anyone else the expression would have been unremarkable. On Sesshomaru, it was practically lascivious. "And any damage I may have done."

Kagome spluttered, "You- assay-"

"It means evaluate," he interrupted smoothly. Kagome's temper flared. She had been through a great deal in recent days. Not the least of which was the first, and decidedly intense, sexual experience of her life. And the damned youkai felt the need to condescend to her.

"I know what it means," she said through clenched teeth. "You-"

"Then why did you seek clarification?" His tiny smile cleared, but his eyes remained warm and his

head tilted slightly, as if to say, *why are humans so contradictory and uneducated*. For some reason it was even more infuriating than Inuyasha's bluntly rude questions. She wanted to punch him.

"I didn't! You-"

"Good. Then we are in agreement." He stood swiftly, scooping her up and stepping towards the water. Her mouth fell open with equal parts shock and outrage.

"We certainly are not! Stop," Kagome's commands became shrill as he waded deeper, until her feet were wet and her bottom was in imminent danger of being soaked. She was unable to struggle; her good arm was trapped between their bodies and her free arm was still tender and pulsing with restraining bands of his youki. She settled for a glare. "Sesshomaru!" His eyes slid to hers, although his face remained firmly forward. All of her concerns and anxiety were overshadowed by her ire, so much so that she forgot for a few moments their circumstances and the precarious nature of her clothing. "Put me down, this instant!"

"As you wish," he replied in a monotone that was belied by the smirk twitching his lips. Kagome had a split second to consider that Sesshomaru never did anything that he didn't want to - certainly not because someone else demanded it. With a movement quicker than the human eye could follow, she was tossed into the air - leaving her salty borrowed shirt behind. She splashed down with a strangled shriek, but did not touch the bottom of the pool. Her head did not even go under the water as Sesshomaru caught her and pulled her once again to his chest, this time deep enough in the spring that she was submerged up to her neck.

Kagome stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, at the shredded remains of white silk that floated on the water. *He stripped me. The arrogant, egotistical, domineering youkai stripped me - he ruined my clothes!* Somewhere in the recesses of the miko's brain, it registered that how Sesshomaru had removed her clothing was far less important than the fact that it was done, and he had done it. She was naked, the ruined garment wasn't even hers, but her overloaded mind couldn't seem to focus on anything past his wanton destruction of expensive material.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Do you ever listen? Can you even hear things you don't agree with? I am not one of your subjects, you can't just order me around and expect me to obey!" She was glaring, her eyes spitting fire while she sharpened her tongue on him. Her face and neck were hot with an angry blush, and she could not find enough words to express how absolutely rude and asinine she felt Sesshomaru had behaved. The longer she went on the more ridiculous she became, accusing him of everything from 'peeping' to, contradictorily, 'an aloof disgust for humanity'. The tirade continued, his calm expression only fueling her as she became more expressive, until she finally ended with, "Just because you made me cum my brains out doesn't mean you can play doctor whenever you want and if you think that a hot body and talented mouth can get you whatever you want, you've got another think coming!"

With that she poked him in the chest to make her point. His head tilted to the side slightly, as though he were considering her words, and she could feel her temper flaring again, until he said, "Although I have

not before heard this expression, ‘cum your brains out’, I believe I understand the meaning.” His eyes were sparkling with mirth and more than a little bit of lust, and Kagome’s mind rapidly replayed everything she had said in the heat of the moment. Like surround sound, she got the full impact of words that had escaped without thought. *Sexy brat. Running hot and cold. God-like prowess with an ego to match. Lickable.* Kagome closed her eyes against the rush of heat to her face and did her best to sink into the water, something made impossible by the way he held her against his chest. She had referred to the First among Demon Lords as a *‘lickable piece of eye candy that should be given the surgeon general’s warning for being a pain in the ass’*. If her luck hadn’t been just as abysmal as it always was, she might have been snatched away to hell in that moment. Unfortunately, her fate was not so kind.

A rumbling, humming vibration shook his chest and caused the water around them to ripple and lap against them. She opened one eye to steal a quick glance, and the other eye followed in confusion. She couldn’t decide whether to be angry or pleasantly surprised. The daiyoukai was *laughing*. His fangs were bared and his eyes crinkled to narrow slits. His body shook and the sound coming from his chest was low and warm and sent a thrill of pleasure straight through her.

Although the sound eliminated most of her anger, a flood of embarrassment made up for it. He relaxed enough that she could slide out of his grasp to stand, still within the circle of his arms. She crossed her arms over her chest in a vain effort to provide some modesty and muttered, “You are so lucky I don’t have any extra beads right now.” She threw a dark glance to his face, still grinning wickedly but his laughter was tapering off. “I’d like to see how hard you laugh after being subjugated.”

His claws trailed up her spine, making her shiver despite the hot water, to sink into her hair and tip back her head. She firmed up her frown, determined not to let mortification overwhelm her. He leaned closer, golden eyes boring into hers, the corner of his mouth still quirked upwards, “If you desire me on my knees before you, you need only ask.” Calloused fingertips caressed her hipbone and Kagome could not help but imagine him as he described, offering a repeat performance of the pleasure she had recently experienced.

“Pervert,” she rasped, her throat suddenly tighter than expected.

“Generous,” he corrected, dipping his head to hers. “Accommodating,” he whispered against her lips. His pressed his mouth against hers, firmly, before pulling back to nip at her full lower lip. “I appreciate the offer, but I must decline.” While his tone was regretful, his words had her head snapping up and her eyes bright again with fury.

“Offer? Why you-” He surprised her with a ladle of hot water poured over her head. She brushed dripping hair out of her eyes and glared at him.

He had maneuvered her within arm’s reach of the supplies that Eiji had left behind and blocked her into a niche in the wall of the pool. He began lathering a bar of soap while he spoke, “We do not have time for such intimacies, you still need a bath, and we have company.”

“Company?” She repeated dumbly. They were in the baths far below the ground floor, she did not understand how he could know if anyone was arriving at the castle.

“My mother approaches.” Sesshomaru dropped that bomb in her lap with a calm facade, then lit the fuse, “I believe Inuyasha is with her.”

ooo

“Geiken, you understand This One had a duty to perform, no matter how distasteful.” Kimi smiled a soft, almost seductive smile at the aged healer imprisoned in the Western dungeons and rolled her implements of torture back into a bundle. “This One understands that you only wished to protect the honor of the West.” The youkai bowed again from his place on the floor, touching his forehead to the cold stone. Hundreds of pinpricks dotted his exposed skin and made weeping stains on his clothing. Kimi had been generous with her needles. “The last time a Western Lord became acquainted with a human female, it was most inauspicious. Your distrust of the woman healer is not surprising.” Geiken trembled from pain, blood loss, and a worshipful awe that was impressive in its tenacity after Kimi’s expert interrogation. Inuyasha wasn’t sure which made her more dangerous: her ability to find every nerve ending in Geiken’s body, or her loving, benevolent tone as she did it.

Inuyasha wanted to snort at the heavy scent of gratitude and righteousness that rolled off of the prisoner. He held himself back, though, maintaining his position in the darkest corner of the room, slightly behind the bastard’s mother, as she had instructed. He had been disgusted initially by her suggestion that he participate in an interrogation, assuming that directly translated to torture at his hands, but he was also a bit curious. *She think I’ll be impressed or afraid of her if I watch her cut on somebody? Keh*, he huffed to himself, *not likely*. As they had made their way to the dungeon, she ordered him to keep himself as unobtrusive as possible until ‘the time is right’. Inuyasha didn’t know exactly what that meant, but her technique was strange enough to keep him watching - and following her lead.

She ordered fresh water and a change of bandages for the badger demon. The linen wrapped around his arm was stained with blood and pus. The servant that changed the bandages noted an infection had set in from Sesshomaru’s acid. Inuyasha listened to the story of the injury, both bewildered and unsurprised by his half-brother’s defense of Kagome. The girl was cheerful, accepting - the most loving and honest person he had ever met - and the level of devotion she inspired in nearly everyone who knew her was almost revolting. Although picturing the cold, heartless prick melting someone for calling the miko names was difficult to imagine, if anyone could draw out even a tiny bit of feeling from Sesshomaru, it was Kagome.

More baffling than the story itself was the Lady’s reaction to it. Despite her earlier attitude of acceptance towards her deceased mate’s bastard, she made sounds of sympathy and understanding as Geiken spoke. Her youki made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up too. She seemed to be comforting the prisoner, but at the same time, Inuyasha could sense her power restrained and controlled, but ready to strike. The guard in the hall and the idiot chained to the wall by his ankle did not appear aware of the Lady’s energy, coiled around her like a protective snake, but it set his teeth on

edge.

“Yes, My Lady,” Geiken exclaimed. “That human whore is just like the one before - only she has the audacity to enter the palace itself. She calls herself a healer, but I felt her power.” His eyes narrowed and he gripped the edge of the futon under his knees. “She is a miko,” he hissed. “She has used her holy magic to cast a shadow over the Saidai Mao, as that weak mortal princess did to his father.” Inuyasha tightened his fist on the hilt of Tessaiga, fighting the urge to lash out at the sniveling moron that insulted his mother. “Now that you are here, My Lady, you can break this dark spell and the Western Lord will see clearly again!”

“You believe she controls your Lord?” Lady Kimi’s question, lilting and just short of sounding fearful, cast a pallor on the prisoner.

“No, My Lady! None can control Sesshomaru-sama!”

“What then, what purpose would be served by removing her, as others have tried to do in your stead?” A frown marred her beautiful face, but Inuyasha was not fooled. Her scent, muted and nearly undetectable, was not puzzled, but anticipatory. The inu bitch was ready to pounce.

“I see no reason to kill her,” Geiken answered easily. “Although I believe others will desire her death when they see how she has turned our Lord’s eye. Turn her out to go back to whatever human hovel she came from. That will destroy her presumptions and free Sesshomaru-sama of her entanglements.” He made an expression of distaste, “Besides, I can think of none who would want to be close enough to a human to kill her. Filthy creatures.”

Inuyasha was vibrating with fury, wanting to show the old fucker exactly what human heritage could do, but the Lady’s regretful sigh held him back. “Poor Geiken. This One had hoped that you had grander ambitions than mere prejudice. It would make so many things easier if you held value as part of a larger scheme, but it is apparent that you do not.” His confusion was obvious, but he did not get a chance to speak. “This One does understand your hatred of humans, Geiken, but it is not excused. Especially now that the Saidai Mao’s pack has human blood in it.” He understood, then, what she had meant when she said ‘when the time is right’. That time had come. He stepped forward, into the shaft of flickering light made by a single lamp in the room. He grinned, baring his teeth and knowing the effect his height and bearing made with shadows cast about him. He purposefully flicked his ears forward, displaying his hanyou heritage clearly. He cracked his knuckles. Scaring the holy hell out of the fucking asshole that tried to hit Kagome would be a decent way to pass the time until she returned.

Geiken swallowed hard, eyes wide and face pale. It was clear that rumors of Sesshomaru’s acceptance of Inuyasha had not made it to the dungeons. “You have allowed this, My Lady?” he whispered in shock.

“Allow?” She smiled and crouched on the floor until she was eye-level with the badger, mindless of the grime that would stain her expensive kimono. “It is not This One’s place to allow the Saidai Mao to do anything. However, This One is most pleased to have another of the InuTashio’s sons brought home.”

Her smile was both pleasant and chilling, the combination disturbing in how well the two juxtaposed emotions were expressed together. She stood, sweeping her hair behind her shoulder with an air of finality. “The Saidai Mao has more important matters to deal with than your punishment, Geiken. This One has taken the task on.” His shudder of relief was short lived. “Inuyasha-san will carry out such tasks in This One’s name...as he sees fit.” Inuyasha took a single step forward, trying to maintain a look of intimidation without betraying the tingling confusion he felt over the title of respect she gave him. If the old healer had even a single like-minded acquaintance in the palace, Inuyasha would find out and ensure that they never got close to Kagome.

Lady Kimi paused in the doorway and cocked her head, drawing his attention. “Unfortunately,” she said, “that will have to wait.” She turned to Inuyasha, “Our Alpha has returned.” Her smile sent a spike of apprehension through him. He didn’t know what she was planning, but he felt certain he wouldn’t like it. “We shall greet him together. Come, Inuyasha-san.” She placed her hand on his forearm and guided him out of the cell with an insistent push of youki.

“Ain’t like he needs me to say hello, wen - er, Lady. We don’t have time for chat and neither of us fuckin’ want it. I’ll just grab Kagome and go.”

“Oh, dear pup,” she chuckled, and his foreboding grew, “This One simply cannot allow such an opportunity to pass by. We will go to them *immediately*.”

ooo

Ko sat at the window of her chamber, looking out over the training grounds. The view was considered less than appealing, which was more than likely why the room had been assigned to a blind youkai. Her mouth twisted in a vindictive smile. She wasn’t blind anymore, and while the view might not be attractive, it was very informative. She watched the progress of the army’s preparation and counted the number of soldiers that remained in the North, giving her an estimate of how many had already been dispatched. Her intelligence gathering was cut short as she heard the unconcealed approach of more than one demon. With a practiced motion, she pulled moisture from a nearby pitcher of water to cloud her eyes.

The door was pushed open with enough force that it bounced against the wall. Her senses recognized Wei, anger pulsing off of him as he stood in the entrance. He surveyed her condition, she could feel his tongue flicking out to scent the air, and hissed in disgust. “Your blood is still fresh, such weakness. It is to be expected of an elemental. I will never understand why my Lord has chosen to favor you with life, when he slaughtered the rest of your kind.”

“Favored,” Ko broke her usual silence to laugh harshly. “Yes, I am most *honored* by his favor.” She did not have to manufacture her discomfort. The wounds Ryukostokken had inflicted were deep, and still bleed sluggishly. It would take days for her to heal completely.

Hot breath was on her face in an instant, and the dragon administrator spoke harshly, “Do not mock me, whore, or our Lord.” His voice turned sly, “Another will take your place tonight, since you cannot

do your duty. We still have some humans and a few little tree youkai chained - perhaps he will select one of them.” Ko bit down on her own tongue, refusing to give in to his provocation. The tree youkai that had survived Ryukostokken’s purge of elementals in the North were all young enough to not yet have taken root, some no more than children. “You will attend him in his private study and instruct the females on my Lord’s pleasure.” His claws bit into the slowly mending scratches on her face, reopening the wounds. “Tree youkai are so unpredictable at that age. Will she bend, or break, do you think?”

“Lord Ryukostokken’s desire will be accommodated,” she replied noncommittally, concealing her disgust and anger with the ease of constant practice. The administrator made a vulgar observation about what else she could accommodate, and then Wei backhanded her, almost as an afterthought, before he departed. Ko waited until she was sure he was gone before she carefully stood and began the short trip to the Dragon Lord’s chamber. She would need to send information to Kagome soon, and hope that she had survived the journey back to the West. In the meantime, she offered a prayer to any Kami that might be listening that whichever tree was cursed to be selected for the evening’s activities would break - quickly. No one deserved to endure Ryukostokken’s *pleasure*.

Soon, she promised herself, soon no one will have to.

Chapter 27: Introductions

Once they were left alone at the springs, Sesshomaru had raised her ire by condescending to her intelligence and it had the desired effect. The guilt that had returned to her scent cooled and was replaced by peppery irritation. While she was distracted, trying to berate him, he carried her into the water and kept her too focused on his words to give her time to protest when he removed her clothing. He caught her before she could do more than make a minor splash, and he was sure the movement had been almost invisible to her human eyes. To his, however...blessed with demon senses he had ample opportunity to take in her pale, naked skin before the water covered her once again.

Her temper overtook her quickly, and he let her words wash over him as he inhaled her scent and gloried in the relaxed, easy peace within himself. She was safe. She was with him. He had Kagome, and he knew his enemy's measure. Although his ego had been shaken during her capture, with her secure at his side it returned in even greater quantity. He knew his weakness, had admitted it, and knew how to protect against having it exploited. While he strategized and defeated his enemies, he would enjoy all of the benefits that could be wrought from an intended mate. Soon, he relished the thought, she would be more. If her shrill accusations were any indication, she was closer to being convinced than he had hoped.

"Just because you made me cum my brains out doesn't mean you can play doctor whenever you want and if you think that a hot body and talented mouth can get you whatever you want, you've got another think coming!"

Blood surged straight to his cock at her words and he relied on centuries of practice to keep his expression calm. She poked him in the chest, most likely thinking it emphasized her point. All she had emphasized was that she had enjoyed their time together, and that she found him physically pleasing. Her appreciation was gratifying, and he considered that such praise deserved an encore. Although he wanted to take her right then and show her that he would, indeed, take whatever he wanted – and she would beg him to do so – he refrained, and instead replied, "Although I have not before heard this expression, 'cum your brains out', I believe I understand the meaning."

She reddened, and he could practically see her mind working. Her mouth fell open, allowing the full lower lip to tempt him. Her eyes widened, and she smelled of sharp turnips. He still held her close, and he considered sliding his hand down her back to cup her bottom and pull her against him and show her how he wanted her. He considered proving to her that she was just as 'lickable' as she claimed she found him to be.

Cinnamon and satsuma oranges joined her embarrassed scent and Sesshomaru could not help the rumble of laughter that came to life in his chest. Kagome, his Kagome, was the most contradictory creature. Contradictory, sweet, brave, loyal, delicious, and absolutely *lickable*. She grumbled something about making him a subjugation spell, and he pictured himself submissive before her. Not prostrate on the ground like Inuyasha, but on his knees, worshiping her body. His instincts had a pleasant tug of war, disliking the submissive image, but urging him to taste her again. He told her he

would be happy to do so, and she threatened him.

The blue fire in her eyes sparked his natural instincts to dominate, and he did his best to modulate his own actions. She was human, and although she needed to learn what it was to be inu, he realized that he might also need to accommodate her nature. Realized that he *could* accommodate her. Instead of pulling her head back by her hair and nipping at her neck, he loomed over her, using his height and superior strength to herd her through the pool, even as he bent to taste her lips. He whispered against them, taunting her and testing his limits. She was soft, silky, and Kagome. He stopped with only a light press against her mouth, as they had reached the destination he had in mind.

The stone seat was only a few feet below the surface of the water, barely deep enough to keep her breasts covered. He pulled back and his body reacted instantly to the sight of pink nipples - pebbled tips on her flushed breasts. Round and firm and thrust towards him as she tried to maintain her one-sided argument. Slim waist and pale, flat belly that ended in the dark arrow of her sex. Toned, muscled thighs that made him ache to think of parting and sliding between. His glance slid up to meet her face. Her cheeks were pink as well, and that only reminded him of the peaks below the water and the blush that would coat all the skin in between when she reached her climax. Inky hair absorbed the steam of the springs and created waves around her, sliding into the water to dance around her shoulders. Shoulders, kissed by the sun, which sloped up to meet her neck in a juncture that pulsed with her heartbeat and called out to him to kiss, to taste, to mark.

He pressed one knee between hers, "Accommodating," he whispered the correction against her mouth, leaning in for another kiss, when a distant pulse of youki reached him. His ardor was immediately banked, although it did not dissipate. His mother was at the palace, and she was thoughtfully – although Sesshomaru could think of much more *thoughtful* actions she could have taken when she realized he had returned, such as allowing him privacy – notifying him that she was making her way to him. He held back a sigh, held back the growl of frustration at having his time with his miko cut short, and pressed a hard kiss to her lips. He nipped her gently. "I appreciate the offer, but I must decline." He reached for the bathing supplies on the ledge of the pool and filled a ladle with water.

"Offer? Why you-" She managed to glare at him around a mouthful of water and a face full of hair. Her irritation was arousing. Almost as much as her kisses, her moans, her breathy uttering of his name. Sesshomaru repressed another sigh. Always there were other demands on him, on his time. He vowed he would rectify that, soon. He began lathering a bar of soap while he spoke, "We do not have time for such intimacies, you still need a bath, and we have company."

"Company?" She stared at him, not understanding.

"My mother approaches." A lesser youki would have winced at the explosion of anxiety, the sour melon tainting her delicious scent. "I believe Inuyasha is with her." Her reaction was instantaneous. She sank into the water until it lapped against her chin and her eyes darted around comically. Sesshomaru cupped her elbow with one hand to prevent her from accidentally drowning and enjoyed the torturous sensation of her inner thighs sliding across his hips as she slid down on her seat. If the ledge she sat on were only a few inches shorter...

"I *can't*- he can't – *your mother!*" She sucked in a deep breath and coughed on water. Sesshomaru pulled her up, gently, and rubbed her back with one soapy hand while he pushed her hair out of her face with the other.

"Shhh, breathe. It will be fine," he tried to assure her. The assurance felt awkward, but he was not certain what, exactly, about the situation upset her. If she would cease talking, she would be dressed before they arrived. Perhaps she worried that his mother would not approve, or that Inuyasha would start a fight. She should have more faith in him. He would not allow either to affect their situation.

"Holy hell, Sesshomaru," she wheezed, staring daggers at him, "it will not be *fine*. It is your mother. It is Inuyasha. We're naked!" She wailed the last part and Sesshomaru could feel her breath speeding up and anxiety overtaking her. He seized her shoulders, slippery with soap, and pulled her flush against him. The kiss, intended to derail her train of thought, had the same effect on him. Her lips were open, and he took advantage, running his tongue along her cheeks and across the smooth surface of her teeth. She tasted of her fish supper and mountain water and salt, but also of the same feelings that made up her scent: citrus excitement, cinnamon passion, sharp turnip embarrassment, sour melon concern, and peppery anger. She tasted of warm gardenias and new cherry wood. She tasted of Kagome.

Her gasp of surprise as she shifted against him, the slide of her skin across his pulsing member, the taste of her – he almost lost himself in the moment. Another, more insistent, irritatingly amused pulse of youki forced him to pull back and set her away from him. He seized the soap again, aware that his movements has lost their usual economy and grace. Aware that her eyes were slightly glazed and her lips swollen. Aware of the spicy sweet scent that drenched the steam around them. His voice was lower, rougher than he intended when he spoke again.

"We have time to finish bathing. They have a considerable distance to traverse." Kagome shivered as he rubbed soap-slickened palms over her shoulders and down her back to wrap around her hips. She looked ready to protest his assistance, but he could not have allowed her to move away in that moment if it would have been required to save his life. "Hold still, and you will be clean with time to dress before they arrive. Resist..." He pointedly looked down into the water, and her eyes followed his. The image of his cock, dark with flushed blood and poised to take her if she only slid off of her seat, was slightly distorted by the ripples in the water, but she gasped and swallowed hard. "Please, Kagome." His hands slipped through her hair, washing the strands and teasing her scalp with the careful prickle of his claws. He held her gaze with his and released a seductive purr that had been building in his chest. "Ka-go-me. Please resist."

She shook her head in the negative, eyes closed and breath hard. Sesshomaru held back again, not a sigh, but a groan. If washing his miko and helping her dress did not kill him, he promised himself he would give serious consideration to the merits of matricide.

ooo

Kimi had to physically restrain the hanyou when they entered the springs and he scented the miko. Her

clawed hand on his arm stopped his leap forward, but not his mouth, “What the fuck, Lady?”

“Allowances may be made for your limited vocabulary, but not your thoughtlessness.” Inuyasha turned to her with a frown and a mouth open to argue and Kimi pulled him to an abrupt stop. “Give the woman a moment to herself,” she commanded. Her tone was soft, but she hardened her expression so that he would know she was not asking. She could feel Sesshomaru’s youki, and although Inuyasha could clearly sense his brother, he either did not understand or did not care that the daiyoukai was obviously warning them to stay away. Kimi did not allow her feelings to seep onto her face or into her scent, but she worried that the miko might have been damaged during her captivity. A youki barrier kept her from gleaned any information from scent, sound, or energy other than the presence of her son and his intended.

“She ain’t fuckin’ alone,” Inuyasha spat.

Kimi raised one delicate eyebrow, “It is considerably less enjoyable that way.” He stared at her for a moment in confusion, until realization dawned and a furious blush spread from his jaw straight up to his hairline. She repressed a smirk. *Youth are so easily embarrassed.*

“You- I-” he fumbled.

Kimi took pity on him, “This One doubts, however, that such an act is occurring. This One assumed that the miko would be eager to wash off the scent of dragon.” After a few more false starts, he began to calm down, falling back to what Kimi was beginning to realize was his default attitude – irritation. The scowling façade had no doubt worked well for centuries to conceal his true feelings from a world that would have been eager to take advantage. He shoved his hands in his sleeves and glowered.

“Whatever,” he muttered. He fell into step beside her, and Kimi set a sedate pace. It belied her own growing excitement. It had been many, many years since she had taken so much enjoyment from life, but since she had arrived at the Western Palace she looked forward to the experience. Meeting the infamous Shikon Miko, the Miko no Mao, could turn out to be severely disappointing, and Kimi did hate to be let down. However, meeting the female that had turned Sesshomaru’s arrogant head could not possibly be anything other than fascinating. Small, delicate steps were slow but still made progress, and she was aware of Sesshomaru’s restrained displeasure as she approached the guards on the path to the family springs. They waited there in silence, Inuyasha’s impatience like a physical presence, for several minutes until Sesshomaru lowered his youki barrier. The hanyou was through in a flash of red and silver. Kimi followed the sounds of his greeting with graceful speed.

“Can’t leave you alone for a minute, can I? And you!” Kimi rounded the last bend in the path to see Inuyasha pointing a deadly claw at his brother. “You were supposed to be protectin’ her!”

“Now don’t-” the miko began, but Sesshomaru interrupted her.

“Kagome, This One presents Mikadzuki Iwakura Kimi, Lady of the Western Lands. Mother,” he paused, meeting Kimi’s gaze with a sternly cold expression and anticipatory youki that demanded her

compliance, “you *are* honored to meet Higurashi Kagome, the Shikon Miko and Miko no Mao.” It was either an unforgivable slight and breach of protocol, or Sesshomaru intentionally placed the miko above Kimi in status. The Lady had little doubt it was the latter. Sesshomaru did not do anything unintentionally. He barely waited for the little human to fold her hands and dip her head in a shocked bow, cheeks red with embarrassment, and for Kimi to nod politely before he turned his attention back to his brother.

“You are correct. This One has failed.” His admission of error was met with silence. Inuyasha’s mouth hung open and the miko’s eyes were wide, staring at the daiyoukai’s impassive face. Kimi nearly rolled her eyes at the display. Although she agreed that her son had acted the part of the fool, it was unnecessary to admit that to anyone else. She regretted that he had taken after his father in that way – unable to so much as blur the truth for the sake of appearances.

The three made a narrow triangle: the males furthest away from each other and centered by the small figure sitting on a boulder to pull on her socks. Her red and white kimono was of excellent quality and blatantly stated her association with Sesshomaru. White foam had gathered at the corners of her mouth and the priestess wiped it with a cloth in one hand while the other was occupied by a lurid green brush that smelled of mint. Her hair was long and silky. Her eyes were a bright blue that could have been youkai considering the unusual color. The Lady Mother of the Western Lands assessed her future daughter-in-law with a critical eye. She was pretty, even by demonic standards, but not breathtaking. Her injuries, half-healed by time and – Kimi guessed – liberal application of inuyoukai saliva, should have made her appear weaker. Instead, she had the air of a warrior bearing battle scars. She was wounded, yes, in spirit as well as body, but she had not been defeated and she would grow stronger for the experience.

Kimi approved. Without knowing firsthand the human’s power, or learning her personality, the Lady knew that the little miko was what the Western Lands needed – because she was what Sesshomaru needed. Strong enough to endure. Strong enough to continue to fight. Strong enough to raise her head and hold herself straight and –

“Knock it off, both of you!”

And command two of the most conceited, powerful creatures in Japan like common pets. Kimi allowed herself a small smile. She most definitely approved.

“Ka-go-me!” Inuyasha’s voice bordered on a whine, but the miko cut that behavior down before it had a chance to grow.

“So help me, Inuyasha, if you accuse him one more time I will sit you straight to the bottom of the spring.” Her jaw was clenched, her cheeks pink, and her voice was laced with barely controlled temper. Kimi was pleased to see her hot anger, reiki sparking in her aura. It was the perfect complement to the icy burn of Sesshomaru’s youki. “And you!” She spun to face the other male, pointing at him with a dull human nail. “You’re not my keeper, it wasn’t your fault, so quit acting like a martyr. If I wanted someone to try to wrap me in cotton I have plenty of other options.”

A vibration, so low it was almost unrecognizable as a growl, rumbled in Sesshomaru's chest. His eyes narrowed. Inuyasha, in a surprising display of wisdom, took a step back. Kimi wanted to clap her hands in anticipation. An alpha needed a mate that was his match, a female that ensnared him fully but would not be a weakness. The miko Kagome was certainly bold enough to be his equal. Sesshomaru was jealous at the mere *idea* of another that might try to hold her - proving himself fully ensnared. The woman needed only a little training and she would be ready for whatever would face her. Kimi relished the thought. She would seize the opportunity to teach the next Western Lady, and watch Sesshomaru's calm be tested. It was unfortunate that placing wagers on his sanity would detract from the image of the Saidai Mao. Kimi was sure the betting would be furious, amusing, and lucrative.

"There are no others," Sesshomaru stated with finality. He took a step towards the miko and she responded in kind, planting her fists on her hips and scowling up at him. The sight of the fragile human, the top of her head below his shoulder, facing off against the formidable daiyoukai was both awe-inspiring and ridiculous. His growl increased in volume and an answering noise emerged from the miko. The sound was small and not threatening in the least. Kimi laughed.

"Come now, children, this is no time for diversions – that can wait until after the full moon." Sesshomaru's gaze swung to her with an intensity that could have pierced armor. His youki followed behind, issuing an undeniable warning to watch her words. *So, he has not told the miko his intentions. Foolish pup.* "Taisho Inuyasha has given This One a report of his mission. It shall be relayed to you, Saidai Mao, while the miko visits her home."

"Is it?" The miko's worried gaze at Inuyasha intrigued Kimi, as did his immediate response,

"We should leave now," he confirmed. "If I run, we can just make it."

"I need to change," she picked at the confining narrow kimono, "if you're going to carry me. And I should see Shippo and--"

"He will not carry you." Sesshomaru closed the distance between himself and the miko and pulled her against him. His face was as cool and impassive as usual, but his youki was bucking – warning the hanyou away from his female.

"She's slow as hell, we'll never make it if she walks," Inuyasha tried to reason.

"Hey!" The miko looked like she wanted to argue, but wasn't sure who deserved her ire first. Kimi held her tongue, waiting to see what would happen next. Wondering if they would let Inuyasha's little secret slip. Of course she had known for years, practically since his infancy. After all, she had the pup followed and spied on. It was nothing special. She had a lot of creatures spied on. However, she did wonder if Sesshomaru had knowledge of his brother's human night, and how it related to taking the miko to her family home.

"You will stay here. This One's construction is finished, and the new pack rooms are most private." He

put an emphasis on the last word that was not lost on Inuyasha.

The hanyou's eyes widened. "You sure?"

Kimi could feel the wealth of unspoken questions in those two words. *Are you sure there is room? Are you sure it is secure? Are you sure you want to call me pack and have everyone know it? Are you sure you want to treat me as a brother?* It was heart-wrenching. Kimi hadn't been certain she still had much of a heart. It was gratifying to know that it had not withered away from disuse, and strange that it would be Toga's bastard, the child of the woman she had blamed for so long that would make it twist.

"This One does not speak empty words." There was not even a hint of warmth in his tone, but Kimi could feel the edges of his youki, reaching out to briefly clasp Inuyasha's shoulder. It was perhaps the most non-violent contact the two had ever participated in, and the younger male was struggling to swallow, all his bravado blown out of him.

"Excuse me?" The miko's voice was nearly muffled by Sesshomaru's mokomoko that had twined around her. A pale hand pushed the fur away from her chin and she grinned. "I am super glad that you guys are having a bonding moment, and you are totally ready for a sleepover or whatever, but I really need to go home." Sesshomaru turned cold eyes on the miko and Inuyasha just stared. "What? Did you forget that I need to check on a few things?" Neither male responded. "Stretch my senses and-" she glanced at Kimi, "-and see if any of our *friends* are around?" Kimi wondered at the miko's secret as well. Sesshomaru had said she knew the future. Perhaps she could only experience a vision at a holy place near her home. *Perhaps there is more to the miko than I have been told. Perhaps my son has learned to obfuscate the truth after all.*

"Mother." Sesshomaru's attention did not reduce the little surge of pride Kimi had felt. She had always regretted that he was not skilled nor interested in deception. She held hope that the miko would bring out the best in him. "Has the threat to This One's pack been substantiated?"

Kimi nodded, "Yes." Sesshomaru's thunderous expression was understandable. He had told her of the rumors that reached him just prior to the miko's kidnapping. Ryukostokken had placed a price on Rin. Not on her head, but on her body. The youkai that brought her, alive and virginity intact, to the North would be paid her weight in pearls. It had been the primary threat to Rin's safety that had kept Sesshomaru from leaving the West without a leader and going after the miko. "Measures have been taken to ensure no bounty is paid." Kimi allowed herself a sweet smile as she recalled how Ryukostokken's herald had looked, exhausted and terrified after her spies had captured him and brought him to the West – and then dragged his flayed body through every village that he had visited. She had ordered pearls sewn under his skin, grinding into his flesh with every movement and leaving a trail of precious dust and blood-soaked gems behind him. The message would be quite clear: none who accepted Ryukostokken's offer would enjoy their reward.

The miko looked confused, but Inuyasha grinned furiously. He had personally seen the effect the pearlized dragon had on any who thought they might profit from Rin's capture; he had relayed to Kimi his satisfaction that any dent caused in Sesshomaru's treasury was more than worth ensuring Rin's

safety. Sesshomaru nodded in acceptance. “This One must be absent a few days longer to journey to Edo.”

“Inuyasha can-” the miko began.

“You have shit to do, I’ll carry-” Inuyasha said at the same time. Kimi overrode them both and saved Sesshomaru the trouble of putting the two in their places and announcing his refusal to have another’s scent on his intended.

“All is fine here. That One had best leave immediately, This One will let the pups know of the miko’s freedom, but if they greet her now it will delay That Sesshomaru grievously.” She held up a hand, knowing the other female was eager to see her pups. She turned to Kagome and smelled the mingled grief and love on her.

“They will be happy, planning for your return, if they know you are safe. However,” Kimi moved her own mokomoko in front of her and the fur slid back to reveal the sleeping Emi, “if you can take one more with you, This One’s ears would appreciate it.” The miko had slipped out of Sesshomaru’s fur and was cradling the pup in moments. Emi woke the instant the miko’s aura touched her own.

“Gome!” she cried and latched onto the human’s neck. The miko had tears running down her face as Sesshomaru stepped behind her, bracing her and wrapping her up once again. They made a perfect picture of a pack, and Kimi was struck by the image. The miko’s dark hair blended with the pup’s and stood out sharply against the white of Sesshomaru. She controlled her scent tightly - refusing to allow the joy of seeing her son so poised for happiness, or the faint bitter sadness at the reminder that her own little pack had grown and dispersed long ago – to cloud the air.

The rock brothers were summoned and the small party disappeared through the stone floor, the miko and hanyou still bickering, to be brought up again outside of the palace walls where prying eyes would not see them leave. Kimi walked sedately back to her reception room, prepared to update Kento and Hisao and sift through the many reports from her informants. She had returned to the West out of curiosity. She had stayed out of duty and planned to continue there for the sake of amusement. She had not anticipated that she would need a pack again – had not considered that there might be a pack for her to need. One that needed her. It was not an unpleasant sensation.

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Arashi held completely still in the high branches of a tree, waiting for his quarry to appear. It had taken nearly the entire night, but finally Hachi seemed to grow tired of drinking away the money of foolish humans and was making his stumbling way up the road towards the dragon hanyou’s position. The raccoon dog demon tripped on a rock and his illusion fell. The image of a slender monk with purple robes and a short ponytail shimmered and revealed the portly servant in his true, sake-drenched, glory.

He lay on the ground for a few minutes, breathing heavily, before managing to roll himself over and stare up at the sky. Arashi jumped down silently, his youki tightly controlled, and padded up to Hachi.

He was within arms' reach when the smaller demon spoke.

"Have you no manners, dragon? One should never sneak up on a Tanuki. We are unpredictable when startled."

"Will you lecture me about moral virtues then? Or perhaps offer financial advice? I fail to see what dire consequences could result." Arashi halted, taking in the closed eyes and neat clothing of the other youkai. Of course, Hachi had no idea that Arashi worked for the Northern Lord, but his lack of concern was strange. It had always been so, since Arashi was barely an adolescent and trying desperately to control his raging youki and make his way in the world. Hachi always had advice and a warm drink for the strange young hanyou, who grew to be the strange older hanyou, who still visited occasionally for advice and news. It was foreign to a dragon, but the nature of a Tanuki was to guide, advise, and wish good fortune on others. Even without knowing their true identity.

"No lecture tonight," he mumbled, "the sake was too good and the ladies far too sweet."

"How about a tale then? News of your travels and stories of things that have changed the course of Japan?" One eye cracked open at Arashi's question, so he offered encouragement. "I have a fire already laid and meat for roasting, if you are of a mind to share warmth and words." With an inexplicable bound of energy, Hachi jumped up.

"So you have listened to my lectures then, how delightful! Well, show me how hospitable you can be Arashi-san, and I will tell tales...or answer questions as you please." Arashi led him to the fire, and lit the prepared wood. They settled in around the flames with the smell of meat in the air. The dragon reflected that he much preferred to gather information through a friendly connection and a warm meal than at the end of his claws, but preferences had little bearing on his position in the Northern Palace.

"I am looking for a specific story tonight, good Hachi-san." The raccoon dog demon turned round, intelligent brown eyes on him. "You have said that you traveled with the Shikon Miko for a time. Your master was one of her comrades."

"Yes," he answered carefully, "I have said as much before."

"Tell me again," the dragon urged. "All of the stories of the Miko. All you saw and heard while you were with her. Everything you have learned since." There was a long pause, and Arashi was concerned for a moment that fire and food would not be enough to gain what he needed this time. He would regret using other means, but the knowledge was vital. Hachi was a friendly face, perhaps even something like a friend, but the stakes were too high to allow that to stand in his way. The stakes were always high in the games Arashi played, but this game, the shogi game of black and white, North and West, dog and dragon...this game was for the fate of Japan. Perhaps even the world. No price was too high to ensure the winner.

"What will you do with such information, my friend?" Hachi was tense. Although his tone remained light, his body was ready to flee. It would be useless, of course. Arashi sat back and considered many

things, not the least of which was how little he liked pulling information from blood and guts.

“Perhaps,” he said softly, “I will right a great wrong.”

“Perhaps?” Hachi questioned.

“Perhaps not,” Arashi shrugged. “It depends upon your stories.” The two demons sat still for long minutes while the fire crackled and the scent of hot meat drifted with wood smoke. The air was cold, but there was no wind in the sheltered clearing to steal their breath. No snow fell from the cloudless sky and the stars and crescent moon were bright against the darkness.

“My master met her first,” Hachi began.

Chapter 28: The First Message

Sesshomaru flew swiftly - with Inuyasha running and leaping below him - to arrive at the well before sunset. Although they did not converse a great deal and she dozed on and off, Kagome remained pressed close to him, with Emi tucked between them, warmed by mokomoko and smelling of contentment with only a hint of her previous shame tainting the clean scent of cherry wood and magnolias. It was balanced by the faint vapor of passion, and so he too was content for the time being. That composure wore away as they descended at the well where he knew he would be forced to leave her in Inuyasha's care. He did not wish to be separated from her again, particularly not so soon after her captivity. She seemed to feel the same way, reluctant to unwind mokomoko or let go of her grasp on his armor.

"The well lets us stay a couple of days..." she trailed off. The miko fussed with the pup's robes and settled her more firmly within his tails.

Inuyasha picked up the thread of conversation as he returned from the village where he had let the old miko know of their arrival, "I have to come back first thing tomorrow. Miroku and Sango have been training with Kuren's soldiers, and I need to get them in position up north." He carried two steaming pots of water, which he set on the ground. The hanyou turned to Kagome, and his expression softened fractionally, although his voice remained gruff. "When you're all done talkin' your mama's ear off, you wait with Kaede until Sango gets back – got it? She and Kirara will fly you West in a few days." He turned his back then, and Kagome did the same, focusing her gaze on the pup. The hanyou stripped quickly and dumped a pot of scalding water over himself.

His curses drew a frown from the miko. "Not in front of Emi, Inuyasha! We just have to be certain no germs--"

Sesshomaru interrupted her scolding, "When will you return?"

She blinked, and he could almost see her mind shift focus. "I have a few things I need to get, and I should meditate to look for youkai at home, and I need--"

"When, Miko?" He pulled up her chin with one claw so that she would have to meet his gaze. Her eyes were so blue, it was like looking directly into the summer sky. Her stomach was rumbling, and he had to clamp down on the urge to feed her. She had promised she would eat on the other side. Inuyasha had assured him that food was plentiful and readily available in her family's home. She bit her bottom lip, gently worrying the plump skin with her teeth.

"I suppose I could be back as soon as tomorrow afternoon," she said softly.

"No point in that," Inuyasha shifted impatiently, settling on the edge of the well naked and dripping. Steam rose from his skin into the chill air. His clothes were left in a neat pile on the ground next to his empty pot. Another full pot and scrubbing cloth were waiting for Kagome. "It will take me a half day at

least to get to Sango, and she'll take nearly two days to get back to Edo. You'll be safer at home than--

"This One will be here." Sesshomaru held her gaze, emphasizing his commitment by brushing her hair away from her face and layering his scent on her. "Return swiftly." Inuyasha barked in impatience, and Kagome uncurled herself and began working on removing her obi and layers of kimono. His half-brother jumped in the well, and blue light and immense power flooded the clearing, making Emi look around wide-eyed.

"Shhh, it's okay. Nothing here will hurt you," she whispered to the pup. Even as she undressed and folded her clothes neatly beside Inuyasha's, she kept her gaze on the little one and a firm smile on her face. Sesshomaru felt a familiar heat pooling in his belly as she turned her back to him and removed her last scraps of clothing. Her blush rose. A less familiar heat built in his chest as well when she spoke, "Be a good girl for Sesshomaru-sama, Emi-chan. I'll be back soon with a special treat for you, if you will eat well and not cry for him, okay?" The little pup was already beginning to sniffle, seeming to understand that the sweet-smelling female would be leaving again, but she did not break into the shrill cries that the daiyoukai had feared.

Kagome, her face turned from him in embarrassment, scrubbed her skin with hot water until she was pink all over, and Sesshomaru knew he should look away – for the sake of his control if for no other reason – but he could not. She was beautiful. She hugged her body awkwardly to both hide her nudity and ease her shivers. Her neck and face were dusted pink. His tails shifted Emi to the side almost unconsciously. He could think of nothing but holding her close and keeping her with him. Her lower lip was tortured between her teeth again, and he had to bite back a growl.

It is too cold for her, she must go. She will be fine. And when she returns, I will make her mine.

His self-assurances did little to calm the uproar of his instincts or the barely contained surge of youki that demanded he refuse her the freedom to leave. He knew that she had to return to her family's shrine, knew that the information she would gain while in her own time could be vital to the upcoming war. Still, he was selfish. In this, where she was concerned, he wanted to be selfish. She draped her scrubbing cloth over the edge of the well to make a thin cushion and gingerly threw one leg over the wide lip. Positioned so, he could not help the erotic images that flooded his mind. Not her impending departure, the proximity of the pup, or the threat of war could have kept him from stepping closer and envying – with every fiber in his being – the simple wooden board that she straddled.

He leaned down, gently gripping her arm with one hand and cupping her cheek with the other. Sesshomaru released a small measure of youki to warm her and ease her trembling. He pressed their foreheads together, breathing in her scent and summoning the control he needed to let her go. *Magnolias and cherry wood.* "I will be waiting," he reiterated in a rough voice. He brushed his nose down her cheekbone until their lips met briefly. With an effort of will that he was sure proved his superiority to all other creatures, Sesshomaru pulled back before he could ravish her mouth and draw her to the ground. She sighed, eyes slightly glazed and breath coming hard.

After a long moment, she blinked as if remembering where she was, and shook her head. She gave Emi

a last peck on the cheek and brought her other leg over the edge of the well, giving Sesshomaru a uniquely agonizing view of moist pink skin and dark hair. Sesshomaru thought she would follow Inuyasha then. She surprised him by gripping a handful of his obi and yanking hard. Her strength was nothing to him, but he allowed himself to be pulled down out of curiosity. And perhaps a desire to delay her departure further. She stared into his eyes, face pink with embarrassment and warm, minty breath puffing against his mouth.

“Oh, hell,” she muttered, more to herself than him, he assumed, “If you don’t enter the tiger’s cave...” She pressed her mouth to his, soft, sweet lips with gentle pressure. She had not initiated intimacies between them before. His surprise and pleasure were genuine – but both escalated when her tongue darted out to trace the seam of his lips. He sank one hand into her hair and wrapped the other around her back, pulling her up and closer to his chest while he opened his mouth in invitation. She was hesitant, but took advantage, her tongue sliding against his before she surged forward with a moan. Their teeth clinked together and discomfiture rose higher in her scent, fighting with the spicy lust that infused the air around her. She pulled away, and he nipped at her lower lip, lapping at the impression his teeth had made and the faint bruising that would keep them swollen and inviting for several hours. “I-I-” she swallowed, heavily, her eyes closed. “I have to go, before the sun sets.” It was almost completely below the horizon, so he released her.

Her body glowed for a moment; pink purification a final insurance against any of the sickness that might still cling to her. She dropped into the open well, and he watched as halfway down her pale skin was enveloped in blue light. His chest felt tight and his eyes hot when the power winked out and she was no longer in his time. The pup whimpered softly, and Sesshomaru loosed a rumble to settle her concerns.

She will return? The little female questioned in the inu language.

Soon, he had responded in kind. His words and soothing sounds had calmed the pup, but did little to ease his own tension. He held the small youkai close and formed his energy sphere, wishing he could have transported Kagome in the same manner and gained additional time with her. Unfortunately, he was not certain a human could safely travel at such speeds. His return to the West was swift, and Sesshomaru ensured the pup would be cared for while he summoned those who would need to hear news of the North and of the miko’s safe return.

It did not take long to tell; Sesshomaru was concise and shared only what was tactically important. The room remained silent for several long minutes while Sesshomaru’s audience digested his words. Even summarizing what Kagome had told him of her captivity had stirred his fury again. He used their contemplation to control his own emotions. He doubted any but his mother sensed even a fissure in his cold façade, but he knew that maintaining that demeanor would require his attention. With a traitor still in the West, it was vital that he appear unaffected. If word of the Saidai Mao reached Ryukostokken, Sesshomaru wanted the dragon to be enraged that his efforts meant so little to the West. Ryukostokken had a temper, and when it flared he lost reason. Eventually the North and West would battle, and the side with the coolest heads, the side led by logic, strategy, and skill would prevail.

“Kagome-sama is most worthy of her title,” Kento said softly, breaking the silence. The blue lines on his forehead creased – concern and consideration emanated from his scent.

“Of course,” Hisao stated, as though Kagome’s superiority were so obvious that it was insulting to bring it up. Sesshomaru privately agreed with the sentiment, although it was gratifying to see how far his captain had reversed his opinion of the miko. “But it could have easily ended much worse.” Hisao flicked his ponytail of black hair over his shoulder. “We should discuss additional plans for protecting her. I suggest we begin with a trained personal guard – I have several who may be positioned as maids and remain with Kagome-sama at all times.”

Kento stood to locate plans for the castle and the grounds surrounding it, and he and Hisao continued offering Sesshomaru options on better defenses. Kimi, seated at his side, poured fresh tea into two cups and sipped hers slowly. The two counselors had begun a review and assessment of every previous attempted assault on the West. They digressed from the topic at hand, but Sesshomaru conceded to allow it for a few moments. He knew what they would have rather been doing – ripping out Ryukostokken’s entrails. That privilege was reserved for Sesshomaru, so they would have settled for tearing apart any dragon, but that, too, could not be. Not at the present. Not without disturbing so many other strategies that had been laid in place to secure victory. They cared for the miko, Sesshomaru knew. They cared for and respected her, and so he allowed them a few moments to bring their own emotions under control before the meeting would have to continue.

He reached for his tea and felt his mother’s youki, a graceful, light brush across his forehead, before it retreated. It had been centuries since she had attempted to comfort him. Centuries since he felt he had needed comforting. The gesture was surprisingly acceptable. His eyes slid to hers and he nodded slightly, in acknowledgment and appreciation.

“This One is fond of the Miko no Mao.” Absolute silence met Kimi’s statement. Hisao and Kento turned and stared at her in shock. Sesshomaru let out a small breath of relief into his teacup and held back a smile. It would make Kagome’s transition into her new position easier if she had Kimi’s acceptance. That had been a key component in his plans to secure her as the next Western Lady. Amusement winked in and out of his mother’s scent in a short-lived flash of warmth. “This One shall personally see to her training so that she may defend herself adequately in the future.”

Shock and worry nearly consumed Sesshomaru for a brief moment. He pictured fragile, human, Kagome facing off against his mother. The Lady Kimi with thousands of years of experience in battle and no compunction about an unfair fight. Kagome, who would refuse to use her reiki against someone she valued – someone she felt *he* valued – even if it would save her life. His mother, who felt it was appropriate to tease her adopted granddaughter with threats of cannibalism. In his mind’s eye he saw his intended bruised and defeated, near tears, and waiting for a mortal blow.

That is not Kagome.

Kagome, despite her reverence for life and reluctance to hurt any living creature, was strong. She was passionate about protecting others and she had grown since he had first met her. She was no longer the

child that shrieked and hid behind Inuyasha or the demon-slayer. She was not the naïve girl that believed peace could always be had without violence. Kagome was a woman who had seen and experienced life viscerally. Her loving nature was unchanged, but she was now capable of unflinching justice as well. The image in his mind swiftly changed. Kagome, glowing from exertion and hair curling with moisture, facing her opponent with determination. His mother, smirking with pride and amusement, but ready to concede that the miko had held her own.

That is my Kagome.

Mind settled, he set down his cup with a purposeful click of porcelain. “A female guard shall be assigned, for both Rin-yojochan and Kagome-san, until That One has finished her instruction of the Miko no Mao.”

Hisao and Kento nodded their understanding, and Sesshomaru watched from the corner of his eye as Kimi smiled into her cup, “As you wish, my Lord,” she murmured without a hint of condescension, but still managed to convey that the idea had been hers and she felt he was posturing for the benefit of his subordinates. “She will need other partners to round out her training. This One will select them.” Her next words were so low, it was doubtful any but Sesshomaru could hear, “I remember sparring sessions with Inu no Tashio well. They were most...instructive. As I am sure you will be far too busy, I will be certain to find another male so that she is *adept* with different opponents.”

Sesshomaru ignored his mother, once again trying to needle him into a conversation that was unnecessary and designed for her own amusement. “Kagome-san has gained another ally for the West.” He reviewed what he knew of Ko, and the potential for information from behind enemy lines. As he expected, Kimi expressed a delighted pride in the miko – pleased to have another spy in their arsenal. Kento and Hisao were suitably impressed. “Report to This One on the status of the East.” He split his attention between Kimi’s retelling of all that Inuyasha and Kouga had accomplished, and his half-brother’s assumptions as to motivations and potential future moves of their enemy. They were surprisingly astute. Sesshomaru surmised that his sparring and constant besting of the hanyou had finally sunk in and Inuyasha had begun to look a few moves ahead and anticipate his opponent. It had only taken a century or so of attempting to beat sense into his dog-eared head. Sesshomaru considered briefly that perhaps he would have reevaluated his approach if it had gone on another hundred years.

Kento analyzed reports of small uprisings, mob activity and pockets of bandits that were taking advantage of the power vacuum in the East. Several human lords were also attempting to use the disease and incursions by the dragons as an opportunity to gain land – at the expense of weakened youkai holdings and frightened human villages. Travel had become dangerous on the roads north of Kouga’s den and dubious as far south as Hirimoto’s border. Even a few of the human lords on the edge of Hirimoto’s domain were stirring up ideas of war against youkai. At a time when he wished to be concentrating his energy on preparing to meet Ryuustokokken’s army, his focus was drawn to a multitude of small problems that threatened to escalate if they were not dealt with.

The wild youkai would respond to Inuyasha, or if they continued attacking travelers, he would put them down. Sesshomaru had few concerns about that. The humans, however, presented a serious threat to long-term peace. They were not difficult to defeat, even when they collected large armies of trained

warriors, but they were a drain on his resources. A few demon warriors would be lost to their sheer numbers if the human lords stood against Sesshomaru and Hirimoto, and every death would be significant after the losses to dragon assassins and the disease.

He reflected again on what Kagome had told him of the growth of the human population. Seven billion in the world, she had said. He believed her, there was no doubt in his mind she told the truth, but the number was still almost incomprehensible to him. A few thousand samurai could result in three or four defeated daiyoukai, of which there were fewer than ever before. Weaker animal and plant form youkai could be killed by smaller bands or even individual humans with disastrous consequences. Sesshomaru had to stop such devastation on demon kind before it happened. There were so many other enemies facing the survival of youkai: disease, dragons, infertility. He would not allow another challenge to be added to that list if it could be avoided. Seven billion. It was a daunting number of enemies.

But a bolstering number of allies.

Kagome made friends even with those who had once sought her death. She had become his ally. Perhaps she was correct. Perhaps, he suppressed a shudder at how she would use such information against him, his *mother* was correct. She recruited spies from every level and type of youkai and among humans – even the holy. He had stood alone, but Kagome had proven to him that he could be stronger if he accepted assistance from others. His mother showed him that every creature, even a weak human, could be tactically useful. He considered his options in a new light, and determined that as long as he was honest with himself, there was no reason to explain to anyone else *how* he had come to such conclusions. *My actions are my own.*

“Send This One’s invitation to the human lords who would benefit most from peace,” he addressed Kento and named three of the more powerful lords that he believed would lose influence if chaos reigned, or worse yet, Ryukostokken. “Consider carefully if you would add others. That One,” he glanced at his mother and felt a flicker of irritation at her quirked brow, “shall provide you with discreet means of sending the messages.” He anticipated the biting and no doubt pointed comment Kimi would be prepared to make and did not give her opportunity to speak. “On the next full moon there shall be a conference, here, of those who will accept. This One will invite them to war.”

“We must ascertain and remove all spies in our midst in advance,” Hisao said. True to his practical nature, he accepted Sesshomaru’s revolutionary decision and had already moved on to considering ways to ensure success. Kento smelled of concern and profound contemplation, but he too turned to the next matter at hand. They began an update on the interrogation of staff, and specifically Geiken, and their thoughts on the investigation into the treason. They broke after many hours for nourishment. As Sesshomaru brought down his third kill, finally satiating his hunger and replenishing his reserves of energy, he considered the position of the stars and how long his intended had been on the other side of time.

Shaking off the memory of her departure and the strange hollow feeling it inspired, Sesshomaru saved a generous portion of venison from his kill and returned to his smaller form. He threw the inedible waste far into the forest for scavengers and returned to the castle with the meat. It should have been

eaten raw – would have been healthier that way for a growing inu – but the youngest pup blanched at the sight of blood and it would not be beneficial for Rin. He felt a bemused sort of pleasure at the thought that although they were not related, Kagome and the pup seemed to have a great deal in common. He sent the meat to the kitchens with instructions to feed the young in his pack, and then bathed and changed clothes. He was anxious to return to the well, although there were hours remaining until his miko would arrive; there was considerable time yet until even his half-brother would return.

He paused in the private reception room, constructed for her, and focused his senses on the pups. His eyes drifted across her desk and belongings as he listened to the soft, even breathing of Rin; sensed the concentrated youki of Shippo; smelled the heavy, deep scent of Nankae's sleep; brushed his energy comfortingly along Emi's light, tense dozing. He was satisfied that the smallest pup, although clearly not happy, was willing to sleep and eat with the other young ones until Kagome returned. She had formed an attachment to Kimi that rivaled her love of the miko.

His gaze landed on the open screen to his study after he assured himself that all was well in his pack. On his writing table he could see the wrapped bundle he had placed there days ago – prior to Kagome's capture. In it was the *hofuna kin* gift he had prepared for her family. He had intended to send it with Inuyasha when his half-brother next returned to her time – along with his proposal, but had not had the opportunity to do so. Although they might have ended up receiving it after he had already mated Kagome, he justified the breach in ceremony with the knowledge that they would always be receiving it after the fact – considering the time travel.

He had not intended to travel to Edo until just before noon, and then await her return. However, Inuyasha would come through the well at dawn, and he could certainly deliver such an important package before heading north. Decision made, Sesshomaru knelt before his desk and quickly inked a meticulous note for her family. He folded and sealed it as soon as it was dry and slipped it into the small ceramic box along with the gift.

Sesshomaru walked through the palace, searching out Kento to notify him of the earlier than planned departure before entering the woods and using his orb to travel from there. He arrived mere moments before the well lit up with power and a naked hanyou jumped through into the early morning light. Inuyasha froze, the smell of tension and surprise sleeting off of him, before visibly shaking off his concern and reaching for his clothes.

"She ain't coming for hours yet," he said gruffly. "Everybody on that side is still asleep. Ya wasted your own time." He turned to face the daiyoukai as he tied his pants and sorted out his shirt and the fire rat. Their shared history made it difficult for Sesshomaru to depend on his half-brother for such an important – such a *personally* important – task, but there was little he could do to change that.

"You are able to use the well freely during this time," he phrased it as a statement, but in truth he did not know for certain. He had guessed as much, from what Kagome had told him of recent trips to her home, but he needed verification.

Inuyasha's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, so?"

“You will deliver something to the head of the Higurashi family.” He purposefully left that statement vague. Kagome had spoken as though her mother was in charge of their household, but he knew that her grandfather was alive and living with them. It was puzzling.

“Mrs. Higurashi will be up soon to start breakfast, but I ain’t your pack mule. Send Kagome with it when she gets here if-“

“This One would prefer to present it directly to the Lady, as tradition dictates.” He pulled the small box from his sleeve, loosened the leather wrapping, and held it out to Inuyasha, whose eyes widened fractionally. “As that is not possible, you shall do so, as my closest male relative.” The use of a personal pronoun caught the hanyou’s attention, as it was intended to. Sesshomaru continued, “I am trusting you with my honor in this.” He stared into his brother’s eyes and considered how he might go forward if Inuyasha refused. He could beat the younger demon into compliance, but there was no assurance of what the hanyou would do once he reached the other side of the well. *Willing assistance is paramount.*

“That’s your bride price, right?” Sesshomaru gave a brief nod at his brother's question, although it seemed unnecessary as the box was decorated with images and characters that declared it as such. Sesshomaru felt confident the artist who had worked the symbols for the Higurashi shrine into the design had performed his task with excellence. Inuyasha shook his head. “Can’t do it.” Irritation bordering on anger flushed Sesshomaru's veins and curled his free hand into a fist.

“You wish to prevent This One’s mating?” He did not bare his teeth as he wanted to, but he could feel the pressure building up behind his cold mask. The inuhanyou would swiftly learn where Sesshomaru’s patience ended if he continued to refuse.

“Keh,” Inuyasha snorted and rolled his eyes. “If you want to draw blood, you can sure as hell try, but that ain’t gonna fix your problem. I can take that through, but the Higurashi’s won’t be able to spend it.”

Sesshomaru found himself at a loss. Inuyasha smelled of the truth. The truth and a strange vanilla and herb scent that clung lightly to his hair. A tiny frown marred the skin between his brows, and he was forced to admit, painfully admit, that he needed the hanyou’s assistance and his knowledge of Kagome’s time. He lifted the lid and displayed the contents. “Do they not accept such things in her time?”

“Holy shit,” Inuyasha exclaimed in a strangled voice. “The wenc - er,“ something in Sesshomaru’s face or scent must have warned him, as he changed his choice of words quickly, “ah, Kagome, is great and all, but that’s – that’s – well, it’s worth a fuckload, even in her time,” he finally exploded. Although Sesshomaru found much to be desired with his vocabulary, at least his sibling was becoming more coherent.

“It will suffice, then?” he asked coolly.

“You could buy Kagome and all her dopey friends for that, but you can’t send it through with me.” Sesshomaru felt ready to rip off one furry ear and speak directly into it. Perhaps if Inuyasha was forced to listen more closely, he would speak more sense. Thankfully - *or unfortunately*, the long-suffering part of his mind insisted - that did not become necessary. “The problem is that if I take it through, it won’t be old enough,” Inuyasha added hastily. “Kagome says they have a way to tell how old something is, a special test. If I take that through, it will only be as old as it is right now and when the Higurashi’s try to spend it, people will wonder where they got it. They can’t exactly say their demon son-in-law is a Lord, much less explain the well, now can they?”

That made Sesshomaru pause. He needed Kagome’s family to receive the gift, but he did not feel it truly met the requirements of the youkai mating ritual if it could not make the Higurashi household more prosperous. He considered the problem carefully, ignoring his half-brother’s impatient shifting. The solution seemed simple, but once again, he would have to rely on Inuyasha to confirm it.

“The Goshinboku is still living in her time.”

“Yeah,” Inuyasha answered slowly. His silver hair slid over his red haori and Sesshomaru was reminded suddenly of their father. “The God Tree is just at the edge of the shrine grounds. It’s bigger than now.”

“By how much?” Sesshomaru studied the tree at the edge of the clearing and considered Inuyasha’s gestures. His arms created a circle to show the diameter of the trunk.

“They put a little fence around it too,” the hanyou added as an afterthought. “About eight feet away, in a square.” Sesshomaru weighed the gift in his hand carefully and considered the condition of heirlooms in the West. They had many, many objects that were more than five hundred years old. He was satisfied that his gift would endure. He carefully withdrew the letter he had written for Kagome’s family and closed up the box, re-wrapping it in the leather. He held the sealed paper out to Inuyasha.

“Deliver this instead. And tell Higurashi -” He stopped suddenly, not knowing the woman’s name. His future mother-in-law. *The mother in the future.*

“Gen,” Inuyasha supplied.

“Tell Higurashi Gen where I have left this.” Sesshomaru turned to walk to the God tree, but stopped only a few feet away. It occurred to him that this task was the first time he had ever needed his half-brother to behave as pack; and that he had never taken the time, nor had the patience, to teach the younger youkai what that entailed. Again he felt a twinge of regret and blamed Kagome for feelings that had never bothered him before his life became entangled with hers. What he knew he should say was physically painful for him, “Please.” He continued on his way, but noted carefully that he had stumbled upon a solution to Inuyasha’s constantly brash mouth when the hanyou fell into shocked silence. *A happy accident.*

The brothers did not speak again until Inuyasha had disappeared down the well and returned many long

minutes later. The hanyou shouted unasked for advice as he ran from Sesshomaru's questions. *Perhaps having a sibling is less of a burden than previously considered. Not a boon, but not an ill fortune either.*

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"Find the half-breed, or it will be your heart This One eats, instead of his."

Ko kept her head bowed low, but considered Ryukostokken's orders to Wei carefully. The Dragon Lord was irritated, but not furious. She doubted he intended to kill his most trusted spy. However, he had been inconstant since the miko's escape. His mood, which had always been prone to sudden change, vacillated between fury, irritation, and a contemplative sort of calm that was unusual for him. It was the calm that concerned her the most. Ryukostokken's temper was legendary and predictable. If he continued to hold his emotions in check, it would become very difficult to forecast his actions. That could prove deadly to Ko.

She had taken the Dragon Lord on an aerial tour of his troops and now she waited, head down and youki pulled in tight to make herself as unobtrusive as possible. Her constant presence in the Northern Palace and Ryukostokken's treatment of her worked to her advantage. He rarely noticed her unless he wanted something, and he always underestimated her. It had taken Ko decades, but she had proven to herself that his dominance over her body did not dictate dominance over her mind. She would not obey him out of blind fear. Kagome had been an inspiration to her; more than merely enduring, she could and would defy the one who had killed the rest of her clan and held her prisoner for so long.

"Gather the bodies of the tree youkai. Deliver them to the border between the Western Lands and the Forest." The vicious smile in Ryukostokken's voice was clearly heard. "The trees will begin to doubt that the dog can protect them. They will blame him for these deaths."

"Does my Lord require anything else?" Wei's obsequious tone made Ko want to sneer, but she held her position.

"The human corpses will be sent to Western villages. Be certain that their decorations remain intact. And bring This One the witch leader. A particular brew is needed for the miko, and the half-breed will have the remaining Western traitor ensure it is delivered."

"She will be most closely guarded, Denka-ue. Will the traitor--"

"This One will not be thwarted!" Ryukostokken's snarl echoed on the stone walls and she listened to Wei drop to the floor and grovel. "The traitor was well chosen and has ready access to the private chambers of the dog. She will be This Ryukostokken's."

"Yes, of course, Denka-ue." Wei bowed and scraped his way out of the room, snapping an order at Ko to do the same. She moved awkwardly, her broken body still recovering from Ryukostokken's treatment and the injury purposefully emphasized by a hunched posture and slight limp. As soon as she

was alone in a rear corridor, she searched with her youki for any other creatures nearby. Finding none, she banished the fog from her eyes and hurried towards the inner courtyard. It was deserted in the early evening, but a volcanic shaft that billowed steam and sulphur into the air kept the space warm. Trees, stunted by the noxious fumes, grew twisted and sickly in the few unpaved portions of the yard. The sky overhead was clear, and quickly darkening from twilight to a deep winter night.

She pulled a rubbery, brownish-green leaf from the nearest tree and whispered over it, willing a small portion of her energy into it. Within moments, a blackened leaf rose on the breeze. It curled lazily and drifted in the air, slowly rising into the night to be carried on silent currents to a destination she had never seen. Her lips moved in prayer, but Ko allowed no sound to betray her.

Find the miko. Find her and warn her of the danger that is to come. Her eyes turned upward, green depths reflecting the first stars to become visible before she reluctantly summoned the fog that would hide her sight. *Please let her be safe.*

Chapter 29: Paving the Road to Hell

Kagome landed at the bottom of the well in the modern era and took a deep breath of cold air. Immediately, she was hit with a jarring shiver and aching pain. Her muscles seized up, causing her to stumble against the dirt wall. She felt as though there was ice in her veins, chilling her skin and pumping into her organs. She could barely gasp enough breath to whisper, “Inuyasha.” No one answered her from above, and she sank to the ground, trying again, louder this time, “Inuyasha!”

Black hair, shining in the light of a camping lamp, popped over the edge and then quickly disappeared again. “What the hell, Kagome? You’re naked!”

“I- I-“ she whispered. She couldn’t seem to get anything else out past the clattering of her teeth. She didn’t understand why she was so cold. She hadn’t felt like this since she had fallen into the ocean. Even when she was standing by the well, wet and naked in a feudal winter, she hadn’t been this mind-numbingly chilled. Her stomach was painfully cramped with hunger and her limbs felt heavy with exhaustion.

A pile of clothes dropped onto her head and then Inuyasha climbed down the ladder, his back to her. “Pull something on already,” he snapped, but she could hear the worry in his voice. Her mother had left clothes for Inuyasha and a sweater and leggings for her in the well house, anticipating their return for the new moon. Kagome managed to get the sweater over her head, and one arm through, but her shivers prevented her from doing much more.

“Inu-yasha, help...” He turned finally, and, finding her important parts covered, his blush began to fade and he frowned at her. The hanyou-turned-human knelt in the dirt beside her and pressed one hand against her forehead.

“You’re freezing! Dumb girl,” his voice was low and strained with concern. He quickly sorted out her leggings and pulled them up to her knees before shoving socks on her feet. He muttered, “Better scrub good before you get back, or the bastard will kill me.” *Sesshomaru*, her mind sighed. He had made her feel so warm and safe.

Kagome would have slapped her own forehead if she could have. His *youki* had made her feel warm and safe. It obviously couldn’t travel through the well, so now she was stuck with heating up her own body. Another dull, aching pulse of her arm reminded her that his energy had been holding her broken bone together as well. She managed to yank her pants over her butt and Inuyasha began rubbing her legs vigorously. “I broke my arm,” she announced a few minutes later when she could speak without chattering.

“Ya could have said something earlier, Kagome,” Inuyasha huffed. He studied the lump of her limb, held protectively against her chest under the sweater. She didn’t bother explaining how his brother had cared for her, put a piece of himself inside her to speed the healing. Even thinking about it made her blush a little. “Do you think you can get on my back? I can’t jump out like this, but I can carry you up

the ladder.” She nodded, and they managed an uncomfortable, slow ascent. By the time they arrived at the top, Kagome’s mother was opening the door.

“Oh!” She sounded pleasantly surprised. Kagome slid off Inuyasha’s back. “I thought maybe you wouldn’t be able to make it this month.” She smiled, and tears welled in Kagome’s eyes. There was something about seeing her mother, about knowing comfort was just a few steps away, which had her suddenly balling. “Oh, dear!”

Inuyasha backed away, tugging at his human ear. “I’ll, ah, I’ll leave you two alone.” Then he was gone, like a shot in the dark. If Kagome had been in a position to care about anything but the flood that was running down her face, she would have laughed about his speed. Teary girls gave human Inuyasha the reflexes of a full youkai.

“It’s alright, dear,” Gen Higurashi folded her daughter into her arms gently. “It will be alright.”

“I don’t think it can be, Mama,” Kagome sobbed. They sank to the floor in the well house, and the situation in the feudal era poured out of the miko. Kagome wasn’t sure how long they were there, but her sobs had subsided to mere tears, her tears to an occasional hiccup and a runny nose, before her mother spoke.

“It sounds like you have quite the support to help you face this Ryu character. I have no doubt that the evil he has done will be revisited upon him.” She continued a slow, soothing rubbing of Kagome’s back. Gen’s voice was soft and conversational, as though it was perfectly normal to have discussions regarding sadistic despots while sitting on a dirt floor. “I have always known that you would help others, Kagome. You have too much of your father in you to keep you at home when there is injustice that could be righted.” Kagome wiped her nose with the sleeve of her sweater and listened. She couldn’t help but hear the notes of amusement and sadness that colored her mother’s voice. “I cannot imagine how difficult it is for you, to see so many terrible things, but I know that your fate is to find wrongdoing and to be compelled to correct it.”

“But I left her, Mama. I left Ko behind and then I- I...” Kagome swallowed, blushing but knowing she had to tell someone. The guilt that was eating at her, the knowledge that she had forgotten about Ko for a brief time, the knowledge of *how* she had managed to forget about Ko was weighing on her like a shameful albatross. In halting words, ripped from her chest, she gave her mother a brief account, without many details, of what she had been offered, what she had accepted, in order to forget for a little while the terror and malevolence of the Northern Palace. She ended with a whisper, “How could I? What kind of person...enjoys themselves like that when a friend is being tortured?”

Gen was quiet for a long moment before she spoke, “Do you know, I always worried about your dad.” Kagome blinked at the confusing change in topic and tried to sit up, but her mother hugged her tightly. “He worked with so many dangerous diseases in the research lab, I was always worried that he would get sick. I was so envious when he was invited to speak at the medical conference in Oritsume. The mountains were so beautiful in winter. When the car accident happened...” Her voice trailed off and she had to clear her voice. “I loved my husband very much, but I had to go on living. It hurt at first, felt

wrong to enjoy life when he couldn't. I needed it though, needed to remember that I was alive. I had so much to live for." She gripped Kagome's upper arms and pushed her away so that she could meet her gaze.

Kagome was awed and humbled by the love and acceptance she saw there. "You came very close to death, Kagome. So many times. Actually, I am surprised you have waited so long to lean on someone else." She cupped her daughter's cheek and smiled, her voice trembling a little, "Sometimes we have to assure ourselves that something so awful hasn't consumed us. There is nothing shameful in that – unless we give it that meaning." As if a great burden had been lifted, Kagome felt lighter. Tears swam in her eyes, but she was done crying. Her mother was right; she needed to move on and focus on how to end Ryukostokken and free Ko – and she would continue to live and enjoy what she could in the process.

Something else her mother had said, or maybe her expression, made Kagome wonder, "Mama, are you saying you...dated...after dad died?"

"Kagome," Gen smiled, "it has been fifteen years. Of course I have dated." Her amused smile met Kagome's embarrassed one. She would have thought telling her mother about her attempted rape or intimate encounter afterward would have been difficult, but it was nothing compared to the possibility that her mother had *dated*. She might have had *sex*. Her *mother*. "Although, I have always been open with the gentlemen I see about what I am looking for." Kagome wanted to die, right then. Just sink through the floor and pray she would never hear her mother say 'one-night stand'. "You should give him the courtesy of doing the same."

"What?" Kagome had no idea what her mother was talking about. Most of her brain was still stumbling over the idea of her mother. Dating. Casually. *When did she find the time?* The other part was trying to figure out how that had anything to do with Sesshomaru.

"Inuyasha, dear. I know you aren't interested in him in that way anymore." Kagome felt her mouth fall open. *Surely she doesn't think* – her brain shorted out while her mother continued, "He did his best to make you feel better because he loves you. But please don't let him go on thinking that this will become something more – that you and he will continue to be...intimate. It wouldn't be fair to him, Kagome. His heart has been through so much." Kagome blinked. She swore she could hear the sound of her lids closing and opening echoing in the silence of the well house. Her mother was staring at her with concern that was almost disapproving. "Unless your feelings have changed?"

"What?" Kagome shouted. She broke out of her stupor and leaned away from her mother with an expression of mortified disgust. *She thinks I – with Inuyasha – that we* – she couldn't finish the thought. "No!" she denied, then again, more vehemently, "No, no, no. Ew! No! It was Sesshomaru, Mama. Not Inuyasha. Ew!" They sat and stared at each other: Kagome trying to quell the urge to scrub her eyelids with something to remove the afterimage of an imagined Inuyasha with his hand between her legs; Gen clearly trying to process new information.

"Inuyasha's brother?" Gen finally managed. At Kagome's mute nod, she continued, "Isn't he the one

that tried to kill you?”

“Everyone tries to kill me at first, Mama,” Kagome said without thinking. Then she laughed, and both women lost some of their tension. “I guess I just inspire that reaction.”

“Oh, dear,” Gen smiled. “Not in everyone.” She laughed too and bumped her shoulder against Kagome’s. “But almost all of them end up loving you afterward. You *do* inspire that reaction.” She stood, brushing off her jeans, and offered Kagome a hand up. They linked arms and began the walk back to the house. Kagome sighed, content, if not completely happy. The house glowed from every window and even across the shrine courtyard she could hear Inuyasha arguing with Souta about whether they should eat supper without waiting for the women. They were nearly to the door when Gen leaned in close and whispered, “Now after supper, we can have a little talk about men and women. I assume things all still work the same way with a demon?”

“Mama!” Kagome threw her palm over her face to hide her blush. She simply was *not* talking with her mother about *that*.

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Inuyasha jumped out of the well the next morning and into the future with a grumble, “I ain’t his messenger-boy.” He had been grumpy to begin with, after his human night – the one night where he always slept deeply in Kagome’s time – was interrupted over and over again by Kagome’s nightmares. He had done his best to soothe the woman, but he didn’t get more than a few hours rest, and none of it at the same time. He hadn’t been looking forward to the run North, and then to find his half-brother waiting for him - well, he wasn’t happy about it. He flipped his silver hair over his shoulder and shoved his arms through his t-shirt. Regardless of the complaints, not for a moment did he consider discarding the note or ignoring Sesshomaru’s request that he speak to Mrs. Higurashi. This was something pack did. It was something that fathers did for sons. Brothers for brothers.

Sesshomaru loved Kagome. He would never admit it; certainly not to Inuyasha and most likely not to himself, but he loved her. It wasn’t surprising, when the hanyou thought about it. There was something about Kagome. *Ya can’t help but love the clumsy wench*, he thought. He still loved her, too. Not like Sesshomaru did – although he had tried. Hell, he had tried so hard to love her like she deserved, like she had wanted him to in the beginning. He just couldn’t. She was so like Kikyou, but *not*. His heart wasn’t in it, and it hadn’t been fair to Kagome to pretend that it ever would be.

The bastard had fallen hard for her. He had shown more emotion in the few weeks Kagome had been with him than in the centuries Inuyasha had known him. She would be good for him, make him less of a cold prick. At least, she would if they mated. Inuyasha paused in the early morning light of the shrine courtyard, his blue jeans stiff against his legs and his bare feet flat against the cold paving. He stared at the flat, folded paper in his hand. Sesshomaru was asking Mrs. Higurashi for Kagome. He was paying the Higurashi’s a fortune for their only daughter. Any youkai family would have probably fallen all over themselves to be related to the Saidai Mao. Any human family from his time would have gotten over their concerns about evil youkai pretty quickly when they saw the bride price. Although Inuyasha

was sure Mrs. Higurashi would understand the significance of the traditional gesture, Kagome was a modern girl. And modern girls – or at least Kagome – liked to talk about emotions and shit before they did anything important.

His gaze flicked between the formal seal of the Western Palace and his clothes, purchased at a store Sesshomaru couldn't have imagined, with money that didn't really 'exist' as Kagome had explained it. Inuyasha knew Sesshomaru was going about his courtship the wrong way. At least, the wrong way for the woman he wanted. Inuyasha didn't know a lot about inu customs, but he figured Sesshomaru was sticking as close to tradition as possible, given the circumstances. Kagome, on the other hand, would want to go on those date things, and hold hands, and probably kiss *a lot* before she thought about mating. She had friends in the future who dated men for years, *different men*, and still weren't even promised for marriage at the age of *twenty*. It was strange to Inuyasha, but he guessed it would be mind-boggling to Sesshomaru.

It could be fun to watch his half-brother squirm. The daiyoukai would muck it up. Terribly, enormously, like guts-in-her-hair and no-place-to-bathe-for-days bad. *He hasn't even asked her yet*, Inuyasha snorted to himself. He could picture how it was going to end. Kagome would figure it out, or Sesshomaru would announce something pompous and arrogantly certain and she would snap. Embarrassed and mad she would scream and yell and point her skinny finger. If Inuyasha was lucky, he wouldn't be anywhere close enough to be sat. When she couldn't relieve her frustration with subjugation, she would want to go home and cry. If Sesshomaru was stupid enough to let her leave, she might not come back.

Damn it. Inuyasha heaved a sigh at his own conclusions. He would have to help the bastard, not that he deserved it. Kagome deserved it. She deserved happiness and love and someplace to keep all the lost children and people she seemed to collect like Tessaiga collected blood. He didn't really want to. His feet dragged as he walked to the kitchen door where he could hear Mrs. Higurashi humming and smell breakfast soup. He was going to have to help Sesshomaru. Inuyasha brightened somewhat as he considered that Kagome would keep Sesshomaru from trying to kill him once the two were mated. He would be free to remind his brother as often as he liked that the great Saidai Mao had said *please*.

He still had a smile on his face when he opened the back door. Mrs. Higurashi greeted him with a bowl of soup and a glass of water. He offered her the note, and for once didn't scarf down his food. Instead he leaned against the refrigerator, watching her carefully open the paper so as not to break the wax. It seemed to take her a long time to read what he could see was a fairly short note. Finally, Inuyasha couldn't stand the silence any longer. "He buried the *hofuna kin* gift under the Goshinboku. I can show you where."

Gen looked up, and Inuyasha was shocked by her flat expression. Never had he seen the woman without a smile at her lips or a sparkle in her brown eyes. "Is your brother a good man, Inuyasha?"

"Half-brother," Inuyasha responded automatically, "and he ain't a man. He's youkai." Gen's eyes bore into his, still waiting for an answer, so he continued gruffly, "The bastard, Sesshomaru ain't exactly good. He's killed a lot of demons – a lot of people – but he doesn't do it for fun. And he never eats 'em; he wouldn't be able to stomach the smell." That didn't seem to impress Gen and Inuyasha could

feel the sweat building under his arms. Helping Sesshomaru was turning out to be much harder than he had anticipated. “Look, I hated him for a long time, most of my life. And I think he hated me too. That might be changin’ some, but even if it wasn’t, I can say the truth to you about this much: Sesshomaru is honorable. He protects those in his care. He is a good ruler,” he muttered the next part, reluctant to admit it, “he’s a great fighter.” His voice became steadier and rose in volume to something approaching normal and he squared his shoulders, desperate to express to Gen what he meant, “He’ll take good care of her. He doesn’t care that she’s human and weak and dumb sometimes. He’s got a kid-”

Gen’s eyes widened and Inuyasha could feel the words falling out of his mouth without thought, desperate to fix things, “Rin! You remember hearing about her, he adopted her! He treats her really well, and she lives at the palace. Kagome and Shippo would live there too, and always have plenty to eat and the best medicine...and...warm clothes...” She wasn’t convinced. Inuyasha could tell. Her eyebrows were drawn together just like her daughter’s right before she explained something for the *final* time. It was usually followed by a ‘sit’. She smelled strange too. Protective and loving like always, but her love had an edge to it that tasted like cold steel in his mouth.

“Will he hurt her?” Her tone – Inuyasha had never heard Gen use that tone before. It was hard and serious; it demanded an answer and made promises for what would happen if the answer was wrong. A shiver gripped the base of Inuyasha’s spine. Kagome could be scary, but she had nothing on her mother.

“Hell – I mean, er, no, Mrs. Higurashi.” He straightened away from the wall and met her eyes with all of the seriousness and ceremony he could manage, although he still wasn’t going to call that bastard sama, not even for Kagome. “Sesshomaru-san loves Kagome, although he hasn’t told her yet. He is inuyoukai, so he will protect and cherish her until the day he dies, maybe longer. He will live for her happiness. He is the Saidai Mao, so the West will always be first for him – but Kagome always puts everyone else first too, so she’ll be a good Lady. The palace already loves her – for savin’ em and everything. He-“

Gen interrupted him, “Sesshomaru loves her. You are certain of that, Inuyasha?”

“Yes,” Inuyasha swallowed hard and pulled his hands out of his sleeves. “Yes, ma’am.” The tension broke almost instantly, and if he hadn’t felt the sudden release of pressure he would have never guessed that a regular human aura could be so commanding.

“Very good. Now, you eat your breakfast while I get things started, and then you can show me where that gift is buried. Oh,” she paused with a smile on her face as he sat down at the table. Gen handed him a spoon and said, casually, “and if she decides she doesn’t want him, I will hold you responsible to bring her back safely, Inuyasha.” She was smiling, her eyes sparkling, and her scent was light and happy again, but Inuyasha could not forget the tangy smell of steel.

“Yes ma’am,” he managed, before shoving a spoonful of soup into his mouth so he wouldn’t have to say anything else. *Sesshomaru is going to pay for this.* He finished his soup and took Gen to the Goshinboku where he dug up Sesshomaru’s gift, the frozen dirt giving easily under his claws. The

leather wrapping was stiff and cracked in places, but Inuyasha peeled it back far enough to allow her to lift out the box. She traced the designs carefully, and the hanyou kept his jaw clenched. He wanted to say something cutting about his half-brother throwing away money and the stupidity of the ritual bride price, but Gen seemed pleased with the box.

“He must have put a great deal of work into this. It is exquisite,” her eyes met his. “Thank you Inuyasha.”

“Don’t you want to look inside?” he blurted.

“I appreciate the gesture,” Gen smiled, “but I think this is something for Kagome to accept or reject. If she doesn’t agree, you can take it back.”

Inuyasha dropped the leather on the ground and backed away. “Oh, no, she can do that herself. I’ve gotta be somewhere. Stuff to kill, ya know?” He laughed nervously. There was no way he wanted to be anywhere near Kagome when she had the news broken to her that Sesshomaru had tried to buy her from her family. And he most definitely didn’t want to be the one to tell the daiyoukai if his efforts had failed. “You, ah, might want to mention that there is a courting process. So she still can change her mind, or whatever.” He was nearly twenty feet away before he turned and bolted for the well house, calling over his shoulder, “She should ask *him* about it!”

When he landed in his own time, once again naked and swearing that he would start leaving his clothes at the bottom of the well, Sesshomaru was waiting for him. He looked cold and unfeeling, but his youki was strained and trying to break free of his control. *Get the fuck outta here*, he said to himself. *When she comes through, ever’ fuckin’ thing in a mile around is gonna be purified, subdued, or melted with acid*. Sesshomaru stared at him, clearly waiting for a response, but Inuyasha wasn’t dumb enough to speak until he was fully dressed and armed.

“Well.” The daiyoukai’s statement was flat, but the impatient question buried there almost had Inuyasha smirking. Almost. Then he remembered what Sesshomaru would do to him if Kagome said no. Not that he would let that fucker kill him. *As if he could!* But he didn’t have time for a fight right now, and he definitely didn’t want to see what Kagome was going to do. That would only be good to watch from the other side of a stone wall. With a spying glass. From about a mile away. Then it would be funny.

Inuyasha secured his sword and braced his feet. “Mrs. Higurashi has it. She’s gonna talk to Kagome about it when the wench wakes up. That’s how they do it in the future,” he added hastily. Sesshomaru was silent for a long moment that had the hanyou bracing for an attack.

“Higurashi Gen was pleased with the value.”

Inuyasha really did roll his eyes then. As if the entire world would fall into chaos if Sesshomaru admitted to not knowing something. Actually asking a question was beneath him. “She liked the box; I told you the gift was too much. Anyway, she didn’t open it while I was there.” Sesshomaru frowned, a

tiny, fleeting downturn of one corner of his mouth. Inuyasha had seen his brother's control slip before, he wasn't sticking around for it again. "If Kagome says yes, the family will say yes." He prepared to leap away, but his conscious was nagging at him. "Shit." He turned, and pointed one claw in frustration at Sesshomaru. "Ask her, and really make it a question. Give her some time, and try not to be a fuckin' arrogant icicle. She forgives a lot, but don't fuck this up." Without intending it, his voice dropped an octave. "She loved me first."

Sesshomaru's reaction was subtle, a tightening at the corners of his eyes. His youki, however, rose like a black wave behind him, ready to crush his opponents. Inuyasha could feel his own hackles rising, his youki responding with a violent churn of red power, but he held his ground.

"She doesn't anymore, not like that." His brother's threat diminished, but youki still filled the clearing with an angry energy. "Still, she gave it to me first, so if you so much as leave a *bruise* on her heart, I'll kill you." Of all the threats he had ever made, all the times he had sworn to kill his half-brother, only this one would be carried out. No matter what it took. If he had to die at Sesshomaru's hands just to be able to return from the grave and take revenge, he would. The threat - the promise - felt right. It sealed something between the two brothers. An agreement, an oath to protect someone they both cared about. After centuries, something honest and serious, something born of pure intentions existed in the space from one dog demon to another. The weight of it, a chain that bound them in a way that was beyond good or bad, settled on them both. Sesshomaru nodded, once, and Inuyasha followed suit before leaping away to run north, leaving the daiyoukai to wait for his miko.

ooo

Kimi tapped her tea cup with a single claw, considering the hare youkai kneeling before her. Her appearance was more animal than human, with reverse jointed knees, paws for feet, and whiskers. Long, silky grey-brown fur cascaded down her head to brush against her shoulders. It was slicked back behind dramatically long, pointed ears that twitched at every sound or shadow.

"Nousagi," Kimi said softly, knowing from long association that the demon was easily startled. "You are certain of this information?"

"Oh, yes, Kimi-sama, most certain." The hare dipped, touching her forehead to the floor. Her whiskers shivered and her shoulders trembled. "Matsudaira has sent many envoys to his neighbors - past the warrens of my family. They leave with scrolls and come back with heavy packs that smell of silk and metal."

Mikawa province was small, even by the standards of human lords, and was surrounded by much larger, more powerful neighbors. The location, straddling the border between the East and West on an important trade route leading to the South could be of significant use to Sesshomaru in the coming war. If the lord of Mikawa had indeed, as Nousagi guessed, forged an alliance with his neighbors he would be even more valuable. *More likely he has blackmailed or threatened them in some way*, Kimi thought. She had been looking forward to meeting some of the human lords her son was inviting to the palace, but Matsudaira was becoming of particular interest. *One who appears so weak, but who may hold great*

power over his neighbors, that is a human I would enjoy meeting. Kimi smiled widely in anticipation, forgetting for a moment her audience.

The little youkai made a noise not unlike the feeble scream of a strangled infant and cowered in fear. “Please, Nousagi,” Kimi said by way of apology, “This One’s fangs are reserved for another.” Kimi soothed her with a slow, gentle motion, “With This One’s thanks and respect, rest and refresh before you return.” She nodded, and Kento stepped forward with a wrapped bundle which he placed on the floor and then slowly he glided away. “A small gift of appreciation from the West.” The hare snatched up the package and walked backward from the room, bowing and twitching, uttering thanks and compliments to Kimi until the doors slid shut. The Lady strengthened her barrier and smoothed her hair over her shoulder.

“Shall I add the name to the list, Kimi-sama?” Kento sat at his small scribe’s table, brush and ink ready for her order. His mushroom colored face was smooth, but his eyes glinted with knowledge. Kimi was pleased; she did love it when subordinates proved to be intelligent, and her son’s assistant had shown himself to be most adept. If only she could find someone at the castle that would match her in other recreational pursuits – bloodletting and sex, although the two were not necessarily mutually exclusive – then she would be completely satisfied with her new residence.

“This One will be most content to have Matsudaira Nobutada in attendance at the Full Moon council.” Kento added the name to the list and Kimi poured another cup of tea for herself. The day, even with Sesshomaru’s absence while he waited for his miko, was turning out to be most productive. “Fetch the next one,” she ordered, her smile breaking loose again. She admonished herself to conceal it before the next informant entered. It would not do to make her spies believe she would eat them – as tasty as that might be.

Chapter 30: Righteous but Not Right

Kagome had woken to the muffled sound of Souta's alarm. She blinked at the ceiling for a moment, her brain slowly returning to wakefulness and the realization that she was at home. *Saturday. Souta has soccer practice.* Dragging herself out of bed was difficult; she felt as though she hadn't slept at all. Strange and frightening dreams which she could only remember fragments of had kept her tossing all night. Inuyasha had already left; the blanket and pillow he used were neatly folded on her floor. She showered and dressed and ate two large helpings of breakfast with her family before her little brother dashed off to carpool with his friends and her grandfather left to open the shrine for tourists. She told her mother she had work to do, and would have lunch with them before she returned to the feudal era. Gen had agreed, and asked her to be safe, but the older woman seemed strange. Not anxious or worried, only – preoccupied.

She had completed a brief meditation the night before but was not able to sense any youkai nearby. Knowing that she needed to be thorough, Kagome grabbed a school bag with a list of assignments she needed to complete for the next quarter of her distance nursing program. She stopped at the neighborhood pharmacy – her face the color of a tomato while she paid for her pills. Then she took the bus to the library, planning to take the notes she needed, pick up a few books at the store, and then stop at a park on the way home to undertake an exhaustive search for youkai. Her trip was uneventful. The library clerk was helpful, all of the books she needed were available at the first store she went to. She even found a few other items to buy. Still, there was something bothering her.

Kagome tried to shake it off as she entered the park, nearly empty given the winter weather. It was as if she had forgotten something. The niggling feeling, of a task left undone or a date overlooked, tugged at her awareness. She tried to brush it away, seating herself in a secluded spot deep in the park. She had learned through trial and error that being close to nature made it easier for her to meditate and work with her reiki. Kagome connected ear buds to her phone and laid it out - not playing anything - on an open book. Hopefully it would be enough to keep anyone from bothering her, if they did happen to come upon her. It was unlikely, but she didn't want to chance having to explain to anyone why she was sitting outdoors in the winter. *It also feels like having a piano dropped on my head when I'm pulled out of deep contemplation,* she thought wryly.

Months of practice enabled her to settle into a state of self-awareness rather quickly. Kagome was accustomed to the mental space she arrived in. It was a white place, bright with sunlight from an unseen source. Pale pink fog rolled across the ground, a few inches high, and the scent of flowers and heavy dew filled the air. She cupped the fog in her hands, concentrating on what she needed to see and focusing her energy. When she pulled her hands apart, the fog parted, and it was as if she was looking down on herself in the park from a height of a few dozen feet. The world around her physical body was muted in darkly saturated colors with little hue. Her body, however, glowed with a pink light – so intense it was almost white. She was surprised to see how much brighter it was than the last time she had meditated.

She widened her view and her mental image scrolled outward so that she could see the whole park.

Several acres around her filled the space, fading into the fog at the edges. She had done this many times in the feudal era, searching for other youkai or humans that might be near their campsite. Tiny pin pricks of yellow light bobbed and moved about the park scene. Those were animals, Kagome knew. A group of humans - teenagers excited about something, she guessed from their bouncing energy - gathered at the edge of the park, near the picnic area. Their bodies were revealed as duller lights in soft, pale colors. No youkai were in the area.

Kagome concentrated, drowning out the animal, insect, and plant life around her. When she had in her mind firmly that she was looking only for humans or youkai, she widened her view again. She searched the blocks around the park, and then the district. Several times she thought she caught something. An aura with the intensity of a youki would catch at the corner of her eye, but as soon as she focused on it, it would disappear. Still, she did not give up. She could feel the strain on her mind, on her reiki, as she finally held an image of all of Tokyo before her. Millions of human lights. Several hundred holy beings, of various levels of power. A few even took notice of her inspection. None shined as brightly as her own white energy in the center of the spiritual map. She relaxed her gaze, about to let the vision go, and something flickered at her.

Her eyes snapped to attention, but it was gone. Again, Kagome prepared to dismiss the map, but another heavy twinkle of power brushed the edges of her sight, this time in a different location. It went on for what seemed like hours. Every time she thought she found a demon, the signature would disappear before she could be sure. It was so frustrating she wanted to scream. Finally, she could hold her meditation no longer. She came back to herself with a startled gasp, as though her head had been underwater and she could only just then breathe. Her hands were shaking and sweat trickled down her back and beaded along her hairline. She would have pulled on her hair in exasperation if she weren't exhausted. She had hoped to be able to tell Sesshomaru that youkai were alive and well; that they had changed the future – just enough to save demons, but not enough to alter reality as Kagome knew it. At the very least, she figured nothing would have changed, and she would have to report that she simply didn't know if they were successful. The teasing information she had learned was somehow worse than finding no youkai at all.

She splashed water from her water bottle on her face and neck, and used the edge of her scarf to dry off. She slung her bag over her shoulders. The weight of her books and her shopping bag felt like it had doubled since the store. Despite her tired limbs and grumbling stomach, she elected to walk the mile back to the shrine rather than take the bus. Her mind needed time to work out the puzzling information from her vision. There were probably demons in her era – she had never sensed even a flicker before. *But they can either sense me sensing them, and avoid detection, or there aren't really any demons and I'm going crazy.*

As she rounded the last corner to the shrine and saw the group lounging against the stairs, she groaned. *I am crazy. Crazy, ill-fated, and probably born under some sort of cursed star.* She actually took one step backward, hoping to avoid a confrontation, but it she was too late.

“Kagome-chan!”

“Kagome!”

“Kagome-san!”

Her old school friends jumped up when they spotted her, and Kagome forced a smile onto her face and gave a weak wave. She had always been terrible at confrontation; she hated telling people no, and her friends, nice though they were, were very hard to say no to. They also did not know anything about the well’s secret. The depth of experiences, and mountain of lies, that had grown since she was fifteen now separated her from them in a way that they didn’t seem to understand and she could not explain. She continued forward, and they met her halfway, turning to walk beside her. Eri linked Kagome’s free arm with hers.

“Kagome, it is so good to see you! Yuka and I met Hojo at the store earlier, we’re on break from University, and we decided we should come visit you!” Eri’s soft brown eyes - they reminded Kagome of Sango - sparkled with warmth. Her breath fogged in the air a bit, but her cheeks were pink with cold and her black coat and pink scarf gave her the appearance of a fashionable college student. *Rightfully so*, Kagome thought, for the first time without a hint of wistfulness.

“How are you feeling, Kagome-san?” Hojo touched her shoulder lightly with his gloved hand to get her attention. She felt her smile falter at the quiet concern and devotion that still burned in his face. Apparently, he had not yet given up hope that Kagome would return his feelings. She sent a prayer to whatever kami were listening, *again*, that he would find a girlfriend. Preferably one who lived in Osaka. Or maybe Korea. Somewhere very, very far away. *Are Americans interested in mail-order husbands*, she wondered.

“I-”

Yuka interrupted her, “She obviously isn’t feeling well, Hojo-kun. Look how pale she is! You should help her up the stairs.” Kagome’s head turned around so quickly she nearly got whiplash. She threw everything she had into glaring at Yuka, but the girl just offered a sly grin and a wink. As if she had done Kagome a favor.

“Are you sure you’re all right, Kagome-chan? You haven’t been injured, have you?” Eri looked concerned, and Kagome was distracted by her odd turn of phrase.

Hojo’s soft, almost cloyingly sweet voice interrupted her chain of thought, “Please, Kagome-san, let me help you with that.” He actually reached for the strap of her bag and Kagome gripped it tightly. A little growl escaped her, *I don’t want your help*, and she blushed when she realized she had made the sound. “Or I could just walk with you. I have been meaning to call again, now that I am home. I wanted to discuss with you your plans for a nursing internship. My father has an opening at his clinic-” Kagome could feel her heart rate increasing. There was no way she could let herself get talked into working with Hojo’s family.

“Oooo!” Yuka squealed and clapped her hands. “That is perfect, Hojo-kun! She would be so close to the apothecary your uncle runs – you know how those remedies you used to bring Kagome made her

feel better! You could keep an eye on Kagome-chan. You would see her every day, since your new apartment is right upstairs from the clinic!” Kagome’s eyes bounced from her pushy, hormone-crazed friend to the boy. She couldn’t think of the slender, soft-spoken milk-toast as a man, no matter how old he was. Hojo’s eyes seemed to have gone sort of soft and dreamy. He and Yuka made plans for how Kagome could get to work every day while Eri looked on, concerned. If Kagome didn’t say anything, they’d have her engaged to Hojo before she had made it up the stairs.

“I already have an internship,” she blurted. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, for a moment torn between elated surprise that she had finally said something to stop Yuka’s schemes and Hojo’s oppressive *niceness*, and horrified wonder that she had lied so easily. Now she just had to keep up the lie. They all stared at her; Eri was the first to break the silence.

“That’s great, Kagome! I know how much you like helping others, nursing is sure to be the right career for you. You should call or email me and let me know how it’s going!” The intellectual girl, usually so focused on her studies, impulsively hugged Kagome and whispered in her ear. “Don’t let them bully you!” Kagome blinked in surprise.

“Yeah, Kagome-chan,” Yuka followed up half-heartedly. “Great. So where is this internship?”

“It’s, ah, it’s in the West,” the lie slipped out, and Kagome felt like maybe she could do this. Usually Gramps did all the storytelling, but if she really wanted to get away from Hojo, she needed a long-term excuse. She just needed to stick as close to the truth as possible. Miroku said that was the best way to create a believable lie.

“What kind of place is that? Are the people there going to look after you?” Hojo looked even more worried. The expression was irritating.

“Where, exactly, in the west?” Yuka looked disbelieving, her eyes narrow and her thin, shaped brows beetled.

“Actually,” Kagome took a deep breath, “It’s with Inuyasha’s family. They own the clinic for the town they live in.”

“That punk owns a clinic?” Yuka still didn’t look like she believed Kagome.

“I thought you broke up with that boy,” Hojo frowned. “He didn’t seem right for you.”

“Inuyasha doesn’t own the clinic, his family does. And,” she swallowed hard and managed a tight-lipped smile, “I probably won’t see anyone much after today. I’m leaving soon – I’ll be staying at their house while I am doing the internship.”

“That sounds really exciting, Kagome,” Eri brushed passed the other two and began herding Kagome up the stairs. “You probably have a lot of packing to do, so we’ll let you get to it. Send me an email when you get there!”

“So you’ll be living with that, that gang-member?” Hojo looked fretful still, but a note of surprised anger had entered his voice. Kagome didn’t have time to be concerned about his feelings, she was starting to feel her own temper rise.

“Inuyasha is *not* a gang-member, Hojo, and please do not say things like that about my friends. Besides, it is his older brother I’ll be staying with.” Yuka tried to grasp her hand, she looked ready to explode with questions, but Kagome jerked away and started up the stairs. “Have a good time at University,” she called over her shoulder. “Eri, I’ll be sure to send you an email, just as soon as I get a chance!” She thought she had made a clean getaway, but Hojo took the stairs two at a time, catching up to her and seizing her shoulders in his hands.

“Kagome-san,” his voice was as soft and sweet as always, but his mouth and eyes were firmed with a new sternness, “please do not feel that you must put yourself in an uncertain situation. What do you really know of this brother? If he is related to that gang-member, ex-boyfriend of yours, he most certainly does not have your best interests at heart.” She opened her mouth to interrupt, but Hojo pulled her forward suddenly, squeezing her in a hug. His cheek brushed against hers and she could feel his warm breath puffing against her hair. She couldn’t have been more surprised if Jaken had hugged her. “Your health has been so delicate,” he murmured in her ear, pulling back after another squeeze to gaze soulfully at her, “let me advise you on this. That brother character would try to take advantage of you; I can help you, care for you, you don’t have to make decisions-”

Her shock finally wore off and she pushed his arms away from her. “Hojo-san,” she said firmly. “I understand that you say these things out of concern.” A soft, hopeful smile split his face and he looked like he wanted to say something. Kagome didn’t let him. Her temper was barely in check. *How dare he assume that she couldn’t make her own decisions.* “However,” she put stress on that word and it nearly hissed out between her clenched teeth. Kagome was very conscious of Eri and Yuka watching from the bottom of the stairs. Yuka looked horrified and fascinated. Eri looked apprehensive. “However,” she said again, “not only are your assumptions incorrect. It is also highly inappropriate for you to express them. I will say this to you only once: do not ever presume to know what is best for me. Ever.” She narrowed her eyes at him, and the little flame of hope in his face flickered.

At least partially mollified, she turned to Eri, “I’ll be fine with Sesshomaru,” Eri’s eyes widened, no doubt at hearing her friend would be staying with someone whose name meant killing perfection, “and I’ll try to send you an email as soon as I’ve settled.” She ignored Yuka, smothering the twinge of guilt she felt over slighting her old schoolmate. The girl was supposed to be Kagome’s friend, but she never listened to what the miko had to say. *If she thinks Hojo is such a catch, maybe she should grab him.*

Kagome practically ran up the rest of the stairs and into her house. She powered through packing a small bag on her irritation and the swell of pride she had in herself for finally putting a pin in Hojo’s dream. *No more of that nonsense.* Books, pills – she blushed while tucking a three month prescription inside a medical text, new toothbrushes, a few gifts, her homework, and other supplies were shoved in an old bag and left waiting by the front door. She changed into another pair of old leggings, thick socks, and a second-hand hoodie. Lunch went by quickly with her family and soon she was ensconced

in the kitchen with her mother, who had insisted they have a private talk. Kagome was dreading it. Her mother had threatened to discuss the birds and bees - youkai version, and there were about a million things Kagome would rather do.

Final exam for chemistry. Clean all of the shrine storage sheds. Kiss Jaken.

Okay, maybe not that last one.

“Kagome, dear, Inuyasha came back this morning with a note from your Sesshomaru,” Gen began.

Kagome opened her mouth to deny that he was *her* anything, but another thought stopped her. “A note for me?” It was strange, she would see the daiyoukai in a half-hour; she couldn’t think of anything good that would not have waited. “Why didn’t you tell me right away?” She held out her hand for the note, trying to calm the race of her pulse while she considered how terrible something would have to be before Sesshomaru would send her a note – with Inuyasha.

“No,” Gen shook her head with a smile, “a note for me.” Confusion swamped the miko’s brain. She wasn’t aware she had ever even told Sesshomaru her mother’s name. “He wanted to introduce himself, and he asked permission to start the pursuing ritual.” Kagome blinked. Her ears didn’t seem to be connected to her brain. Her mother was watching her with a twinkle in her eye and an understanding expression that didn’t make anything clearer. “He used formal words, but that man would like to court you - and marry you if things go well.”

“Youkai, not man,” Kagome corrected numbly. *Court me. Marry me. Sesshomaru?* She felt a sweat starting to build. She was too hot, but also chilly. Goosebumps rose on her arms.

“He is very traditional, which make sense, I suppose, given his time. He sent a bride gift.” Gen stood and reached into the cupboard next to the sink and pulled out a porcelain box. Kagome recognized her name, as well as the symbols for Miko no Mao, Shikon, and Sunset Shrine worked into an intricate design. It was beautiful, but it still did not make any sense to her. Her mind swirled in foggy circles. She wasn’t a bride; Sesshomaru hadn’t said anything about marriage, or even courting. Sure, they had kissed and...done other stuff, but marriage wasn’t something she had ever considered. Not with him. Not with anyone. *I’ve only really known him for a month!* She had been thinking about a relationship, exploring the possibility of caring for him, loving him, but marriage...

Kagome was very conscious of her open palm, still hanging in the air between them like a beggar’s cup. She moved to retract it, but her mother settled the box there and Kagome automatically secured it with both hands. She tried to focus on her breathing, but her lungs weren’t working properly.

Sesshomaru seemed to enjoy her company. He obviously enjoyed being intimate with her, and he intended to continue that sort of behavior and take it further - if his actions in the spring were any indication. She had accepted and prepared for that – hence the prescription. She didn’t even blush at the thought. That was how strange and unbelievable the situation appeared to her. She liked Sesshomaru. She had already decided she would see where a relationship with him might go, but that

had only been a week ago – and most of the intervening time they hadn't even been together. They had never talked about anything like this; they had never been on a date. She had never even held his hand.

That started off a downward spiral of fluttery desire, shame at the pace of their intimacy, and a spark of outrage that burned in her stomach like a hot coal. "Well," her mother said in a calm voice, "I think you should open it." Kagome set the box gently on the table and stared for a moment. She knew she should be happy that Sesshomaru wanted to take things further with her. After years of one step forward, two steps back with Inuyasha and predictably boring and uncomfortable dates with Hojo, she should be happy that the daiyoukai was serious about their relationship. Unfortunately, she couldn't seem to move past the part where he sent a note to her mother about a wedding before he had even asked her on a date. Kagome had always known Sesshomaru was arrogant, most of it was deserved, but this act was unfathomable to her. Certainly, she knew a few girls, from very conservative families, who had become engaged to men they barely knew – but that had never been her family. Although they owned a shrine, and Gramps often complained about how much better the old ways were, no one in her family had had an arranged marriage since before the war. The Shrine had still been a school for monks and miko and Gramps hadn't even been a twinkle in his father's eye the last time a Higurashi received an actual, not symbolic, bride price. And her mother had never pressured her to accept, or even consider, interest from potential suitors.

In a daze, still unsure about her own feelings, she lifted off the lid. "Oh, my," Gen breathed. Kagome felt her mouth fall open, but no words came out. Her eyes were wide enough that she was distantly aware that she should blink before they dried out, but she could do nothing but stare.

Nestled in the box was a white dog, approximately eight inches long, with three tails, carved out of pale, nearly colorless, jade. Under his feet, a darker jade had been carved in whorls and swirls that resembled clouds. Discrete hinges and a clasp identified the cloud as a hinged case. Where the jade parted and whirled apart in intricate carvings, she could see what was inside. A gold bar. Stamped with Japanese kanji. It was the size of a candy bar. That alone would have been excessive in the extreme. The gold with the jade cloud was beyond gratuitous. The elaborate dog carving was lavish and probably priceless. However, it was the last item in the box that sent Kagome over the edge. Nestled in the open jaws of the dog, like a spoil of battle, lay a smooth, oblong stone the size of a quail egg. The red color was unblemished except for a thin white star pattern at its heart.

A ruby, her mind stated. Even her imagination couldn't begin to settle on an emotion. *It has to be worth...* she couldn't even guess. The whole thing belonged in a museum somewhere, perhaps at the national palace with Japan's imperial relics. Sesshomaru either thought so little of the expense that he buried it under a tree for her family, or he thought so much of her that he buried it under a tree for her family. She wasn't sure which was preferable. *He buried this. He sent my mother priceless artifacts to ask permission to marry me. He sent a bride gift* – her brain locked onto that. Kagome was overwhelmed. She felt helpless, as though fate was moving without her, as though she had no choice, no power, no say in her own future. Suddenly, painfully, the hazy fog that had been numbing her disappeared and she was left with a single realization:

He never asked me.

Later, much later, some tiny part of her might argue that she was not being fair. She was leaping to conclusions and attributing modern sensibilities to someone who had no concept of sexual equality or inherent individual rights. In that moment, all of the indecision, shock, confusion, and other immense, deep feelings that were too much for her to consider were shoved into the background as she latched onto her temper. It was easier, simpler, to focus on how wrong his deed appeared, rather than sort through how right his intention might have been. Simpler to be angry about a courting than to think about why she suddenly was so afraid to be powerless. It was easier to let her ire build than to sort through the enormity of what it *could* mean.

Kagome snapped the lid back on the porcelain box, not even noticing Gen's wince as the delicate china clicked together. "I have to go now, Mama," she said through clenched teeth.

She stood, hugging the other woman woodenly and moving out of her arms and towards the door even while Gen reached for her and called out, "Now, Kagome, wait. Don't let your mouth run away with you!" The young miko hefted her bag and nodded, but continued walking. Gen followed her. "I think you might be jumping to conclusions, dear. You should really talk to him about this, if it upsets you."

"Talk?" Kagome snorted, "Yeah, clearly we do a lot of that." *Why should I talk to him*, she thought acidly, *when he did this without talking to me?*

"Really." The censure in Gen's voice made Kagome pause and look over her shoulder. "Consider when you have had the opportunity to do so with him." A smile quirked Gen's mouth, "Or have you used such opportunities for other things? Things that might have given him certain expectations?" Kagome's face burned, and she held onto her slipping temper with tight fists. "I am not judging you, or him, but 'a greeting is the local deity who turns up providentially'." The proverb was something her grandfather often said, and it ate at her as she continued, more slowly, to the well house. She wasn't sure if she was truly looking for a fight where there was none, as her mother had implied. Sesshomaru was in the wrong. He should have spoken to her first. Panic flared and warred with anger. She had to be the one to decide her fate. No matter how it pained him or hurt his stoic image, about something so important, so personal, he should have talked with her first.

Her famous temper in full evidence, Kagome jumped down the well. Blue power engulfed her, and her eyes narrowed. The Saidai Mao was about to find out exactly what his mistake was, in great detail. Even if she had to pinch his pointed ear and speak directly into it to make him listen.

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"The demon gave this for her?" Grandfather Higurashi's eyes were round as he stared into the little box on the kitchen table. His daughter-in-law was being far too complacent for his tastes. A demon, the lord of all demons if it was the same Sesshomaru that was mentioned in the shrine scrolls, had asked permission to court his granddaughter. Without consulting him, Gen had agreed. The two were engaged. *Engaged to a demon!* His Kagome, the heir to the Higurashi holy power and future keeper of

the Sunset Shrine was going to marry a demon. It was utterly incomprehensible.

“Yes, although Kagome wasn’t too pleased with it.” Gen turned her back on him and continued cleaning up the kitchen.

“Not pleased?” He snorted, “Kagome’s a good girl - pretty, smart and full of holy energy, but there isn’t a dozen girls in Japan worth this much.”

“Grandpa!” Gen scolded, snapping at him with a tea towel.

“What?” He folded his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair, frowning and staring at the box. “It’s true.” He warmed to his favorite topic: the laziness and thoughtlessness of young people. “Children today don’t know how good they have it. Don’t understand their responsibility to their family – or proper respect for tradition. Why, last year she didn’t even blink before she said no to the omiai with that nice boy from the Inawashiro shrine! The girl should be tripping over herself to say yes to a man with this kind of money.” His voice dropped and he muttered the next sentence, “Even if he is a soulless cold demon.”

“Higurashi Jirou!” Gen’s tone was harsh and brooked no argument. He knew that tone. His late wife had only used it a handful of times, but its meaning was clear: that woman would not be ignored. “The choice is Kagome’s and hers alone, do not even think that you can order her who to marry. And if I hear you say one unkind word about his heritage where he or either of my children can hear you, you will be taking care of your own cooking and laundry – do you understand me?”

The patron of the Higurashi clan knew who really ran his household. He was vividly aware of where the power in their little family lay. He would hold his tongue about the demon, but he refused to admit he was wrong. “Hope you remembered to send the girl with a gift for his family,” he muttered.

“Certainly,” Gen replied, turning back to the counter and the rice balls she needed to make for Souta’s soccer team, “I tucked something into her bag with a note.”

The old man pushed back from the table and headed for the back door and his shrine duties, there at least he was listened too – if only by the tourists. He muttered to himself the whole way, “Don’t see why she has to ruin a good thing. No demons in the family in my day. Ancestors would be turning over...” He kept up his diatribe even after he reached his little office next to the gift shop, and sat down to write out blessings of fertility for the new couple to receive on their wedding day. He gently set aside a glass case containing an ancient scroll and pulled out his ink paste and the heavy silver hanko seal he used for important business. “Don’t know how they expect the shrine to function under these circumstances. Unheard of...”

Chapter 31: Fear Lashes Out

Sesshomaru felt the rush of power from the well an instant before soft blue light erupted from its depths. When it dissipated a moment later, it left only the fading taste of ozone in the air and the scent of magnolias and cherry wood. *Kagome*. His tension both eased and intensified as he turned to the well, prepared to jump in and reclaim his miko. She had returned, and she would tell him if her family had accepted his offer. That should not have caused any trepidation in the daiyoukai, but Inuyasha's message still echoed in his ears. 'Ask her, and really make it a question', the hanyou had said. *He knew the miko*, Sesshomaru had grudgingly admitted to himself while he waited. Inuyasha knew her better than Sesshomaru – the younger brother had known her longer. He might have miscalculated by following tradition, but he was not certain what he should have done instead.

He did not have the opportunity to get her, as she quickly began climbing up on her own. With every rustle of vines and heavy breath from the well her scent of anger increased. Inuzansho pepper was heavy and layered over another more concerning flavor. Sesshomaru tried to identify it, but it was deeply buried. When she finally emerged, her face was red from exertion and her eyes were alight with fury. Her bag was tossed onto the snow and her booted feet followed. He opened his mouth, unsure as to what he would say, but she spoke over him, "Did you think I wouldn't figure it out? Did you think you could just plan everything for me and I would go along?" Her voice was almost shrill, and she nearly vibrated with anger. His instinct in the face of her challenging tone and stance was to lunge, to carry her to the ground and force submission. Sesshomaru actually found himself leaning forward, minutely, and had to pull back.

His own lips barely moved, so tightly did he have to reign himself in or risk giving in to his nature. "I intend-," he began, but was again interrupted.

"*You intend?*" She spat the words and followed it with an impressive snarl, for a human. "I am so glad that you have made this decision, Sesshomaru," her voice dripped with sarcasm and the sound of his name spoken with such derision caused simultaneous feelings of rage and sadness within him. "Please, do, go on – what else do you *intend?*" When he did not immediately respond, she continued with almost manic fury, "Haven't you already set the date? Shall we be married when we return, or will you allow me time to select my own dress, *Saidai Mao*. Perhaps you could enlighten me as to your plans – will we be having children right away? How many do you wish me to have? Go on, Sesshomaru-*sama*, explain to me what I will be doing with *my* life!" Her volume increased, so that she was shouting at the end, hurting his ears, but that pain was drown out by the raging of the beast inside him.

He stood still, painfully immobile so that he would not do something that might drive her away or hurt her, while he argued with himself, trying to establish an approach that would not result in blood, tears, or an attempted run by his intended. *She is human*, he told himself. *She doesn't know how her accusations rile me*.

She is disrespectful, he argued.

Not disrespectful, informal, he corrected. She is not of this time. She may not understand tradition.

He raged inside his mind, *She is mine! She accepts my touch, enjoys it, gave herself to me. She cannot refuse, I will not allow it!*

Logic tried to rule him, *Think. She is not merely angry. There is something else fueling her.*

While he had been struggling with himself, she had approached him, pointing with one finger as she glared. “You are not the Lord of everything, Sesshomaru! You can’t decide the fate of everyone around you! What if I don’t want to marry you? Did you think about that?” She poked him for emphasis, directly above the bone plate of his armor. Her reiki had surged to life with her anger, and it sparked against him. Hot energy snaked under his skin and the smell of sun and salt air tempered the pepper clogging his senses. He seized her finger, and wrapped his other arm around her, pulling her close and bending to loom over her face. Her eyes widened, and a tiny bit of sour niguari melon slid under his nose. She was still angry, but she was worried as well. *She should be.*

He was very aware of how small her body was. How very mortal and easily broken by his strength. He was aware of how easily broken her feelings might be as well. His eyes narrowed and he tempered a growl into a warning rumble that was intended to curb her actions.

“You should have asked me,” she whispered furiously. He stared at her mouth, watching her form the words, but hearing his brother’s voice, ‘you haven’t even asked her’. The statement seemed to break her, and Sesshomaru felt his own anger scattering as hers was stripped away and her true feelings laid bare. She was not merely worried, but afraid. *Afraid of me, perhaps.* “I just- I can’t-” A muffled sob escaped her and then she was leaning against him, heedless of his armor. Her free hand fisted in the material of his sleeve and she raised watery blue eyes to meet his gaze. “I can’t be helpless. I *can’t* be powerless.” In a strange and worrisome reverse of her previous behavior, she grew quieter with each word, the fight leaving her like wind from a sail. “Not again,” she said, barely loud enough for him to hear.

He knew then, understood his mistake. Ryukostokken had robbed her of her power, had held her at his mercy such a short time ago. A part of Sesshomaru was insulted that she would compare him to the vile dragon, but he understood the root of her fear – and the anger she had tried to conceal it with. He gently smoothed one hand down her side to grasp her hip. *I cannot allow her to be afraid.* He held her accusing extremity carefully between two clawed fingers and tried to determine how he could ease her dread.

“Speak, Kagome. I will listen.”

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Kagome wasn’t sure exactly how it had happened – which was often the case when her temper got away from her – but, as if she was standing outside herself, she could hear the accusations. Although they were not without merit, she grimaced at the childish way she had reacted. *Why am I doing this?* Her mind tried to answer that internal question, but some part of her, some instinct for self-preservation

refused to examine her motives. It would have been better to talk to him, she knew that. It would have been better to explain why she was upset, rather than expecting him to guess, to know; she couldn't seem to help herself. She was a modern woman, but she understood tradition. Had a man from her time been interested, he might have acted the same. Obviously, she would have had many indications that he was serious - probably even a frank, private conversation between the two of them - before her family became involved. And the gift. It would have been a symbolic envelope of cash, or a transfer into the Shrine's fund. Not – not *that*. She was also aware of another pressure, pushing her to act without thinking. A lingering shame, an uneasiness in her own skin, even fear, which threatened to spill out again if she did not focus on something else.

Sesshomaru supported her weight easily, her finger held between two deadly claws. Her other arm was pinned between them when he reached around her, holding her tightly. The pinprick of his fingers through her leggings and into the flesh of her hip reminded her of how casually violent he could be, and how defenseless she was against him. The golden lava roiling in his eyes let her know that he was far more upset than a mere prick of her skin. He was boiling, livid that she had accused him – verbally attacked him, and only his supreme control was keeping her safe. *He is concerned for me*, the thought rang true. She knew that was why he restrained himself; that was why he sought answers from her, rather than apologies. Or blood.

“Speak, Kagome. I will listen.” The hard plates of his armor were unyielding against her chest and hips. His stance forced her back to bow slightly, tilting her face up and exposing her neck and keeping her off balance. She had lost. She recognized that. He had been wrong, yes, but she had overreacted and miscalculated and there was no opportunity for her to win the battle of wills. Some unreasonable part of her was terrified of her position, of her powerlessness before him - reminding her of another, very different youkai.

The realization pushed her fear forward again. She could not be helpless. She had to be in charge of her own future. Her destiny. Her soul and mind and body. “I am not strong enough – I *wasn't* strong enough,” she whispered. The words felt as if they were torn from her. She admitted her weakness, and it left a gaping, ragged wound of vulnerability behind. “Before – then, in the North – I couldn't do anything to change what was happening to me. What could have-” A shuddering sigh escaped her, something that barely managed not to be the frightened sob that wanted to escape. “What would have been. I need to have this now. I need to hold my own future. Sesshomaru...” In his golden eyes, behind the cool, emotionless façade he presented to the world, Kagome thought she could see understanding. “Please don't take that from me.”

“You had already accepted my offer. I would not have sent the gift to your family if that was not the case.” He spoke evenly, almost monotonously, but she could hear the confusion and reproach in his words as well.

She was left with sudden exhaustion and regret. She sagged against him, allowing his hold to accept her weight. Gracelessly, with her hands still immobile, she leaned against his spike-less shoulder. “I didn't know you – you...” she stumbled over her words, as though she had used up all of her articulation yelling at him. “I had no idea that you were thinking about that. So quickly, so soon. It was

a shock.” Her voice fell until she was whispering, “You can’t – no matter how much I wanted you to be with me, to want to be with me – you can’t make decisions for me. You can’t expect me to know your mind and agree without question. I don’t know, I mean, how could I know? What youkai or inus think marriage is like? Shouldn’t we talk about that? Shouldn’t we know what the other wants, expects, before something like this?” She was speaking so quietly, no human could have heard her, but she knew his supernatural ears were listening, “We haven’t even held hands.”

The silence in the clearing was heavy. The heat of him pressed against her front and around her waist where he held her, but the backs of her legs were cold and snow was seeping through the toes of the cheap boots she had deemed inexpensive enough to be left in the feudal era. His youki was tangible, looming over and around her, neither soothing nor oppressing, but waiting, for what, she was not sure. A chill breeze picked up, casting long, silver strands into the air to dance behind him before they settled over his shoulders and slipped across hers as well. She knew what had set off her panic – the panic she had contained with unreasonable anger. She knew that her experiences in the North had left scars, psychological damage that would take time to heal. She knew those things, but it did not make the pain of her memories - the shame of what had happened, what could have happened, and her shame and fear over anticipating the pain that Ryukostokken had promised – disappear. She sighed into his chest, wishing she could forget about everything else and go back to that night she had lain next to him and decided she wanted to be with him. It had been easier, *before*.

“I am holding your hand now.” That statement, said so calmly, made her lean back in surprise. Her eyes darted between his stoic face and the white hand that was still wrapped around hers. His claws rested on her skin; his callouses, built up from centuries of handling a sword, were just hard and rough enough to send a shiver down her spine when he squeezed her gently. She couldn’t help herself. She laughed.

Once she started, she couldn’t stop. Her wild fear leached away leaving a desperate need to make him understand and a strange out-of-body knowledge that the depth and wealth of misunderstandings that could happen between them was staggering. Great, deep gales of laughter escaped her, making her body try to double over. Sesshomaru saved her from impaling herself on his armor at the last moment, turning her in his arms and sinking to the ground with her. She curled over in his lap, tears streaming down her face and barely breathing around the near hysterical giggles that followed. One large hand smoothed over her back and she was able to, after several long minutes, take a deep breath. “That is exactly our problem,” she managed to get out, “you are holding my hand. But that is not the way I meant.” She sat up and met his eyes. Mirth curled the corners of her pink lips. His expression was as stoic as ever, but his eyes were still smoldering. He was so handsome...and so fascinatingly complex. It nearly took her breath away. She still wanted him – still wanted to try to be with him. He was worth the effort. *Surely, she bolstered her confidence, teaching Sesshomaru to communicate can’t be even half as hard as it has been with Inuyasha. And he didn’t mean to make me feel like that, she thought more soberly. No matter how arrogant, how much he thinks he knows what is best, Sesshomaru would never wish to hurt me.*

She lifted her captive fingers and he obliged by allowing her to do so. Their hands, suspended before them with his sharp claws gingerly pinching her smaller finger as if it had offended him, looked so

comical that she nearly started laughing again. She swallowed the response and said, “You see that you are holding my hand.” She looked to him for confirmation, one brow raised to encourage a response. He nodded shortly. Kagome pulled her hand away and placed their palms flat together, interlacing their fingers. She held up their clasped hands for his perusal. “I meant to hold hands for companionship...intimacy.” She barely controlled her blush, but forged on, “Not captivity.” He was quiet for a long moment, and she held her breath in anticipation. Finally, he settled her more firmly against his chest and squeezed their joined hands. A barely audible sigh blew against her hair.

“If you desire intimacy, you need only ask. I am happy to provide such.” Her mouth fell open at his cool suggestion and the trail of claws across the thin fabric of her leggings.

“It’s not – I don’t mean – “ she made a noise of frustration and pulled back, conscious that she could only do so because he allowed it –but this time not frightened of his power over her, to stare at his face. A blush burned high on her cheeks, but she wouldn’t allow herself to look away. “Marriage is a big step. There should be a lot of other things,” her voice dropped to a whisper again, this time in embarrassment, “not just sex.” She cleared her throat and ignored the predatory gleam that had sparked in his eyes. “A lot of other things should happen before two people get married.”

“Hn.” His claws had found the hem of her shirt, and he was tracing along it in a distracting way, but his eyes remained focused on hers. “Such as hand holding.”

She smiled, tentatively, “Like holding hands. Like going on dates – er, on walks, and eating together, talking.” She narrowed her eyes and spoke slowly and firmly to help him understand how important this was, “Especially about things like the possibility of getting married.”

“Mated.”

“Whatever you want to call it,” she huffed in exasperation. “The point is, that...” She swallowed convulsively, trying to remember why she had been so mad to begin with but finding it difficult when he was being so nice – when she felt so safe. He was holding her tenderly, looking at her with warm golden eyes and letting a low, soothing sound vibrate his chest. “You should have asked me first.” His fingers on her leg stilled and he allowed some distance between them. His head tilted slightly, reminding her of a quizzical dog – not that she would ever say so.

“Inuyasha said much the same,” he stated. That had her temper rising from ashes that weren’t yet cool.

“Inuyasha! You talked to him about – but not me! I-”

He cut her off with the brief press of his mouth to hers. When he pulled away, she was startled by the emotion in his expression. His eyebrows were drawn together slightly and the corners of his mouth tight – his equivalent to a plea for understanding. “I did not anticipate that your captivity would cast such a light on my actions. You are fierce, passionate, loyal, and independent, Kagome.” His next words soothed the jagged edges left in her spirit after she admitted her fear, “These are the things that I admire in you. I desire you for those qualities, and more.” He stroked their joined hands down her

cheek, and Kagome felt in that moment that there was nothing she could not forgive, nothing she could not overcome. “I am not,” he seemed to search his vocabulary before coming up with the right word, “*accustomed* to accepting the help of others. Especially not my half-brother.” She smiled, trying to encourage him to continue, and the corner of his mouth quirked up in response. “You are deserving of all the respect and honor that can be bestowed by the West. I wished to court you and adhere to tradition as strictly as possible.”

“This,” she waved her free hand between them, “isn’t exactly traditional.” She smiled, and then his entire meaning caught up with her. “Court me?”

He looked down his nose at her, his voice laced with amused condescension, “It means-”

“I *know* what it means.” Her irritation at his enjoyment in needling her washed away as quickly as it arrived. “What I do not know, is what that is all about. What happens when youkai court? Is it very different from humans? Is it very different from humans of my time?”

“In your time,” he said carefully, “there is no longer an exchange of gifts between families.”

She heard the question in his statement and answered, trying to ignore how strange it was to be having such a conversation with a youkai. With *Sesshomaru*. Trying to ignore her own conflicting feelings over the idea that he wanted to court her, to mate her. Trying not to think about what, exactly, mating entailed. Trying to contain the blush that seemed ever-ready to erupt in his presence. “Many families still give gifts, but not all. And it is symbolic. Nobody in Japan, well, nobody I know, provides actual compensation to the family of the bride.” He seemed genuinely puzzled by her statement.

“If the gift is not commensurate, the parents would have no provision for their old age. They lose a daughter that would care for them late in life. That is of particular importance among humans.” He stated the last part with an arrogance that made her grin, as if Sesshomaru had become an expert on the human condition and social norms.

“I realize that is true in this time, but not in mine. Adults save for their retirement, rather than depending entirely on their children. Although some still move in with their kids, or vice versa. Real estate in Tokyo is murder.” She regretted the statement, as she could see plainly that it had raised all sorts of off-topic questions with the daiyoukai. She should not have worried. As always, Sesshomaru was able to accept a great deal of information and still stay resolutely on task.

“Explain how the courting practice is performed in your time.” His command rang with authority, and his free hand danced up her spine to comb through her hair. The combination was as impossible to resist as it was soothing to the uncertainty that still lingered in the recesses of her mind.

“Usually, kids date some when they are in school. Ah,” she could tell that wasn’t helping him understand at all, “When humans in my time are around fifteen years old, about the age I was when I freed Inuyasha, they begin to spend time with someone of the other gender, to determine if they like each other.”

“Establishing the potential of a mate.”

She wanted to roll her eyes, but she supposed it was as close a comparison as could be made. “Yeah, I guess. Very few of those relationships end in marriage, or anything very, er, intimate. It is more like a test run, to try and figure out, ah-”

“Where everything goes,” he finished. His composure and deadpan delivery did not fool her, she could see the playful light in his eyes.

Kagome wasn’t about to allow him to get the best of her; she was never one to back down from a challenge. “Yes.” His eyes widened minutely and she felt her inner self cackling with glee. *He didn’t see that coming.* She kept pushing, “By their early twenties, most humans have had sex with one or more partners. Sometimes that person ends up being their spouse, but not always. Sex is part of serious dat- er, courting, before marriage.”

“It is common for women in your time to be intimate outside of a mating claim?” She could hear the growl in his voice, but her enjoyment of his discomfort swiftly fell away, to be replaced with excited apprehension with his next words, “I agree that such a *test run* should be incorporated into our courting. I accept your suggestion.” He smirked and his thumb dipped between their joined hands to rub teasing circles on her palm.

Her face felt hot, she knew it had to be bright red. “You, I didn’t-” she spluttered. A rumble shook his chest and she let the argument drop in favor of listening to his laughter. It was quiet and so low she felt it more than heard it, but it was there. A warm glow of happiness ignited inside her. She liked that sound. When it stopped, she had to shake herself back to reality. “In *any* case,” she cleared her throat, “a couple may then get engaged – like a promise to be married. Sometimes the girl asks the guy, but it is usually the other way around. He *asks* her – *before* they talk to their families. That is usually after a few years of courting. At the engagement party, the family exchanges *ceremonial* gifts.” She stressed the ceremonial part, but Sesshomaru focused on something entirely different.

“Several years,” he stated flatly, “is not acceptable.”

She rolled past that to finish up the description, “The gifts are usually small, symbolic. Yours was way, way, *way* over the top.” That didn’t seem to faze him, so she sighed and continued, “Engagement can last about a year, to allow time to plan the wedding. And then they are married. Although, the divorce rate has gone up in Japan, so not everybody stays married. And then the courting may start over again.”

“Divorce-” he pronounced carefully with a frown.

Kagome interrupted, pleased to turn his mockery back on him, “It means to dissolve a marriage and go your separate ways.” She couldn’t help a smirk of her own from breaking out.

“I surmised as much,” he said with a glower. “That will not be a concern.” Sesshomaru, in a fashion

that suited him as much as it was expected, brushed away legal rights, matrimonial concerns, and the experience of millions of human beings with six words and a flick of silver hair. “The schedule you have described is unacceptable.”

“Well, then what is your idea of courting?” He studied her, and she worried that he might still not answer her questions. She knew he was taciturn; she expected him to be stubborn and arrogant. She could live with that, she even - strangely, inexplicably – *liked* those things about him most of the time. But this was not something he could expect her to follow him into without explanation.

Then he began in his low, even voice to describe inuyoukai courtship. With short, clear sentences he described how, when dog demons came of age, they would often engage in feats of power and strength when they encountered another they were interested in. If the interest was reciprocated, the second youkai would give a gift to the first – as a symbol that they found the display impressive. Within one month, the two families would meet and, if the mating was agreed upon, they would exchange gifts. The gifts would be commensurate with the status of the family and the financial stress that the loss of a child would have on the home.

The male would stay with the female's family for one month. His description, although not particularly suggestive, was accompanied by caresses and a brush of his lips on her hair that made her imagine what it would be like to be secluded with him for that long. She had to force herself to concentrate on the rest of his words. If at the end of that time, the mating was still desired, the couple would exchange gifts, and their life together would begin.

Two months, she swallowed hard, *that is pretty fast*. “So, they can break up, they don’t have to mate?”

“A couple may decide at any time that they are not suited to one another, although,” his lips twitched downward, “family pressures often ensure the mating takes place regardless of any hesitation.”

“Have you ever, ah, courted anyone...before...” Her question hung in the air until he brushed his mouth across the skin of her forehead.

“No,” he said simply.

“And there isn’t any dating, or, ah...” Her blush had returned full force, but she knew she had to ask anyway. Sesshomaru was rarely so talkative, so she would take advantage. “Youkai aren’t intimate with anyone outside of courting?” Her voice squeaked on the ‘intimate’, and she could sense his amusement, but she held his gaze.

“Some youkai, not all. Inu may rut with a partner they do not intend to court. It is a common practice to relieve stress and...do a *test run*, as you said.” He must have anticipated what she was really asking, and she was thankful she didn’t have to spell it out. “If you wish to know if I have done so, the answer is yes, albeit rarely.” She wanted to shy away from him then, embarrassed and unreasonably disappointed, but his hand cupped the back of her head firmly and refused to let her. “I am more than seven hundred years old, Kagome. I have been mature for many centuries. But...” he smiled, a slow,

seductive smile that melted her brain a little and sent butterflies loose in her stomach. “I am very selective. There have been few, and none whom I can remember after seeing your flushed skin and open lips. After hearing you moan my name...no other would satisfy.” Her heart must have been near to bursting, or perhaps her blood was thundering in her veins in an eager attempt to fuel the heat pooling in her belly. If anyone else had ever said something like that to her, she would have laughed in his face and called him a smooth-talking liar. She couldn’t imagine Sesshomaru ever lying to get into a woman’s bed. He would never need to. She couldn’t imagine Sesshomaru even stretching the truth – for any reason. *He really means that.* “And you, Kagome?”

“There ah, no one...not until you.” Her eyes fluttered closed as he dipped to taste her mouth.

His lips found her jaw, and he whispered along it, “There will be no others.” He found her ear and reversed, backtracking with gentle nips and kisses to find the other ear. There he stopped and breathed deeply. His hand in her hair was still, his body tense beneath her, but she was lost in the shivery sensation of his breath on her skin. His voice was cold and unrelenting, “What other male has touched you?”

Like a bucket of water had been thrown over her, Kagome blinked, startled, “What?”

He pulled back, tipping her head so that he could lean over her further, nearly parallel to the ground. His voice was composed, but his teeth were clenched. “Another has touched you, here,” he bent quickly and ran his tongue along her cheek to her ear, catching the lobe between his fangs and lapping with the slightly rough appendage. He pulled back, and Kagome could barely focus. Between the strangely exciting anger in his eyes and the cool winter air drying the wet trail on her face, she managed to grasp that he must have smelled something on her.

Hojo, she remembered, then groaned. *Stupid Hojo*. Sesshomaru growled, and Kagome grumbled, feeling that the intimate moment between them had been broken, “I should have let Inuyasha drop him off a building years ago.” Sesshomaru gave her a hard stare, and she shrugged – as best she was able in her position, “He was pretty disappointed when I told him I was going to be living with you.”

“Who,” he demanded quietly.

“A boy from my time,” she answered. She had just begun to feel a little enjoyment in his obvious jealousy, when she suddenly realized what the inu equivalent of a jealous boyfriend would mean. Yuka’s last boyfriend had broken another boy’s nose. She scaled that reaction up in her mind for a hanyou like Inuyasha and blanched. Then she reminded herself that Sesshomaru was, if demon blood was responsible, twice as possessive as his brother. *Holy hell, thank the kami he can’t get through the well. Someone would get gutted.* “He hasn’t ever tried to do more than hold my hand or kiss me,” she assured him, and quickly understood that admission was not helping. His hand tightened on hers and he leaned closer until she could not focus on his eyes. “I don’t like him! I’ve told him so! And hey-” she frowned, suddenly wondering how he had gotten the high ground in their conversation. “If I had known you wanted to date me, I might have let him know I was already taken! So I guess there are a lot of good reasons for you to discuss things with me – instead of just making decisions!”

She was angry again. Sesshomaru was aware of the resurgence of pepper in her scent, although the dry mace scent of her fear and sour worry were thankfully absent, but he could not focus on diffusing her mood when he was struggling to reign in his own instincts. Regardless of any conversation that Kagome desired to have with him, the result was already a foregone conclusion. She would agree to mate him, because he would not accept any other outcome. Knowing why she had feared losing her independence and what expectations her upbringing had given her gave him the opportunity to alter his strategy to ensure success – but he would succeed. As he had already claimed her as his intended, both in his own mind and as tradition dictated with gifts and scent marking, his instincts were snarling for blood. Another male had touched what he claimed as his own. If he had been present when the suicidal Hojo had held her – for Sesshomaru knew she would not have accepted such behavior from someone she spoke so disparagingly about without being held still – Sesshomaru would have removed his offensive hands permanently.

She is human, he reminded himself. *Words have more meaning for her than action*. No demoness would have been surprised by his formal offer of mating. Scent-marking her with his touch, sleeping beside her, the clothing he had provided for her – he had even hunted for her when they rescued the orphaned pups – these things were obvious actions of a male that had selected an intended mate. She had not understood. Kagome needed words. He could not comprehend it; she spoke so often, about things both enormously important and ridiculously inconsequential, and yet still she needed more words. He breathed deeply, trying to quell his temper, and succeeded only in taking in her scent, which aroused him, and the traces of the human male on her. His youki lashed around him like a tangible thing, and he forced his miko to lie on the ground. Her hair spread across the snow and mokomoko swept under her to cushion her back from the cold.

“You can’t just assume, Sesshomaru! I...” His own thoughts drown out her tirade. *Magnolia. Cherry Wood. Pepper. Sour niguari melon. Sweet, spicy cinnamon*. He pressed his mouth against her neck, just below her ear. He was driven to place his teeth there, to growl and force her to submit while he replaced with his own scent the light trace of musk and nervous sweat that tainted her. He wanted to mark her. Not just to place a visual reminder of her importance to him, but to hurt her, just a bit. He wanted to make her feel a brief, painful reminder of why she should obey. To remind her that she belonged to him. He wanted to soothe that pain with his tongue and hands. To make her forget about any other males that might try to capture her interest. He wanted to pleasure her and have her call out his name and know that she knew he was responsible for her – her safety, her needs, *her wants*.

Her wants, her fears, were what held him back. Drawing blood would reprimand an inuyoukai female; it would likely frighten and anger Kagome. His arm tightened around her, holding her still while he struggled not to press her down with his weight. She was too fragile, her body not made to withstand such displays. He squeezed their joined hands and pulled her arm above her head. Sesshomaru’s body felt hot and heavy, his muscles tensed and ready to pounce. “Do not move.” His youki enforced the command, coating her skin and holding her still. Her reiki rose to meet him - vigilant, but not yet

fighting; it sparked against him in small, gratifying shocks. Her voice faded away, and he held his breath while he licked. Once. Twice. A third time along her jaw to her earlobe and around the shell of her ear. When he could taste nothing but *his* miko, he rested, finally allowing her pure scent to fill his lungs.

“Sesshomaru?” She questioned. The sour melon worry had grown. He did not wish to frighten her, to concern her. Such emotions were counterproductive to his goals, and knowing that she was still hurting, in her mind and soul, from her captivity he had no desire to have her fear him. *She will not understand.* He held her for a moment longer, selfishly avoiding her gaze and questions, before leveraging his weight off of her and onto an elbow. The bulk of his youki receded slowly, but wisps still twined across her skin, caressing her. He set aside his reluctance. It was unavoidable.

He would have to explain himself.

Her dark brows were drawn together, her lush mouth open to express concern, which he forestalled. “It is in my nature to protect. To possess.” She looked like she would argue, so he continued quickly, “I know that this is not how things are done in your time. You have said as much.” He stared into her eyes, trying to impress upon her that he was fighting himself for her benefit. “I am attempting to take your nature into consideration, Kagome.”

Her dark blue gaze searched him silently, and then she said something he did not expect, “How...how much more is there?” He blinked, and she seemed to sense his confusion, as she continued, “If this,” she nodded her chin to indicate their position and her imprisonment beneath him, “is you holding back, how much more is there?”

His youki surged forward at her apparent invitation, and he barely kept it in check. “Do not say such things,” he ground out, “unless you mean for me to show you.”

“Tell me first,” she countered. Her scent was anxious, but also excited. Oranges and traces of cinnamon and fading pepper whet his appetite for her. He could not ignore her request, even though he did not think she would be pleased. He described how he wanted to find the weak human, Hojo, and eviscerate him. Sesshomaru could almost feel the satisfaction that should have been his as he described how he would have used his acid to cauterize the welp’s wounds, so that he would not bleed to death, but be able to hear the daiyoukai’s promise to remove his eyes as well as any other part that touched *his* miko. He stated that he would have wanted to mark her there, where the assault on his female had occurred, so the boy could watch, but he would have held himself back until they were alone so that no one else would see her bare flesh.

And she would have been bare. Within moments. He told her how he would have rent her clothing; it would never be worn by her again as another had touched it. He would have removed all traces of the boy’s scent. With his hands, with his lips and tongue, he would have covered her with his scent – so that only she and he remained. Then he would have impressed upon her to whom she belonged, because she was his – his miko, his intended mate.

Reprimands with teeth and fangs and the barest hint of blood.

Soothing comfort with touches, caresses, kisses.

Desire. Want. Bringing his name to her lips in a cry of concupiscence so deeply felt, so passionate, that she forgot all others. So that she would know no other could bring her to the same peak.

He became silent, and the weight of his desires fell on them both. His lower body, pressed lightly against hers, ached where his armor restrained him. His muscles were tense and nearly shaking under the iron bands he had placed on himself. The scents around them - her arousal and his own - were so strong that he was distantly concerned he would not notice an enemy if it approached. Her eyes were wide, the black centers large – only a thin rim of blue surrounded them. Her lips were parted. The pink skin was full and recently wet – from his tongue or hers he was not sure. *This is not the time nor the place*, he sternly reminded himself. He wanted to do all of the things he had described, but she needed time. He would not wait years as humans were wont to where she was from; the idea was infuriating and ludicrous – but he knew she would not be ready to receive him, to finish the courting process, in another month as inuyoukai tradition dictated. He breathed deeply, forcing the air in and out of his lungs smoothly rather than lingering on the taste of her excitement. It did not soften his ardor.

“How- how about, I mean, can you do just *some* of - of that?”

His blood froze in his veins at her words, at the implication that she would accept his instincts, then pounded even harder through his body. Every inch of his skin came alive, tense and waiting for her to confirm what he wanted to hear.

She made a strange, laughing sound, “Obviously not maiming, ew, and if you could use the well and do that, the police would try to arrest you and then you'd want to melt something and – well,” she chuckled again. “Not that part. But,” her eyes met his and her amusement faded. She swallowed, wetting her lips again with the tip of a pink tongue and splitting his thoughts between her words, and a myriad of possibilities for that little muscle. His fundoshi was painfully tight, his cock hard and heavy with need. “As long as you understand...this isn't me saying yes to the mating...and I can still change my mind. If you can promise that this is still my decision, then, ah...” Her cheeks flushed becomingly, and spicy sweet citrus filled the air. “I think,” her voice fell into a husky whisper, “I'd like you to, to...exercise your instincts.” His youki surged and mokomoko swelled and heaved against her, pushing her closer to him.

She whispered suggestively, “We could do a test run.”

Chapter 32: Shifting Pieces

Arashi took his time after he left his meeting with the raccoon dog. Hachi's story had been long, winding, and as informative as it was thought-provoking. The Shikon Miko. The Miko no Mao. They were definitively one in the same. Hachi could not confirm it, but his descriptions of the woman were all Arashi needed to settle any doubts he had. A human girl with dark wavy hair and eyes too blue to belong to a mortal. A power unmatched by any other, save perhaps Midoriko, and Hachi expressed his opinion that the young miko would surpass even the priestess of legend one day.

One day. Arashi felt that day may have come and gone and the miko was still growing in power. He had a few other sources to explore, but it was merely formality to ensure no stone was left unturned. *A woman who sees not race, nor class, nor even past transgressions,* he mused. The human he had kidnapped and delivered to the Northern Lord was a rare spiritual power that could chart new destinies for those around her – perhaps even the world. Like a pebble dropped in a still pond, the ripples of her actions were felt far and wide. Creatures who had never met her, would never meet her, had been transformed by her travels.

He paused outside a human village, one sometimes frequented by kitsune who lived in a school nearby. He considered all his options, moves and counter-moves, while he eavesdropped on the women gathering at a frigid stream bed to launder their clothes. Their talk began with speculation on rumors of raids in the north. They spoke of a disease and a traveler who brought them word to quarantine any who showed signs of illness. They were not afraid, and Arashi found that most interesting. Ryukostokken had designed his plans around fear, shadows, and intimidation. These human women, the weakest and most vulnerable to such tactics, knew nothing of the dragons or the fear of impending pain and death.

“Are you certain?” A young woman, barely old enough to marry, stopped her work to stare at a snub-nosed girl who wore a superior expression.

“I wouldn’t tell tales,” she replied, and then belied her own statement. “The headman was dining with my father when the traveler arrived. He said Miroku-sama sent him, and others, out to all of the villages with the same message.” The woman frowned when she was interrupted by several heartfelt sighs of ‘Miroku-sama’ and ‘houshi-sama’. One female even wondered aloud if he still needed someone to bear his children. Arashi tasted the varying degrees of lust from the women. Apparently Hachi had taught his master more than sutras and bindings. The raccoon dog’s lecherous nature had rubbed off on the monk. “In any case,” the woman continued sharply, “the headman was warned that a disease was moving south, and that we should use the special medicine sent by Miroku-sama if any villages nearby reported sickness.”

The hanyou was surprised by that information. *So, he thought, the miko has given a cure to her friends. It is no wonder the pox did not spread as Ryukostokken anticipated. Not only spiritually powerful, but intelligent as well.* Suppositions on the health and marital status of Miroku and the nature of the sickness that had never come all ground to a halt as another woman raced over a hill to the stream. Her

panting breath was visible in the winter air, her eyes were wide with a fearful sort of excitement.

“You have to come, quickly! A demon has arrived!” The women abandoned their washing to return to the village. Arashi followed them silently, using his youki and dull clothing to remain hidden in the trees that skirted the edges of fields and huts. A demon, a horse youkai by the scent that met Arashi’s outstretched tongue, was surrounded by a throng of villagers. They kept their distance, but the crowd was too dense for Arashi to make out what lay on the ground at the horse’s feet. It left the coppery taste of blood in the air.

“Hear me, humans!” The youkai’s voice boomed out, silencing whispers and stilling shifting feet. “A message from the Saidai Mao! There is no price great enough to harm what is his! Those who make threats, will be repaid doubly. Those who offer rewards, will suffer this fate ten-fold!” He kicked at something on the ground, and a raspy sound, like stone flaking away from a mountain, grated against the ears of those present and bespoke of unimaginable pain.

The headman, aged and stooped, stepped forward and spoke quietly. His voice was steady and without a hint of the fear and disgust that showed on the faces of other villagers. “I have heard that title, long ago.” His serious tone caught the interest of both Arashi and the horse youkai. “What threat exists to Sesshomaru-sama that cannot be ended with a single strike of his whip?”

“The Saidai Mao protects what is his – his pack. The West. His allies.”

“We are not in the West,” the headman responded slowly. His face was heavily lined, but his eyes were sharp and clear. “Are we to be protected, or should we prepare for his wrath?”

“Those that wish to live peaceably. Those that do not covet the lands and possessions of another. Those that have aided his allies. Those that use their minds and mouths before their weapons.” The horse youkai paused, and Arashi followed his gaze to a mature woman, dressed in miko garb, that stood behind the headman. She had no scent of power about her, but she carried implements of healing. “Those that aided the Shikon Miko-” whispers broke out again, but the horse spoke over them, “these shall be protected. Choose to live protected, and prosper by your own hands – or listen to those who offer rewards for blood, and die amid your illicit wealth.” The horse bent down, and when he was visible to Arashi again he held several lengths of rope in his hands.

The villagers stepped hastily out of his way and the youkai ran south from the village, picking up speed and dragging his creaking, crusted burden behind him. Arashi spent several minutes staring after the messenger and the trail of blood left behind him.

“Bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

Arashi started, but managed to turn his face calmly to the young woman standing beneath him. She did not look up, but leaned casually against the tree and kept her eyes on the red-streaked dirt and snow.

“Actions speak loudly,” he replied softly. He watched the woman carefully, not recognizing her face,

but finding something familiar in her aura. “Aina, do you not have students to concern you?”

She smiled, and ignored his question, pointing instead to the gore left in the wake of the horse and his cargo. “Action is one thing,” she said. She took long strides and retrieved something small from the quickly freezing liquid that stained the path. “Spectacles are another, and I am most familiar with the latter.” She picked her way through the snow to stand under the tree again, and held up her hand. Pinched between two fingers was a ball the size of a robin’s egg, crusted in dried browns and wet reds. He met her eyes, which swirled, first brown, then green as her disguise began to fall. One fang fell over her lip and she grinned, calling him by the false name he had given her long ago, “Genji, tell me you have not heard the offers from the North and thought to fill your sleeves with pearls.”

“No, Aina, I have far too much employment as it is. I have no time to wash my payment after it has been stitched under my skin.” She smiled again, and Arashi, had he not been a long-time observer of others, might have missed the relief and fear that washed across her features. He had need of new pieces for his shogi board, and Aina enjoyed a game more than anyone else he knew – even if she could never be allowed to know the entire strategy. “Invite me for tea, little Aina,” he coaxed. She snorted, but her smile remained. “I have another task that may interest you. A role that only a performer of skill beyond compare could master.”

She quirked one brow and nodded, and he jumped lightly out of his tree. “I have not been little for a least a century, Genji,” she said dryly. “I trust there will be no pearls involved, no breaching of the protection of the Western Palace?”

Arashi followed her, watching the tips of her red tails swish across the ground from under her kimono. “No pearls,” he confirmed. “And you are intimately aware that I prefer infiltration over breaching.” Her laughter was sultry and curious at the same time, and echoed against the trees. They left the cold winter afternoon behind, with only the silent trees to consider their conversation.

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Inuyasha arrived at the make-shift camp sweaty, tired, and still cross with himself for having given in to the urge to help his brother. *Bastard*, he told himself, but cursing the daiyoukai didn’t help his mood. Sango met him at the edge of the woods, her boomerang slung over her shoulder. Her eyes were serious and her mouth set in a firm line. She smelled of supple leather, oil for her weapon, rice soup, and Kagome’s future soap. She smelled of camellias and hemlock. She smelled determined, healthy, and had the damp scent of marimo moss that, on her, he always associated with distraction and anxiety.

“Is Kagome okay?”

Inuyasha wanted to roll his eyes. *As if I’d be here if the wench was in trouble*. That thought made him snort. Sesshomaru was going to be the one in trouble when Kagome figured out what was going on. He *almost* wished he could watch it. “About time she sat somebody else,” he mumbled.

“What?” Sango was frowning, puzzled, and Inuyasha realized he had spoken aloud.

He scowled to cover his embarrassment. "She's fine. Sesshomaru is going to take her back to the West. I was gonna send you with her, but since you don't have to, you should..." he sniffed, frowning. There was something else about Sango that smelled different, but he couldn't quite figure it out. She looked ready to question him, but Miroku came up behind her, forestalling any inquiries.

"Is Kagome-san alright?"

"Keh, the wench is fine already. Stop askin'!" Soldiers nearby - some remnants of Kuren's diminished troops, others powerful allies they had met during the quest for the Shikon – turned curious eyes toward him. He lowered his voice, "She's fine. Look, we need to get moving. Monk-" Inuyasha snarled and grabbed one purple sleeve before Miroku could connect with his unsuspecting target. If the lecher was knocked unconscious by Hiraikotsu, they would be delayed at least an hour. "Keep your curse to yourself, and go get the maps. I got a new idea." Miroku smiled and nodded as though he had not been caught about to fondle his wife, and made his way to the bag that contained his writing implements and various maps and scrolls.

"What are you up to, Inuyasha?" Sango's question lacked the suspicion most humans would have used when they spoke to him. *Would have*. Before Kagome. Before the hunt for the Shikon and the death of Naraku. Because of the clumsy, cheerful little miko he had friends that were proud to fight by his side. He had allies - humans and demons - that respected him. Because of Kagome, he had a brother that was willing to claim him as family. He had a pack. Inuyasha had to shake his head and take several deep breaths to clear the tightness that suddenly gripped his chest. *I ain't got time to get all mushy*, he reprimanded himself. Sango's strange scent bugged him, but her sharp hemlock was a reminder of his responsibilities.

"We gotta take the offensive," he replied.

"Because we so often run away from a fight?" Sango asked dryly. One dark eyebrow arched under her bangs and she leaned against her weapon.

"Nah. Not literally."

"Oooo, my friend," Miroku trotted up to the hanyou, a wide smile on his face and scrolls under his arm, "Perhaps this new association with your brother has truly opened your mind. Such an excellent vocabulary choice!"

"Shut it," Inuyasha growled. He snatched away the maps and stomped to the nearest group of fighters. With a quick bark, he scattered them and claimed the log they had been seated on to lay out his scrolls. "We were doin' good, killin' those scaly bastards up in the mountains. But it was small time work."

"It is time-consuming to destroy an army one scout at a time," Sango murmured thoughtfully. Inuyasha was grateful for her experience in battle at that moment. What he knew of fighting had been learned at the sharp edge of a sword. The slayer, however, had been trained from an early age both in practical

combat and in strategy. He valued her advice.

“More like ten at a time, but yeah. We were tryin’ to keep things quiet and take ‘em by surprise.”

“That worked well,” Miroku noted. “But the one that got away from Kouga-san and yourself before the new moon will have reported to his superiors. Even if they don’t know who they are fighting, the Northern forces will be wary of an unknown enemy. They will not be caught easily in an ambush, nor in such small numbers.” The monk turned narrowed eyes on his friend, and Inuyasha almost smiled at the roguish glint he saw there. “We can’t pursue them in force without risking your identity.”

“Let ‘em find out.”

“Inuyasha!” Sango sounded surprised, but also curious. “We were supposed to be harassing their flank and gaining information. This isn’t a good position, or nearly enough warriors, to fight the whole Northern army. Surely you don’t mean to taunt them into attacking us instead of the West?” Inuyasha remained silent, staring at the map below him and slowly tracing a path from his position, up the eastern coast, into an ideal location for what he had in mind. The shell of an ancient volcano protected a valley deep in the mountains. It was secluded and easily defended, but difficult to stage an attack from. He didn’t like the idea of even giving an enemy the impression that they had the upper hand, but he understood the necessity.

“No, my love,” Miroku answered her slowly. “Our friend is thinking far too deviously for that. Aren’t you, Inuyasha?”

“If anyone would recognize a devious plan, it’s you, pervert,” Sango muttered.

“I ain’t goin’ up there to get everyone killed. And it ain’t *my* plan, exactly.” He took a deep breath, scowling at the strangely floral scent that was buried under Sango’s smell and trying not to let it distract him. “Sesshomaru gave me some advice, and it got me thinking-”

“Your brother got you to use your brain?” Miroku whistled. “That must have been some advice.”

Inuyasha grunted and slapped the monk on the back of his head. “It got me thinkin’ that it is a lot easier to overhear somebody talkin’ if you can sit at the door, rather than in a tree in the yard.”

Miroku rubbed his head, hissing at the throbbing pain that indicated a lump was certainly forming. “I am afraid I do not follow you, my friend.”

“Oh, Inuyasha,” Sango breathed. She bent over the map as well, tracing the same path his claws had followed. “How did I not think of it? ‘We cannot enter into alliances until we are acquainted with the designs of our neighbors’,” she quoted.

Miroku frowned. “I am not certain how that particular war strategy from the mainland applies here, Sango-kasan.”

Inuyasha had never heard the proverb she quoted, so he glanced between the couple, one on either side of him. Miroku looked confused, while Sango stared at the map with a smile of dawning comprehension. She replied to her husband, “We aren’t the ones wanting an alliance, houshi. That bloodthirsty dragon is. Inuyasha wants to get close to the dragon, so he’s going to pretend to be interested in an alliance with him, right, Inuyasha?”

“Keh.” He let the scroll roll up against Sango’s hand and stuffed his arms into his sleeves. He bent his head to hide the satisfied smile that threatened to erupt at her tone of admiration.

“What on earth did Sesshomaru tell you that made you think of such a thing?” Miroku’s incredulity chipped off some of the hanyou’s good mood. He mumbled a response, and pushed the scrolls into the monk’s hands, shoving him towards his bags.

“What was that?” Sango asked.

Miroku obligingly began to walk away, but he grinned over his shoulder. Both males knew what Inuyasha had said, and that he wasn’t eager to repeat it. “He said that it would be impossible for someone like Ryukostokken to believe that after two centuries of sibling warfare Sesshomaru would accept such a senseless, impudent vagrant as a trusted ally,” the monk paraphrased. It was enough for Miroku to break into laughter, which trailed behind him as he walked through the camp drawing the stares of many demons.

“It wasn’t a very nice thing to say,” Sango began. Inuyasha knew she intended to comfort him, but he could clearly see the smile twitching the corners of her mouth.

“Whatever. At least I don’t have ice in my veins like that bastard.” He waved the matter away, hoping his blush would follow and changed the topic, “We should leave at dark. One of you should take Kirara back to Edo and...” Another inhale had him losing his train of thought. There was nothing a dog demon hated more than a scent he couldn’t place. Swiftly, Inuyasha cataloged the usual smells of the forest. *Frozen earth. Pine and juniper. Clean snow.* The rotting carcass of a rodent to his left and the raw, bloody smell of talons on the carrion bird that circled overhead. The camp scents were familiar as well. *Charred wood. Fresh meat. Steel and sweat.* Demons - birds, monkeys, neko, and even a kitsune. The scent of Miroku was faint on his sleeve and trailed away from the puddle of smells the monk had left behind. *Lotus. Charcoal. Sharp ink. Golden honeyed amusement.* Sango stood silent and waiting on his left. *Camilla. Hemlock. Renkon. The leathery smell of fresh teak.*

His eyes widened. *Renkon.* That was the strange smell that had been bothering him. The young shoots of the lotus plant. Stress and embarrassment were quickly followed by excited happiness. Inuyasha crushed the germ of joy the scent and its meaning brought on and forced an outraged irritation in its place. “Oi,” His loud exclamation attracted attention, and Inuyasha quickly lowered his voice. “What the hell do you think you’re doin’? You shoulda said something and I would have found somebody else to help train these idiots. And, hey...” He frowned, trying not to feel hurt, but not quite managing it, “How come Miroku didn’t say nothing’?”

Sango stared at him, her brown eyes wide and her mouth slightly open in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You...you know...with the...” He found he couldn’t say it plainly, and so instead gestured with his claws and swiftly turned his head away. From the corner of his eye he could see her. A frown deepened on her face and she glanced from his hand, to his face, to her own body and back again. When she opened her mouth, ready to ask him for an explanation, Inuyasha blurted out, “Why didn’t you say you are going to have a baby?”

Chapter 33: A Qualifying Heat

“I think I'd like you to exercise your instincts. We could do a test run.” Kagome held her breath, waiting to see how Sesshomaru would react and fighting the blush that was rising on her cheeks. Instead of kissing her, of holding her close and doing any of the deliciously naughty things that she had imagined, he stood gracefully. Without saying anything, he set her on her feet, steadied her, and moved away. Mocomoko remained wrapped around her, keeping her warm, but Kagome watched in growing confusion and embarrassment as he picked up her bag from where she had dropped it.

His back to her, he collected her neatly folded kimono and tucked it into the bag. The embarrassment that had flushed her face was swiftly turning to mortification. She had been stupid – absolutely stupid. Asking him to make out with her in an open field. They were in the middle of a plague. A war was looming. *And I just refused to mate him. He must think I am crazy. Or a slut. A crazy slut*, she thought with growing humiliation.

Self-recrimination overwhelmed her and she squeezed her eyes shut. Her emotions had been on a roller coaster for days, and then this little rejection – a tiny rebuff – had her rethinking every decision all over again. She was angry with herself for saying anything. Disappointed that he wasn't more eager to take advantage. Angry with him for just moving on – preparing to leave as though nothing had happened when he could have said *something, anything. Don't let me just stand here! I-*

“Kagome.” He breathed her name against her face and her eyes opened of their own accord to find him standing only a few inches away. She was forced to tilt her head far back to meet his gaze. The act was painful as she dreaded seeing condescension – or worse, blankness – in his expression. What she found made her speechless. His jaw was iron; locked hard as though he feared what he would say or do with his mouth if he allowed it free reign. His eyes - *sweet mother of pearl, his eyes* – were red. Not the blood-soaked fury that she had seen there before in the midst of battle, but instead a ruby that burned her, that asked – demanded – that she accept his heat and burn with him. “Cease your foolish thoughts.”

She opened her mouth to argue, to tell him she wasn't foolish, to take back what she had said, maybe even to beg him to touch her, but he swallowed whatever words she would have spoken. His lips were narrow but unbelievably soft and Kagome could not help but lean into him. His tongue entered her mouth, not sneaking between her lips as he had done before, but thrusting, boldly. He swept into the recesses and circled her tongue with his – urging her to participate but not giving her the opportunity. He controlled the force and tempo of the kiss just as he controlled their position. Mocomoko pressed her against him and one arm snaked around her back. The ridges of his armor were uncomfortable, but also exciting. The pressure felt good, felt agonizing on her lower belly and thighs. She wanted to move against him, wanted to gain a better angle to redirect that pressure right where she needed it most, but his tight hold would not allow it.

Kagome was almost oblivious to cold air swirling around her legs as she moaned into his mouth. She shifted and clenched ineffectually at his sleeves, but he responded only with a low growl and a none-too-gentle nip at her lower lip. For a moment, she thought he broke the skin, and then his tongue was

on her mouth again, hot and sure and tasting of cloves and copper. The hand at her back squeezed her shoulder before pulling lower in a hard, smoothing motion that soothed her muscles and sent a shiver down her spine at the same time. Claws pricked through the thin cotton of her shirt to drum across the skin of her ribs. The tickling, teasing sensation caused her breasts to tighten and feel suddenly heavier.

She tried to use her tongue. She tried to give back as good as she got but he would not allow it. He growled again and nipped at that muscle, making her gasp and pull back or risk being bitten. Instead of following, he pulled her lower lip into his mouth, sucking not quite hard enough to hurt, but enough to find a direct connection between the soft flesh of her mouth and the bundle of nerves between her legs. Kagome moaned again, giving in to his dominance and letting her head fall back, trusting him to keep her safe. She felt boneless and overwhelmed. He was everywhere. Around her, inside her mouth, pressing against her and almost crushing her with the force of his interest.

She didn't have room to breathe. She didn't have room for anything – not worry, shame, anger, or embarrassment – only him. There was only the feel of his claws on her skin, his breath in her mouth, the bruising pressure of his lips on hers. When he finally lifted his head she felt dazed, drugged, and incapable of thought except for the wild observation that he had somehow moved them into the forest and the painful loss of his heat on her mouth.

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Sesshomaru had known his control was hanging by a thread. She offered herself to him – offered him a small taste of what he already considered his and had been denying himself out of courtesy to her. She had been gone from his side for too long; and before that, taken from him against her will. Then she listened to his desire, his need, the dark call of his instincts to take her, make her his, make her submit, to pleasure her, and she agreed.

Only so far. No further.

It was torture. He was sure, or would have been if he did not know without any room for doubt that she was incapable of deception or guile – at least where he was concerned, that she did not know what she was asking of him. Her suggestion, to fulfill *some* of his needs, but not all, was a dark thrill to his lust. Something that could easily push him over the razor thin edge of reason. He would take everything she would offer, but he could not allow himself any more than that.

He had taken a moment to compose himself. Sesshomaru breathed deeply, slowly, while he collected her things and tried to think clearly. He needed to temper the expectations of his beast, of himself, because he knew he could not take her. She wanted intimacy, she would submit, but he could not spend himself in her body and mark her as his mate. It was what he wanted. More than anything in his long life, at that moment he wanted to strip her and enter her, to hear her scream his name in a pleasure that bordered on pain and taste her blood in his mouth. Smell her excitement, her submission and her power. He wanted to bend *his* female to his flesh and his will. But he could not go that far.

He kissed her. It was intended to distract her from thoughts of anxiety while he moved them to a more

private location, but instead he found himself nearly overcome by an inferno of lust. She tasted sweet. *Sugared citrus. Fresh flowers. Faint mint.* He plundered her, diving into her mouth to capture every drop of her essence and he became so engaged in the feel of it he almost forgot to hold on to her as his cloud formed beneath their feet.

And then her flesh was under his hand. The sleek muscles of her back and the delicate skin over her ribs. His claws sank through her clothing like Bakusaiga through silk and he barely held himself back from hurting her. Her tongue reached out to his and he reacted before he could stop himself. He bit her, accepting nothing less than her complete surrender and easily gaining it. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he had been too rough, too *youkai*, but he could not stop himself. His saliva would help seal the wound, and it had not been overly deep, but the taste of her blood mixed in the back of his mouth with the scent of her capitulation and he growled in triumph.

They landed near a dense copse of young trees and he carried her into the shelter. He dropped her bag and pulled her lower lip into his mouth. She was soft, pliant, and it called to his instincts. He barely restrained himself biting her again, harder. From sliding his mouth to the pulse in her neck and clamping his jaws around the beat of her heart. She was his, she would know it, but he could not treat her as a *youkai*. He had to soften his instincts, dull the edge of his desire before he injured her or drove her away.

He released her mouth and pulled back. The sight of her was nearly enough to break the tenuous hold he maintained on rational thought. Heavy-lidded and dark with desire, the blue of her eyes was glazed and nearly swallowed by the black pupils. *Her mouth.* Sesshomaru had to close his eyes for a moment and force the Kagome-scented air out of his lungs to think clearly. When he opened them again, it was in time to see the tip of her tongue dart out to trace the obvious puncture mark on her lower lip. It was not bleeding, *inuyoukai* healing properties had seen to that, but the flesh around it had swollen in response and glistened wetly. He was not certain if he could still taste her coppery sweet blood, or if it had been seared into his memory. He tore his gaze away to prevent him from taking her mouth again. Her cheeks were flushed dark pink – the color trailing down her neck and creating an arrow for his eyes that drew to a point between her collarbones and led to her heaving chest.

Cinnamon. She was eager for him. *Satsuma oranges.* His actions, perhaps even his roughness, excited her. *Heavy, hot gardenias. Magnolias. Cherry wood. The lingering faint trace of carnations.*

She trusted him. He recognized it in her scent and that cooled the fires that were threatening to overwhelm his judgment. He was overreacting. She had done nothing wrong. The human pup that had touched her had done so without her consent; he had not hurt or shamed her. He would never touch her again. *There is no cause to punish my intended, only reprimand. There is no reason to rush to complete the courting ritual, only to allow us both to seek pleasure.*

Why does my behavior not obey my thought?

With sudden, stark understanding the *daiyoukai* knew that he was wrong. Entirely, utterly wrong. Not only did Kagome not deserve his treatment, but he was displaying his dominance for the wrong reason. When he had found her, falling into the ocean after her escape from the North. When she had lain in his

arms, shivering and staving off fear and self-disgust as he warmed her. When they had returned to the castle only to be required to leave again quickly and he was forced to hand her safety over to another. At those times he had wanted to reassert his claim over her, to secure her willing obedience and soothe the beast inside himself with the knowledge that she belonged to him. That she knew she belonged to him – and that she would never again be held by another. He had denied himself so thoroughly that until she returned and innocently offered herself, Sesshomaru had not been cognizant of the strength of his need.

He had been frightened when he lost her.

Sesshomaru ran his hands down her back to grasp her hips and pressed a light kiss to her forehead. Kagome had been, was still, deeply affected by her captivity. He understood her reaction and was committed to soothing her fears and giving her strength of her own – and all of his she would accept – to banish those fears permanently. However, he was not prepared to deal with the turmoil it had stirred in him. She had been taken from him. Easily. Quietly. She had been taken and could have been lost to him forever. Sesshomaru had to be truthful with himself: the thought that it could happen again, with a far blacker outcome, was enough to send him into a snarling, senseless fury of hurt and terror. *She deserves more.*

The daiyoukai was not accustomed to dealing with emotions at all, much less deep, wild feelings within himself. He would have to find a way, however. He could not use Kagome, would not abuse her to soothe his irrational needs. She deserved more. He had to either overcome this new weakness, this fear, or find a way to manage it.

“Sesshomaru?” Her voice was thick and had a burr caused by his rough treatment. She did not smell of fear or hurt, but he knew he could have caused either or both – had been moments away from damaging her. He forced himself to pull back far enough to meet her eyes.

“I apologize,” he said simply.

She blinked, most of the haze of passion fading, and opened and closed her mouth several times before finally working out, “What?”

He ground his teeth together, reluctant to repeat himself but refusing to allow cowardice to dictate his actions. “This One apologizes for causing you pain.”

“You didn’t...” She scowled, “now don’t start that ‘This One’ crap again. You don’t get to be all distant and lordly with me after all of – of – of this.” She gestured vaguely with her chin between the two of them and her cheeks burned brighter.

“I intended only to show respect and my sincerity.” Sesshomaru would have smiled at her sudden umbrage – only Kagome could berate him while her hands were still fisted from passion in his sleeves – but he needed her to understand that he had been wrong. He. Sesshomaru. The Killing Perfection. The Saidai Mao had abused her trust, acted dishonorably, and required her forgiveness. It was galling. There was no other that could have made him admit as much. No other for whom he felt so deeply that he would act that way.

“You respect me?” Her mouth hung open in a perfect, red circle. Had it been anyone else, he would have been baffled by their ability to focus on the completely inconsequential and wrong words. “I...Sesshomaru...” She blinked, a long, slow sweep of dark lashes against pale skin. When blue eyes met his again, the warmth in her gaze astounded him. “Thank you.” Tears began to gather and the faint scent of salt and camphor was nearly drown out by light carnations. “That is just – you're so...I mean...Sesshomaru!”

She threw her arms around his neck, heedless of his armor. Only youkai reflexes allowed him to shift her to the side before she lanced herself on his shoulder spike. Sesshomaru could not stop the furrow of confusion that drew his brows together. Heavy, molten lust still pooled in his belly and hardened his member. The taste of her mouth and her blood lingered on his tongue. A twinge of disgrace still pulled on his honor. All of that, and this woman. His woman – his miko – was crying into his neck and smelling of something deeper than happiness.

“You are,” he paused, unsure of how to explain his confusion without upsetting her again. “You are most changeable, Kagome.”

“Me?” She laughed. The sound was light and eased the knot of tension in his chest. “A girl has a right to change her mood, Sesshomaru. But what is your excuse? You run hot and cold and here I am, just waiting for you to kiss me.” Her eyes sparkled with mirth and unshed tears. With her hands still clasped behind his neck, she tugged, pulling one foot off the ground to hook her thigh over his hip. The thoroughly confused, thoroughly aroused youkai was extremely conscious of his hands gripping her thighs and the thin material that separated his skin from hers. His interest, banked by the concern that he had hurt her, rose again.

He tugged her closer, helping her to grind her core against a ridge in his armor and drawing a gasp of surprise from her lips and a burst of sweet cinnamon that mixed with the deliciously salty musk from between her legs. Her mouth drew closer to his, and his need to lay his honor in her hands was swiftly being overcome by desire. He had offered his apology; whether she accepted it or not, understood it or not, agreed with it or not, that was out of his control. He took only one more moment to attempt to keep himself in check and to convince her of his sincerity, “You must say something, if I go too far.” She did not answer, but pressed her lips to his, and Sesshomaru did not spend any more considerations on how a small human woman – young and guileless and ignorant of her power – had so completely destroyed his control.

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Kagome wanted to grin. She wanted to throw back her head and laugh. More than anything, she wanted to kiss him. Sesshomaru. He desired her. He worried about hurting her. He respected her. It wasn't love. She hadn't thought it would be – hadn't expected Sesshomaru of all people to declare his love for her. She would have been shocked – suspicious even – if he had. Nothing could change the nature of the reserved, cool daiyoukai so quickly. Certainly not her.

However. She smiled again and then nearly moaned as he helped her get closer – grinding her hips against him. Respect was perhaps the highest feeling that Sesshomaru had ever admitted for anyone. He would never be able to love someone he did not respect, she was sure. And she felt the same way about him. She respected him – his loyalty, his honor, his dedication to his role as a leader. She worried for his safety. She desired him. *Holy hell.* If Kagome desired him any more she would probably

spontaneously combust.

“You must say something, if I go too far.” His command had a tiny plea buried inside it, but still Kagome heard it and melted a little more. He thought he would lose his control with her. He thought she was *capable* of making him lose his control. The power went straight to her head and made her nearly dizzy. Between that and the blood that had left her brain to pool somewhere much lower, Kagome wasn't capable of rational thought.

She pressed her lips to his and sighed into his mouth, “I could love you.” As soon as the words were spoken, she forgot them. He shifted his weight and the seam of his armor pressed against a slightly different place. She moaned. His tongue slid across her lips, tugging slightly at the abused skin where he had bitten her. A twinge of soreness was drowned in a surge of need as his lips found her jaw, then her neck. He placed hot kisses on her throat and licked at the place where her pulse fluttered wildly. The pressure – faintly rasping – of his tongue was followed by a suction that forced her to close her eyes and moan. It felt so good. Jolts of electricity sparked across her skin in random directions, all centered on his connection to her. Reflexively, she squeezed her legs and arms, pulling him tighter.

The movement nearly stabbed her with his armor. She frowned, the uncomfortable press of his spike against her shoulder distracting her from the heavenly sensation of his hot palms sliding under her ass. She let go of his sleeve and wormed her fingers under the edges of his shoulder piece. She found the ties, but her fingers felt dumb and useless when he nipped at her flesh. Sharp teeth grazed her skin and sent liquid heat roiling through her to crash against his plate covered body. “Take it off,” she breathed. He didn't respond immediately, and she worried that he didn't understand, so she tugged at the confounding straps that held his armor together. “Mmmm, Sesshomaru,” she mumbled. He lifted her higher, gripping her ass and kneading the muscles there until she was ready to melt in his hands. His mouth left her neck – she was certain she would have a massive hickey but she could not find it in her to care as he left a burning path of kisses across her collarbone and into the vee of her cleavage. “Take it off,” she managed to gasp out.

The upper swell of her left breast was pulled against his teeth as he sucked gently and then drew circles on her flesh with his tongue. “Untie the pauldron,” he murmured against her skin. When she did not immediately obey, he nipped at her and swept his talented, teasing muscle under the edge of her tank top and bra to ghost against her nipple. She was aching. Everywhere. Every inch of her was throbbing with need. It centered in pulsing, hot ripples on her hard nipple and the empty spot between her legs that was weeping for his touch. “There is only one loose end. Pull.” He emphasized his command by nosing aside her shirt and finding the hardened bud of her breast through the thin cotton lace of her bra. His mouth latched on and he sucked.

Kagome saw stars.

Every fiber in her being was focused at that moment on a single square inch of her body. The intense, wet heat of him surrounded her and started a fusion reaction that she did not think anything could stop. His tongue lapped at the underside of her nipple, swirling against the tight skin and then pushing it up against the textured roof of his mouth and allowing it to drag against the edge of his teeth as he released her. The scrape of deadly weapons against her skin was erotic, dangerous, and thrilling.

“Sess-homaruuu,” she moaned.

He flicked his tongue across her one more time before whispering against her skin, “Take it off, Kagome.” As if Ritalin had been injected directly into her fingers, she was suddenly, resolutely,

focused on her task. One thin strap of leather hung loose from the knot that held his armor together and she grasped on and pulled. There was a shift and a faint clank, and then he had pulled it away and her upper stomach was seared with direct contact to his chest. Pressure increased on her back as he pushed against her, nosing her loose flannel shirt aside to expose the hardened peaks of her breasts in a thin pink tank top and thinner bra. He nipped at her through her clothes, and she cried out, reflexively tightening her legs and pressing even closer to him. “This as well, before I tear it from you.”

She understood he wanted her shirts gone, but she could only manage to struggle out of her plaid over shirt, leaving it trapped between the tree behind her and her back before he lost patience. She nearly sobbed in relief when he took over. His teeth caught the neckline of her tank top and with a jerk of his head the garment was no more. Flutters of pale pink cotton danced in the air around them like tiny clouds, but Kagome had only a moment to be distracted as Sesshomaru's claws found the thin ribbon between the cups of her bra and severed it. His face pressed against the exposed skin and he breathed deeply. Kagome dove her fingers into his hair and prepared to guide him back to her nipple – she was eager to benefit from his talented mouth again.

A sound, caught between a growl and a snarl, vibrated his chest and straight into her. “Kagome,” he said quietly. She paid him no attention – she couldn't, not while the noise he was making sent quivers of pleasure crashing through her. Her body tightened and trembled. She felt like she was on the precipice of a great discovery; an excited voice in the recesses of her mind whispered, *Orgasm! Here it comes!* The tone of his growling changed and she was left wanting, needing, waiting – like a spring had been compressed inside her but not released. “Ka-go-me,” he repeated more sternly.

“No,” she pleaded, desperate. Her eyes fluttered open, she hadn't realized that she had closed them, and met his own red stare. There was a slight twist to his mouth, unnoticeable on anyone else, it screamed to Kagome: frustration. “What?” she finally managed.

“I am going to remove your clothes,” he stated flatly. His expression was completely controlled, but his hands tightened on her ass and his claws pricked through her leggings. She nodded, breathless. *Now, please!* “I am going to hold you here, and taste you until you are incapable of experiencing more pleasure.” *Yes! Yes! What are you waiting for!* She let out a breathy gasp of acceptance. One hand slid up and around to grasp the waistband of her leggings and the thin strip of her underwear across her hip. Effortlessly, he lifted her higher, still pinned against the tree. She held onto his hair to keep her balance as he pulled one of her legs over his shoulder, making it obvious how he intended to taste her. The precarious position and realization that cunnilingus was about to become an experience, not just an idea, send a breeze of cool reality through her head. *Did I shave at home? Not that anybody here shaves, but he might – oh sweet hell – is he going to want this all the time? What if he doesn't? What if he doesn't like it and I don't smell as good as-*

The rip of material drew her out of a downward spiral of hysteria. She focused on him again, and had only a moment to burn the image of his pale skin, red eyes, and swollen lips mere inches from her triangle of dark hair. “When the pleasure becomes too great, and you fall unconscious, I will catch you.” *When I what?* Sesshomaru leaned closer, pressing his nose against the crease between her inner thigh and her outer labia, and took a deep breath.

“Sesshomaru-” she began, but her hesitant question died in her throat when his low rumble started again. This time the vibrations traveled directly from his mouth to her core. Kagome tilted back her head and opened her mouth on a silent cry. Her breath made a cloud in the air above her, but she felt warm. Hot. She was burning up and when his wet, strong tongue stroked her slit the coil of tension in

her belly compressed painfully. “Sess- Sess-” she gasped. He parted her folds with his nose and a growl of intense hunger. His mouth followed, the pressure on her skin dueled with his purr – she could think of it as nothing else – and the two combined to trip the spring of her release.

“Sesshomaru, yes!”

Chapter 34: Tests, Flights, and Revelations

“Sesshomaru, Yes!”

Kagome's cry was torn from her throat, and Sesshomaru smiled savagely against her skin. His miko was more responsive than he could have hoped for; she flew apart before he could even truly taste her. He was eager to discover her reaction to everything he wished to do to her. Would do to her.

The only measure of control he had over himself was gained by focusing entirely on her. On her pleasure and the way she would call his name with her release – the way he would ensure that she would never seek to slake her needs with another. Cinnamon and salty musk flooded his nose and stained his lips: the scent of her emotions as well as her body. He watched, fascinated, as her flesh clenched in pleasure. Her creamy desire tempted him, and there was no reason to deny himself. He lapped at her skin. She shuddered in pleasure, whispering his name. The heavy current of need in her voice vied with the taste of her for his attention. Thankfully, he was daiyoukai, and more than capable of concentrating on two tasks at once. His right hand still gripped her bottom. One full globe filled his palm, the tantalizing crease between thigh and cheek caught in the wide span of his thumb and first finger. His left hand slid from her waist to cup her breast and knead the flesh gently.

He dragged his claws lightly up the swell of soft skin until the weight of her slipped out of his hand to bounce against her chest and he was left with only her hardened peak between his fingers. She gasped. He rolled. She blew out a noisy breath that sounded only vaguely like a plea. He flicked with one claw. She sucked in sharply. He pinched. She cried out – throwing her head back against the trunk and bucking her hips against his face.

He took advantage of her movement, thrusting his tongue out to meet her and spearing her sweet center. It was better, so much better than merely lapping up her juice, and he nearly forgot his resolve. He growled to chastise himself, but the sound, the low vibration had the unintended but not surprising effect of both intensifying and casting aside his frustrations. Her dull nails clenched and unclenched against his scalp and her chest rose and fell rapidly.

“Sesshomaru?” Her voice rose like a question. He answered her without words, finding that he rather preferred to speak to her in his own language.

You are mine, he growled. His tongue was still buried half-way inside her, so the meaning would have been unintelligible – even if she understood inu. The intent was not lost on her, however, and another rush of liquid and the renewed flutters of her inner walls signaled her enjoyment.

“Yes!” she gasped. It made a fierce pride beat within him that she agreed. Even if she did not know it, she accepted his claim. She allowed his touch. Welcomed it. Burned for it. As he burned for her.

He dragged his nose up her slit, taking in her heady orange scent of her excitement and withdrawing his tongue only to spear and withdraw again. *Only mine*, he demanded against her skin.

“Yes!” She repeated on a whisper.

His thumb slid forward until he found her needy center. Ever careful of his claws, Sesshomaru quickly clipped the deadly point with his teeth. He licked at her body, tracing the edges of her opening to seek out the berry hidden at the top. When he found it, he used the flat, slightly rough surface of his tongue

to secure her complete attention. *Forever*, he swore. He used the tip of his tongue to trace around the center of her pleasure. His thumb thrust into her shallowly, the tight sheath of her body almost preventing him from curling to hit the spot he knew lay just inside.

“Yessss!” She moaned.

His lips closed around her berry. He pressed the pad of his thumb against her sensitive spot and sucked. *Mine*.

“Yes!” Her hoarse shout fell on deaf ears. He could hear nothing but the sound of his own blood thundering in his veins as her body seized around his thumb. Sesshomaru was driven by a searing fantasy image of his miko. Her legs wrapped around his hips instead of his shoulders. The clench of her gratification around the swollen flesh of his member instead of his hand. He drank down the proof of her desire as her release rocked through her – but he would not let her finish completion. He would not take her fully, but nor would he let her rest until every drop of pleasure had been wrung from her body.

His left hand cupped her breast again, crushing the hard peak against his palm and grinding it there. Her berry – the tender, sweet trigger for her release – was pulled into his mouth once more and rolled against the harder surface of his palate. She cried out again and another wave of sensation washed over him. The taste of her release. The scent of her passion. The feel of soft skin, taut muscle, and quivering flesh. His body throbbed, aching to respond in kind, but he denied himself with the reminder that he had promised her more pleasure than she could take.

Sesshomaru pushed her leg off of his shoulder and caught it in the crook of his elbow. He allowed her to slide down a few inches, just enough to bring her breasts level with his mouth. Saliva pooled in his cheeks as he gazed at her. Both mounds were swollen and heavy. One was flushed – the usually dark pink center red and hard from his attention. He glanced up at her face. Her cheeks were pink, her lips bruised and temptingly full. Her eyes were unfocused, the blue dark with satisfied desire.

“You may not rest, Ka-go-me,” he ordered. “This test has only just begun.” Her eyes widened briefly, and her mouth opened, but the sound that came out was more moan than words as he moved against her.

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Arashi had left Aina packing for her own journey after only a few hours' conversation. She was still young, considering her number of tails, and a kitsune, so convincing her to undertake a risky deception was not overly difficult. He had traveled far south to meet with her, and would have to set a brutal pace to return to the North in time to set the next phase of his plan in motion. Knowing the identity of the Miko no Mao changed everything.

And nothing.

Arashi ran through the forest, avoiding humans and other demons, and considered the shogi board in his head. All of Japan was the playing field, and it would be the prize – perhaps even more than that. The winner might claim power beyond what any of the four lords had ever dreamed of, if the game was played correctly. *White versus black*, Arashi pictured both sides facing off. Strength would only defeat an opponent who was weak of heart and mind. These players were neither. Arashi had been determined from the very beginning to run the board, and he would do that as he always had – with cunning.

The North had built up a plan to weaken the other demon lords' power base, then attack them. After illness had spread through the lands, reducing the numbers in opposing armies and creating fear and confusion, the raids were supposed to begin. Masked forces that struck with devastating brutality would drive refugees into the West and East, straining their resources and sowing seeds of terror and resentment. Then the Northern Army would have swept down from the mountains, crushing the West swiftly and removing the largest obstacle to Ryukostokken's quest for domination.

Matters had not proceeded as the Saigo Mao had intended. In the beginning, the weak demons that were infected and sent into the West had worked as planned. The sickness spread, and the West was slow to react; no illness had caused more than a minor inconvenience to demons in thousands of years, and so they were shocked into immobility when the lesser of them began dying. Even the great Sesshomaru was dilatory when the first reports were received at the Western shiro. When the spies in his castle reported that the human-child had fallen ill, Ryukostokken was engorged with delight. His personal celebrations left blood washing across the floors of his rooms.

It was not all celebration, however. The dragon prince ignored the reports, but Arashi immediately saw the potential for disaster. The pox had spread to the humans as well, and they sickened and died far quicker than demons. Although their panic over a plague could cause problems for the other three lords, it could also obliterate the opportunity for strategy. Scared humans were dangerous humans. It was a fact that Arashi knew well but Ryu dismissed as inconsequential. A lone farmer shaking in fear was inconsequential. A warlord gathering trained thousands was another issue entirely. Arashi had sent out inquiries to all of his sources and cautioned them to watch their backs.

Then, in the course of a fortnight, the entire board had been rotated. Sesshomaru had returned to his palace with a healthy human-child, a miko, and a cure. Arashi was the poor bastard hanyou orphan of the North; he could not afford to lie to himself. He admitted that he had made an error in misjudging the priestess. His self-realization allowed him to take a closer look at her when he kidnapped her, to question what he knew and to know that he did not know enough. She had been left alone with Ryu too long. Long enough to potentially be damaged, long enough for Sesshomaru to have taken action. It could not be helped. He only hoped that she had taken his advice, kept quiet, made herself useful. By some miracle Ryu might have also kept his head and put her to tasks best suited to her skills - tasks that would keep her alive and unspoilt in her feelings towards the North.

She would be the fulcrum for the future of them all. On her mortal shoulders rested the balance of power in Japan. Arashi knew that siding against her would bring almost certain failure – if not the destruction of all that could be won.

The Miko no Mao. The Shikon Miko.

He shook his head, slowing his run as night approached. Much might have occurred while he was gone, but he had prepared for every eventuality. Aina would be in place in the West, closer to the heart of power than any of Ryu's spies had ever dreamed. His most reliable, and most expensive, agent was already on his way to Edo to gather more information and seek out the miko's old allies. Arashi would return to the North and assess the situation there. Whatever steps were necessary to make certain that the miko was positioned to his advantage, he would take them.

Too much time had passed, and Arashi felt pressured to take action. Waiting was a tactic he had used often to good effect, but now he felt that events might rush by him if he did not move faster. They

might have already done so.

He climbed to the top of a sturdy old tree and waited as twilight deepened into true night. The moon was still new, and the starlight too weak to do more than glint dimly on the curve of his black talons as he loosed his wings and took to the air.

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Inuyasha forced a feeling of irritation to hide the hurt that he felt at his friends' deception. Sango smelled of supple leather, soup, and Kagome's soap. She smelled of camellias and hemlock, marimo moss and renkon. Only one person he knew had ever smelled of lotus, and Miroku's scent had always been of a mature plant. Inuyasha could put facts together, and he knew why Sango smelled like new lotus growth. *Renkon, damn.*

“Oi,” his loud exclamation attracted attention, and Inuyasha quickly lowered his voice. “What the hell do you think you're doin'? You shoulda said something and I would have found somebody else to help train these idiots. And, hey...” He frowned, glancing at the back of the monk's robes – far enough away to be out of earshot. “How come Miroku didn't say nothing?”

Sango stared at him, her brown eyes wide and her mouth slightly open in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You...you know...with the...” He found he couldn't say it plainly, and so instead gestured with his claws and swiftly turned his head away. From the corner of his eye he could see her. A frown deepened on her face and she glanced from his hand, to his face, to her own body and back again. When she opened her mouth, ready to ask him for an explanation, Inuyasha blurted out, “Why didn't you say you are going to have a baby?”

Sango's eyes went so wide, for a moment he thought they might burst out of her face. She darted a glance at Miroku and then seized Inuyasha's upper arm painfully. Her brown gaze narrowed and her jaw clenched. “Keep your mouth shut or you'll wish you were still pinned to that tree.”

“You-” Whatever refusal he might have come up with was cut off as she spun him around. A sharp kick to the back of his knee had him stumbling forward.

“Oh, Inuyasha!” She exclaimed loudly. Her voice rang with an odd sort of false concern. Sango was a loyal friend, an amazing fighter, a passable blacksmith and had a dry humor that often had him cracking a smile days after a joke. She was not, however, a good liar. “You must be starving! Come have some of this soup I made! There is plenty left for anyone who is hungry.”

A circle cleared out around them as if by magic. Even Miroku had disappeared, suddenly remembering something he had to do on the other side of camp. Sango was a terrible liar – but she was a worse cook. Inuyasha moved with her to the small campfire in front of her pallet, reluctant to fight out of her deceptively strong grip now that he knew she was growing a little human inside her. *Course, he considered privately as he was pushed down to sit on the ground, if the kid was anything like Miroku it would be able to take a considerable beating and come back for more with a smile.*

“How did you know?” Sango shoved a bowl of hot soup at him, hard enough that some splattered on

his hand. He let it burn rather than licking it up and assaulting his tongue with her seasoning. Her whisper was low, although he could smell her anger and a touch of fear, so he followed her example.

“Renkon,” he said quietly, then explained, “You smell like the pervert.” She blushed and he added hastily. “More than the usual, I mean.” *That didn’t come out right.* Inuyasha moved on, “It is the kind of thing that is hard to describe, but any inu would be able to tell, if he knew both your scents.” He stirred the soup absently, and almost took a bite before he remembered where it had come from. Sango cursed. Fluently. Inuyasha stared, fairly certain he had never heard the slayer use such language. Uncertain if *he* had ever used such language.

“Do you think anyone else knows?” Sango interrupted. “There is that kitsune in camp, I know they have good noses.”

Inuyasha frowned. The conversation was not going how he thought it would – not that he had ever before considered that he might be having such a conversation. Certainly not with Sango - in the middle of a war encampment. “I doubt it,” he said slowly. “Kitsune aren’t as good as inu, and that kit is too young and occupied with revenge to worry about knowing every scent in camp. And it’s still early...I mean...” He blushed awkwardly. “It is, right? I, ah, haven’t spent a lot of time around females who are, ah, like this.”

“Yes, it’s early,” she confirmed with a hollow voice. “I wasn’t sure until a week or so ago. I haven’t even told...” She glanced across camp and Inuyasha followed her gaze to her husband, who was joking with a large group of bird youkai. “You can’t tell him, Inuyasha.” Her eyes fell down to her lap, where she twisted her fingers together. Although her voice was steady, the hanyou could smell the sadness and desperation flooding through her. “Not yet, maybe...” She shook her head, and Inuyasha was shocked to see a glimmer of moisture collect on her eyelashes. Sango was not a crier. “Maybe not ever.”

Inuyasha was not comfortable with emotions, and would prefer not to have to deal with them – his or anyone else’s. He wondered briefly if fate was having a good laugh at him: Lady Kimi, Sesshomaru, and now Sango. *Feelings, dammit.* There was no way that he could just drop it, unfortunately. Kagome would have told him to look on the bright side. There weren’t any conversations that came to mind as more awkward than talking to his stoic female friend about making babies.

Except maybe talking to Sesshomaru about making babies.

Or Kimi.

Inuyasha’s shudder of horror was prevented from becoming something more violent when Sango spoke again, “The women in my family...they don’t...they lose a lot of babies.”

“Lose them,” Inuyasha repeated blankly. It took a moment for understanding to dawn. *Ah hell.* He winced, not quite knowing what to say. “Are you, I mean, is this one gonna-“

“No,” Sango said fiercely, her head snapping up to glare at him. She splayed one hand over her belly protectively. Her passionate conviction lasted only a moment, then she sagged into herself, slouching. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “Mama lost three before she had me, and another one after me. My aunt had two stillborn and died in childbirth.”

“Died?” Inuyasha gripped the hilt of Tessaiga and leaned forward, also whispering. “If you could be in danger, you definitely should not be here. You should be with Kagome or Kaede – they’ll know what to do if-“

“If I lose it? If I can’t have children?” The desolation fell away from her and was replaced with self-directed anger. “What then, Inuyasha? What good is a wife who cannot bear children? What would Miroku-”

“He’d sure as hell not throw you out of his hut,” Inuyasha interrupted. He continued, cheeks burning, “He didn’t marry you just to have you pop out a few kids, Sango. And it’s not like you guys can’t adopt or something. Hell, I’m sure Kagome has a few extra runts hanging around she could give you – if you can’t find one you like.” Sango remained quiet, but she still didn’t look comforted. The hanyou tugged on one ear and rushed out his last attempt to make her feel better, “None of these other assholes,” he gestured to the demons milling about the camp, “can have babies – and I still let ‘em fight with me, even though they ain’t half as good as you. You don’t see them cryin’ about it.”

“I wasn’t crying,” Sango said stiffly. “But...thank you.”

Inuyasha inhaled tentatively. She still smelled pregnant and anxious, but less sad and angry than before. *Maybe there isn’t so much to this feelings stuff*, he thought. *It’s not so hard*. “Great, so go tell Miroku and then you can-”

“I am not. Telling. Miroku.” Sango bit off each word and punctuated her husband’s name with a closed fist against one fuzzy ear. “Get it through your thick skull, Inuyasha. This is *my* decision, and I’ll tell who I want, when I want, got it?” He rubbed his throbbing appendage and nodded – not in agreement, but just to let her know he heard so she would stop hitting him.

“Fuck all, woman,” he muttered, “I just thought he’d be happy, and you shouldn’t be here, workin’ so hard training these morons when you’re-”

“Happy?” she snorted. “He’d be over the moon. And if the worst happened?” She swallowed hard, “He’d be crushed.” Sango leaned forward until their foreheads were almost touching. “You need me here, Inuyasha, and I need to be doing something that I am good at.” Her voice cracked a little, and Inuyasha felt a rush of – something – that he didn’t like. It made the hairs on his arms stand up and his chest constricted painfully. He didn’t want his friend to feel like a failure – especially not at something that was so important to her. But he was inu, after all, and inu protected their pack and pups fiercely. Sango and Miroku were part of his pack, and he wasn’t going to take any chances with their safety, or that of their baby.

He could smell Miroku coming closer, so he spoke quickly. “There are other ways to be useful Sango – and you don’t need to prove your worth to anyone, sure as hell not me. If you don’t want to tell him yet, fine. I think you’re being an idiot,” he said with a snort, “but fine. Pretty soon though, it won’t be somethin’ you can hide, and then you’re gonna be a distraction to Miroku and about every demon for a half-mile around.” Sango looked completely destroyed, and Inuyasha felt that uncomfortable feeling in his chest again.

“I don’t want to put anyone in danger,” she whispered.

“Who’s in danger?” Miroku asked with a frown. The slayer had been so focused on their conversation,

she hadn't noticed his approach. Inuyasha had been listening to his footsteps carefully, however.

"Kagome," he answered quickly, "who else?"

"Oh, that poor girl," Miroku sighed and leaned against his staff. "Has she gotten kidnapped again?"

Inuyasha blinked. *That happens way too often if it is the first thing that comes to mind.* "Yeah, actually." Both Sango and Miroku turned to him, mouths open and eyes worried. He huffed, "Oi. The bast- Sesshomaru got her back, she's fine." Like a light had been shone on the path, Inuyasha suddenly knew exactly how to manage the situation. "But you know how she is, probably it won't be two weeks before some asshole tries to take her again. Or she falls off a cliff, or eats demonic mushrooms, or has some looney weirdo in love with her and trying to seal her soul in his pillow or something." Both of his friends stared at him, half-smiles on their faces. "Well," he shrugged uncomfortably, "you know what I mean."

"Kagome does have a penchant for implausible peril," Miroku said diplomatically.

"Keh. And she gets into weird danger too. So..." He cleared his throat and tilted back his head so he didn't have to look at Sango while he spoke. "We were talkin', and Sango and I think maybe she should take Sesshomaru the next report. Then she could stay at the palace for a while – at least until he has some news or something we need to hear, and keep an eye on Kagome."

"I-"

"That is an excellent idea, my friend," Miroku cut off his wife and sat down beside Inuyasha, clapping him on the back. "Sango will be the least likely to be noticed, crossing behind enemy lines flying on Kirara, and Kagome might actually listen to her advice." He turned his face toward Sango, "Do you think you could see if she has any more of those amazing little pencils? I have nearly used up the last one she gave me."

Sango growled a response and stomped away, and Miroku took the bowl of soup from Inuyasha's hands and began eating, humming contentedly. Inuyasha let out a long breath and relaxed slightly. It had gone better than he had expected – but then, taking care of Miroku and Sango was not nearly as hard as keeping Kagome out of trouble had been. His pack was smaller now, but, if things went well, it would get bigger again soon. He felt a little smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"How can you eat that?" he asked the monk, to distract himself from the anticipation of seeing Miroku and Sango's kid. It would serve Miroku right if he got a girl – beautiful like her mother and with all of the little human boys drooling after her. Not that Inuyasha would let them get too near, but it would be well-deserved justice for the lecher.

"My wife has worked hard to cook this meal, it would dishonor her not to eat it with a good nature," Miroku said calmly. He took another spoonful and spoke around it, "It is actually a lot better. She got the turnips cooked all the way through, this time." He stopped and stirred the liquid, peering into his bowl with the intent of a fortune teller into a crystal ball. "Oh, maybe these aren't turnips."

Inuyasha made a sound of disgust. "Hurry up, then. Everyone should get some sleep so we can break camp before dawn, and I need you to write a message to Kouga." He stood and stretched, preparing to walk the perimeter.

Miroku touched the sleeve of the fire rat lightly, catching the hanyou's attention. "Thank you, Inuyasha." He said quietly, and then bowed over his soup bowl. He didn't wait for the question that was on Inuyasha's tongue and politely ignored the red flags on his cheeks. "Lovely Sango worries that she cannot be a mother – and that if she is, she will no longer be a slayer. You have given her the opportunity to be both. Thank you, my friend."

"You- you know?" It was all Inuyasha could say. It made a certain kind of sense, however. Sango was a terrible liar. Miroku was an excellent one.

"She has been ill every afternoon for more than a week, and trying to conceal it," he said frankly. "And she has been very attentive to my needs - while denying herself, which is unlike my passionate bride."

"Don't. Just – don't." Inuyasha felt a little ill himself at the image of Sango *attending* to her husband.

"I was not certain, until I witnessed your conversation with her this evening."

"Why didn't you say something to her?" Inuyasha was completely puzzled. He had lived among humans his entire life, had made three of them his closest friends – packmates. He still did not understand them.

"Sango was not ready to discuss it, and she should be afforded this privacy. I know that she worries that the unfortunate experiences of her mother will be her own fate, and only time and a positive outcome will ease those fears. When she is ready to share her burden with me, she will do so." His eyes glittered with happiness, and for a brief moment, a grin of supreme bliss flashed across his face. "And when she shares the news, I will celebrate most eagerly."

Fucking pervert, Inuyasha thought. Aloud, he said, "You're sly as hell, monk."

"Why thank you, Inuyasha. It is always pleasant to be appreciated for one's talents. Now," he set down his bowl to be washed later and clapped his hands together, "let us plot deviously to snare and destroy our enemies, shall we?"

Chapter 35: Eye of the Storm

Kagome walked next to Sesshomaru at a sedate pace that she knew he had set for her benefit. She was grateful for their slow progress, despite the matters that urged them to hasten back to his shiro. Her brain was tumbling over itself trying to become accustomed to her new reality. It brought on a pleasant sort of vertigo.

They had spent the entire day in the forest near Goshinboku. An entire day of caresses, kisses, whispered words and low growls and moans. If there had been any doubt left that Sesshomaru desired her, it was completely obliterated under the onslaught of his tongue. The memory should have made her blush, but as she stepped along the worn path, she found she could not. Kagome had the strange thought that her new *boyfriend – lover – intended mate* might have stolen her ability to be embarrassed. There was only so much naked exposure and toe-curling fulfillment a person could endure before their mind was broken. She was fairly certain hers was.

She could not think of another explanation for why she was walking calmly along after everything that had happened: an entire afternoon of being physically worshipped by a powerful demon, of having her every need met, of being told she was beautiful, cherished, protected, strong, and intelligent; an afternoon that had left her exhausted and tingling with aftershocks. She had fallen asleep sometime before twilight became fully night and after Sesshomaru had built a fire, fed her, and explored her body for the fourth – *maybe fifth* – time. When she woke, it was to a breakfast of cooked venison, which he shared with her, and fresh berries, which he did not. Sesshomaru was considerably more subdued, but while his face was impassive enough to fool anyone who didn't know him well, she recognized the soft glint in his eye. He touched her unnecessarily often, helping her with her obi and sandals, carrying her backpack.

Holding her hand.

Kagome glanced down at their entwined fingers again, as though to remind herself that it was real. The Killing Perfection had informed her that it was time to leave their little camp, and then held out his hand for hers. His fingers were warm, his palm calloused from using his sword. The tips of his claws prickled lightly against her skin. He did not glance at her, but walked in silence with only the whisper of silk and the faint swish of his hair disturbing the background noise of the forest. Any human who viewed them from a distance would see the strange, but tranquil, scene of a lord and his finely dressed hime out for a stroll. A demon or holy person would know differently. Even as Kagome stared absently at the hem of her kimono, she could not help but sense the youki washing around them.

Kagome knew that Sesshomaru walked his lands to mark them, to let his presence be felt by those he protected – and any who intended harm in the West. She had experienced his power in that way many times, while they were searching for the Shikon, and recognized that it was different now. Where before, his youki had felt like a suspended weight - a pause, the threat of a blade that could fall at any moment - it was quieter now, thicker. *Just as dangerous*, she thought. She tried to conjure up an image to describe the sensation the energy inspired. The threat was still present, still deadly, but it was not Damocles waiting to fall. It was a warning sign: Danger. Keep Clear. No Unauthorized Admittance. This Property is Under Surveillance.

Beware of Dog.

Laughter broke the silence and brought Sesshomaru to a halt. He turned to her, face impassive but

clearly waiting for an explanation. Kagome smiled and shrugged, knowing better than to think he would find the image funny.

“You have been quiet,” Sesshomaru stated. There was a tiny wrinkle between his eyes that indicated a frown.

“I just...” Kagome trailed off, suddenly uncomfortable under his direct gaze. She began walking again to avoid it. His face turned forward, and she found it easier to speak without the weight of his eyes on her, “I just am not sure what to say. I think you...I think,” she laughed again, this time at herself, “I think you fried my brain. I’m sure language skills will come back to me eventually – so you should probably enjoy this while you can.”

“Your chatter is not...unpleasant.” Kagome blinked, unsure if she had been given a backhanded compliment, or a watered-down insult. Any response she had was forestalled as he continued, “I have not ‘fried’ anything, but if you mean to say the experience was so impressive that you have been rendered speechless, then I accept your praise.”

“You-” Kagome spluttered, eyes wide. It had been impressive. Overwhelming. *Completely freakin’ awesome*. However, saying so, especially with Sesshomaru’s smooth nonchalance, seemed to ruin it a little. She wondered if he did it on purpose to rile her, or if he couldn’t help it – his ego was just that big. The corner of his mouth twitched and she narrowed her eyes. The daiyoukai’s ego was certainly large, but he was also trying to irritate her. *Two can play at that game*. “Impressive?” She flipped her hair over her shoulder and turned up her nose, prepared to take him down a few notches. “Good, certainly, but given the pedestrian nature of your repertoire compared to what is advertised in the future, if it were to be judged on a sliding scale, I think you wouldn’t score any higher than, say-”

“Pedestrian?” Sesshomaru stopped again and glared down at her.

“It means-”

“I am aware,” he said, nostrils flaring. Kagome had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling.

“Oh, then you understand. I mean, with such a small amount of data, I can’t really compile an accurate assessment.” He still looked upset, but his head tilted slightly. Kagome swallowed a grin and continued, trying to lead him into bantering, “And there are so many factors to take into consideration. Location, time of day, stress, familiarity – they could all affect performance.”

His jaw clenched so hard, she worried it might crack. “My performance-”

Kagome interrupted him, “Before I could pass judgement and call it impressive, I would really need a larger pool for comparison.” His posture relaxed slightly, and Kagome continued helpfully, “You know, I would hate to call yesterday impressive, and then find out it wasn’t your best effort.” She could feel a blush rising, it was almost a relief to know she still could, but she could also see a glint in his eyes. She pushed on, “I’m going to need to see the rest of your resume, before I know if I’m willing to keep you on in this position.”

She knew he didn’t understand her references, but he seemed to grasp her meaning all the same. Excitement and contentment warred within her as he leaned down and firmly lifted her chin. “I am

impressive, little miko.” His face bent closer and Kagome’s heart sped up. His lips brushed against her cheek to find her ear. She closed her eyes and shivered as his tongue traced the shell and he pulled the lobe between his teeth, biting gently. A soft moan escaped her lips, and she forgot why she had wanted to needle him in the first place. “Impressive – in every position.”

His whisper sent heat shooting right through her. She was surprised when, not a moment later, she was jerked forward by their joined hands. “Hey!” she complained.

“We should be going, we need to get back to the West today.”

Kagome was put out. It had been a little scary teasing him, certainly she had never said anything like that before – to anyone, much less the Saidai Mao. She had hoped for more of a reaction. That, and his attentions had left her ear tingling and a dampness between her legs that would grow uncomfortable soon. She muttered under her breath, “If you’re in such a hurry all the sudden, why bother walking?”

“It is what courting humans do,” his low voice answered easily.

It was Kagome’s turn to pull them to a stop, remembering their conversation about mating customs.

“A lot of other things should happen before two people get married.”

“Hn. Such as hand holding.”

“Like holding hands. Like going on dates – er, on walks, and eating together, talking.”

Her heart stuttered, and her breath caught – just for a moment. He was compromising for her. Sesshomaru, the most unyielding person she had ever met, the one being who didn’t have to bend – who bent others around his desires, was meeting her halfway. *For her*. She stared at him, mouth open.

Kagome fell in love.

Later she would examine it, pick apart the moment and try to remember exactly how it had happened, but nothing would ever explain it. She had been standing there, arguing with him, feeling a little irritated and a little turned on. And then she loved him. Maybe it was the way he said it, the way he said almost everything, as though it was obvious and expected and the idea that things would happen in any way but his way was ludicrous. Maybe it was the way he had decided to do what she wanted. No questions, no argument, no dragging his feet. She didn’t nag or bat her eyes or plead. He had woken her up that morning with breakfast. Eaten with her, then taken her hand and proceeded to walk at a pace that was far slower than even his most unconcerned patrol – at a time when they really should be travelling as fast as possible. All so that she could have a date. He had the pressure of a war weighing him down, an entire people to protect, to save, and he still put everything on hold to walk with her.

Tears pricked at her eyes, and she smiled at him. A huge, goofy smile that probably looked ridiculous but she couldn’t seem to help herself. “Yep,” she said, her voice cracking a little, “they do.” She squeezed his hand, ignoring the worried frown wrinkle that had reappeared between his eyes, and began walking again.

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Sesshomaru felt content. Which shouldn’t have been very unusual for him, considering that he had

always taken exactly what he wanted, and ignored or killed what he didn't. However, despite remaining sexually unsatisfied and enduring a sleepless night, dawn found him peaceful, rested, and absolutely... content.

Kagome had cried out his name until her voice gave out. She had come undone so many times in his arms her muscles quivered from the strain – until she could take no more and simply relaxed into a deep sleep. He had completely and utterly sated his intended – at her request – and no youkai could approach either of them without scenting their claim on each other.

No human could see Kagome and not recognize that she had been devastatingly well-satisfied.

That was obvious when he woke her for breakfast. Her lips were still red and swollen, her skin faintly flushed. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders in attractive disarray that spoke to having claws thrust into it passionately. When he retrieved mokomoko and helped her to dress in her red and white kimono, he had an excellent view of her silky skin, marked at the hips and thighs with faint pink lines and small bruises – the latter from her own fingers when she couldn't reach his hair to hold on to. Her breasts had still been heavy and swollen even after her rest; her nipples red and peaked and overly sensitive.

Kagome smiled at him shyly as he helped her dress. She grinned openly over breakfast. She hummed under her breath and stared into the middle distance with a smile on her lips as they walked. She smelled of fresh cherry wood and dewy magnolias. The faint smoke of her cinnamon desire still wreathed her and was layered heavily with the warm, thick scent of gardenias. She was happy to be with him. Happy with *him*.

The scent of her – of her emotions – washed over him like a tide. He had taken nothing of her for himself, and still, he was content. More than content. Pleased with himself, with her. Pleased with the day and the crisp air and the faint taste of far-off snow in the air. The feel of her small cool hand in his as they walked, the sound of her sandals stepping in time with his – only occasionally tripping. The feel of her power ebbing and flowing between them, reaching out to caress him without any active direction from her.

Content.

After a few hours, the feeling had not diminished, but it was joined by a spark of concern. It occurred to him that he had never known his miko to remain quiet so long. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She had a strange look on her face that matched the scent of concentration around her. Without warning, her scent deepened and brightened and the clear tone of her laughter broke out. A year ago, he would have ignored such behavior, but he could not have prevented himself from stopping and turning to her if he had wanted to. And he did not want to. Sesshomaru wanted, desired, needed to know everything about this female – his intended. Her complex and ever changing emotions were almost incomprehensible to him. Although his nose told him what she was feeling, despite all his preternatural senses and supreme intellect he often did not know why she felt as she did.

She shrugged off his questions – either unable or unwilling to explain her sudden amusement to him. He allowed that, but could not let her think that her voice disturbed him. He did not actively listen to every word that came out of the female's mouth, there were simply too many, but even when his mind was elsewhere he had discovered he enjoyed the sound of her – at least most of the time - almost as much as the scent of her. Then she had called his abilities into question. He was fairly certain she was teasing him, but her expression was serious and her scent full of too many emotions to be definite.

Sesshomaru was fully prepared to carry her deeper into the woods and prove his prowess.

“Before I could pass judgement and call it impressive, I would really needed a larger comparison.” She *was* teasing. Her metaphors were unfamiliar, but he understood her intent. He barely suppressed a wicked grin. His shy little miko was blushing again, but she had rather boldly tried to maneuver him into giving her what they both wanted. He, of course, had been right. In the end she needed very little convincing. The citrus of her excitement misted around him, tugging at his own control.

Sesshomaru carefully pinched her chin between two claws. “I *am* impressive, little miko,” he stated, his voice deep and carefully pitched for her ears alone. He brushed his nose and mouth along her jaw and cheek, inhaling the uniquely satisfying mix of *her*. He ran his tongue along the delicate edge of her ear and nipped at her. She moaned, and he allowed a self-satisfied smile against her skin. “Impressive,” he purred, “– in every position.”

The spice of desire filled his nose and he withdrew, leaving her to consider the state her teasing had left her in. Sesshomaru was not unaffected, but he had centuries of practice at self-denial and repressing his own desires to help him win the little game she had devised. She was vocally unhappy with his decision to move on, and he could feel the corner of his mouth lift slightly at her disgruntled comments. He considered that perhaps he would take another night on their journey to show Kagome his considerable skills. One more day would be acceptable to be away from the West; Kimi, although he would never say so to his mother, would have things well in hand. With Kento and Hisao present and no immediate threats, he could afford to take a short time with his intended.

“If you’re in such a hurry all the sudden, why bother walking?” She was irritated, which he found enjoyable in small doses, and unsatisfied, which he empathized with – strongly.

“It is what courting humans do,” he responded. The entire morning had been by her order, after all. She had catered to his needs the previous afternoon, accepting many of the wholly inu actions his instincts and culture demanded of their situation: the courting, the challenge to his claim, the reassurances. A strong mating was a partnership. Even if it was not often sought in inu unions, he would have preferred equality to forcing Kagome into subservience. Such was not in her nature. So he had followed her instructions as well. A meal together. A walk together. Hand Holding. Although he had no intentions of delaying their mating as long as human customs dictated, those affections and intimacies were not objectionable, and Kagome was obviously pleased with them.

At least, he thought so, until she suddenly stopped on the path. Their linked hands forced him to stop as well, rather than drag her after him. She said nothing, but her eyes were wide and her lips parted. Sesshomaru felt his concern revive. He inhaled discretely.

Cherry wood, freshly cut. Magnolia blossoms, kissed with dew. *Kagome*.

Fading satsuma oranges. *Excitement*.

Cinnamon spice. *Desire*.

Faint inuzansho pepper. *Irritation*.

Hints of sour niguari melon. *Concern*.

He could feel an involuntary crease forming between his brows. At least ten other emotions ebbed and flowed in her scent – he could not be certain which pertained to his actions and person, and which were wholly products of whatever thoughts ran through her mind. He had assumed she would be pleased with his attempts to accommodate her culture. Doubt began to grow in his mind. He had misjudged her

on previous occasions, perhaps the unfortunate circumstance had occurred again. Her scent gave him no clear direction, so he focused on the sound of her.

Dub-lub. Dub-lub. For a moment, she stopped breathing. *Dubbbub.* Her heart seemed to catch, and his eyes widened momentarily, but the organ corrected itself before his fear could surface. Carnations effused the air around them, so sweetly rich and thick they nearly overwhelmed the rest of her scent. The flowers married perfectly with the base of her, of what was *Kagome*; to his inu nose she was suddenly complete in a way he had not known she could be. He could not tie the aroma to any particular emotion, and was further disoriented by the salt and shine of her unshed tears. A smile broke out on her face, like the sun from behind a cloud.

“Yep, they do.” Her voice cracked, as though in sadness, but she squeezed his hand and began walking again. Had Sesshomaru been anyone other than himself he would have shaken his head in wonder and confusion. Kagome was pleased with him, happy with him, desired him – and yet also seemed on the verge of an emotional maelstrom. Females were difficult. Human females unfathomable. His miko was on a level entirely her own.

Sesshomaru could not let the conversation rest on her odd words, but did not know what to say. “Hn.” He walked alongside her, still sorting through the varied and conflicting signals she put out, and listening to her quiet humming.

He was still trying to precisely determine where the morning had escaped his control when the odor of death reached him. He had Kagome secured against his side and the area scanned before she could utter a surprised, “Wha-?”

With a surge of youki and a spring of his powerful legs he leaped above the trees, summoning his cloud to hold them there. “Sesshomaru!” Her shock and concern were evident, but she kept her voice modulated. A far corner of his mind noted with satisfaction that she was familiar with dangerous situations and reacted appropriately. One small hand gripped the strap of his armor while the other reached for her bow – which was not there. He would have winced, if he were inferior enough to allow discomfort at his miscalculations to show on his face. The future Lady of the West needed to be able to defend herself and her people. She was capable of it, he had seen that firsthand time and time again. She needed her weapon. She needed training.

Those thoughts ran in the background while he assessed the situation. There were no youkai nearby, although several lesser individuals, males that had controlled their youki and scent, had travelled in the area recently. The most recent human trace was months old. The odor was centered to the west and north of their path, and the animals had given it a wide berth. There was no immediate threat, but Sesshomaru was still vigilant.

“Something – someone – has been killed recently. Call your reiki,” he ordered quietly. “We will investigate.” He flew closer, but could not easily see the source of the stench through a thick tangle of branches. Touching down a few yards away, he reluctantly let Kagome go. “Stay close. Protect yourself as you see fit – your abilities will not harm me.” His silent steps were wasted as Kagome crunched through the crust of snow and old leaves on the ground. He ignored it, and approached the corpse, cataloguing the injuries and attempting to set aside the protective urges inspired by Kagome’s gasp and saddened horror.

The body was human, but beyond that he could only guess at the identity. The naked back faced the

sky, long dark hair spread across the snow. Shallow cuts ran across the skin, only a finger's width apart, from the neck to the ankles. Blood stained the ground around the body – the person had been alive when it was dumped there – but escape or salvation would have been impossible. From the angle and texture of the joints he could ascertain that the ankles and knees had been crushed. From the coloring of the skin, it had been done before death. The ground near the outstretched arms had been disturbed; dirt and dried blood clotted around torn nails and bruised fingers. Sesshomaru held up a hand to signal Kagome to stay back, which she ignored, following a few feet after him as he approached the corpse.

He knelt beside it, careful to keep his silks away from the blood and muck. The scent of youkai was faint, but not concealed. Sesshomaru quickly identified it as dragon. Already cautious, his instincts demanded he secure the area. The daiyoukai had not become the most powerful of the demon lords by constantly giving into his primal tendencies, and he needed more information before he could act appropriately. He gently rolled the body. It was female – or had been – and the cuts on the back continued around the front. He held out his hand to verify the pattern. As though the person had been suspended and spun, claw marks spiraled around from foot to neck, gradually growing deeper. The bloodloss would not have killed, but the pain would have been immense as nerves and skin were scored like a lemon rind. Particular attention had been paid to the breasts and genitals. The woman had been viciously raped, but then - or perhaps beforehand to further denigrate the will and amplify the pain – some sort of dulled blade had been taken to her flesh. Those places that were most sensitive had been sawed and ground until they resembled little more than meaty pulp.

Rage burned hot in his veins as he took in the atrocity that had been committed. The location where the body had been left, on a road between East and West, and the unnecessarily prominent stench of dragon were evidence that he was intended to know the fate of this pitiful creature. The sadistic whelp Ryukostokken had arranged the remains of his activities to be found where someone loyal to or allied with the West would be sure to find it and recognize the taint of dragon. It took every ounce of his will to remain kneeling on the ground, quietly. He wanted nothing more than to tear something in two – particularly the vile monster, *he does not deserve to be called youkai* – but he could not. This was not a battle of one and one - meeting on a field and proving their worth. This was a battle of armies and innocents. Ryukostokken had shown, viscerally, that he would target Sesshomaru with any weapon he could while remaining behind his walls, subjects, and untold numbers of prisoners. Sesshomaru was aware of Kagome's gasp and strangled retching behind him, but he could not comfort her until he had his own violence under control. Her pale, shaking hand inadvertently brushed the hair away from the corpse's face as she whispered a prayer for peace.

His heart stopped.

Between one breath and the next, he saw Kagome lying there. Kagome bloodied and desecrated on the ground. Kagome who had been seized and violated and left to die in agony and solitude. He looked to the sky and a howl of rage and grief built in his chest and his fangs and claws lengthened of their own volition. His youki exploded into the woods, frightening every living thing within a mile and threatening death. He took in a deep breath to release his anguish and fury. Camphor and sweet flowers washed over him, soothing and clearing his senses.

"Sesshomaru?" He looked down, the red haze receding from his vision. Her voice was soft and concerned, her face close to his, nearly blocking his view of the body. "Sesshomaru?" Her fingers brushed across his face markings, and the blue of her eyes radiated her care and unease. He carefully gripped her arms, confirming that she was there, with him – alive. His gaze shifted back to the corpse,

this time prepared for what he would see. It was only the first glance that had tricked his eye. The face was roughly shaped like hers: small nose, pointed chin, high cheekbones. The hair had been inexpertly cut across the forehead to mimic her long, untamed bangs. The shape of the mouth was wrong, but it was the eyes that had momentarily obfuscated the truth. He was nearly certain that the woman had been born with brown eyes, like most humans, but a ceramic mask had been fitted to cover them. Large blue eyes, lined with thick lashes, were painted on the surface.

Ryukostokken could not have Kagome. So instead he had recreated her image and tortured and raped the woman behind it. Then he purposefully left his scent and the body where Sesshomaru would be made aware of it. This was a threat, a promise, that the dragon would take her again – and she would not live to escape a second time. Kagome tried to turn and see what had distressed him, but he used his superior strength to refuse her.

“No,” he growled. He pressed her face against his arm and stepped back from the corpse. “Do not look.”

“Sesshomaru,” she mumbled into the silk of his sleeve, “Let me go.”

“No.” He tightened his grip and turned them both to trap her between a large tree and his body. His beast was dangerously close to the surface, and he was not certain that he could endure her horror and shame if she were to see what the dragon had done and come to the correct conclusions. “You must not.” He was not certain *he* could endure to look again. He pressed his nose into her hair and breathed deeply of her. His youki still flooded the area, warning and threatening any who might approach.

It was not her.

Slowly, carefully, tendrils of reiki wound around his hands and arms. A gentle breeze of her power, warm ozone with a tang of salt, blew against him. His beast was pacing, howling, scratching at the chains he had around it, but her soft aura soothed him, calmed the worst of his vehement reflexes. “I can handle it, Sesshomaru,” she said quietly. His mind refused the idea, recalling the image of her broken with shame and crying in his arms after the escape from the North. Her arms circled his chest, pressing her to him despite his armor. Reiki followed suit, winding around him and his youki, surrounding him with herself. “I am stronger now, Sesshomaru. Stronger with you. You cannot hide the world from me.”

He brushed his mouth against her hair and smoothed his hands down her arms, across her back. *It was not her.* She was right. He knew that, knew that his miko, his intended was strong. She had proven it, he only needed to move past his protective concern and let her stand beside him. It was exceedingly difficult.

“If not the world,” he said quietly, almost to himself, “why not then, this one thing?” With a monumental effort, he stepped aside, but kept his hands on her, prepared to shelter her again if she showed the slightest need. *If I feel the need.* Her face remained relatively calm, for her, although her scent and the tension in her body betrayed the sadness and revulsion she felt looking on the dead woman. He knew the instant she saw what he had seen, understood the depravity and cruelty that was displayed with that one death.

“It’s me?” The question fell out of her mouth, unthinking, and Sesshomaru reflexively tipped his head and snapped at her ear in rebuke.

“No,” he growled, and she must have sensed his turmoil because her eyes turned to his and the growing shame and anger in her scent diminished to make way for concern. He breathed of her again, inching closer to his perfect control. “But it was intended to be. Ryukostokken-”

“How do you know it was him?” she interrupted.

In another time, Sesshomaru might have asked how many murderous stalkers were interested in her, if she couldn’t immediately blame one individual. Instead, he responded, “The stench of dragons stains the flesh. It was marked intentionally for one such as myself to discover.”

“He wants to punish me,” she said slowly. Her understanding was laced with guilt and stirrings of her newfound hatred, “but I got away so he did this to someone else instead.” Her eyes narrowed on the body, and she swore with a conviction he had not heard before, “I will *erase* him.”

Sesshomaru both relished her determination to end the dragon’s life and mourned her innocence. What was done was done, and Kagome knew the reality of the world. He could only now ensure that she was prepared to meet it. “We must return to the West.” The situation had changed since that morning. The luxury of escaping for a day to be with each other was no longer afforded to them. They had people to protect, justice to mete out, and a stain upon the living world that must be removed.

“We cannot leave her like this,” as ever-changing as the wind, Kagome shifted from avenging warrior to caring priestess. “We should take her with us.”

No. He could think of few things more disturbing than carrying his miko and the desecrated corpse of her double. “There is an outpost nearby,” Sesshomaru informed her, marking the area with his youki to keep others away. “We will send soldiers here.”

“She deserves an honored burial.” Kagome kept her gaze on the woman even as she latched onto his armor and his cloud formed around their feet. They rose in the air and began west, as quickly as possible. Kagome growled impressively against Sesshomaru, “He deserves to be castrated.”

“It shall be as you decree,” he replied, approving both her demands.

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“It’s not clear enough. What if he doesn’t figure it out?” Inuyasha stuffed his hands in his sleeves and scowled at the note Miroku had painstakingly drafted and redrafted.

“He’ll get it, don’t worry. If the Northern Lord isn’t intelligent enough to read between the lines, then he has someone working for him who can. When this message gets to him, there will be scouts checking on our position within a day.” Miroku finished the final kanji and set down his brush.

Sango added, “Don’t worry, this is a good plan. It is something my father would have thought of - making your enemy think he wants you as his friend.”

“Remember though,” Miroku cautioned, “he needs to have to work for it. If you look too eager, he’ll catch on to what we’re doing.”

The hanyou growled under his breath. Sango was right, it was a good plan. He just wasn't sure he wanted it to work. If Ryukostokken took the bait and followed him to try and negotiate an alliance, Inuyasha would have to speak with him. At some point, he would have to stand across from that dragon fucker and not rip out his windpipe. It wasn't his style. In fact, it grated against every nerve ending he had to play a part and pretend that his enemy was his ally. If it worked, he would get close enough to smell the slippery little asshole – but he wouldn't be able to kill him.

If it worked, he could get enough information to end the war before it really began. He could find out exactly how and when the North was moving their troops. He could send word to Sesshomaru and they could attack, together, before the dragons got anywhere near Edo or the Western Palace. Inuyasha didn't have a lot of people he cared about, but they were all in danger, and if staying his sword this one time would save them, he had to do it. The whole thing left a nasty taste in his mouth.

It must have shown in his expression, because Sango slapped him on the back, hard enough to rock him forward a few inches. "Cheer up, Inuyasha. With that attitude, we won't have to worry about him wondering if this is a trap – he'll know you want to kill him."

"The truth hurts," Miroku stated cheerfully, rolling up the scroll.

"Some more than others," Inuyasha muttered. He shook off his misgivings and waved one of older soldiers, a crane that had proven capable of setting aside his feelings over the massacre at the Eastern Palace in order to get the job done. "You know what to do. Drop it if they don't manage to take it from you-"

Miroku interrupted, "Try to look like you're thinking about going back for it."

Inuyasha continued, "Just don't get hurt too badly. A couple of good licks to make 'em think they drove you off, but don't get carried away. We need good soldiers more than we need this plan."

"I will not fail, Inuyasha-sama." The crane bowed stiffly and accepted the scroll. Several of his comrades stood silently, witnesses to his bravery, as he took to the skies. The entire camp was quiet as the grey-blue of the soldier's wings faded into the distance. Inuyasha took a deep, calming breath. This was it. The decision was made and there was no going back. Every demon and human in his small army was counting on him. Edo was counting on him. Kagome, Shippo, and Rin were counting on him. Sesshomaru was counting on him. If he succeeded, he could save his friends and allies – the West. Hell, all of Japan if his bastard of a brother was to be believed.

Keh, he snorted, no pressure.

"What are you standing around for?" He barked at the soldiers, "Get moving, now! You have your orders!" He turned to Miroku, but the monk was already packing up his ink and brushes.

"I'll meet up with Kouga and bring him around to the staging area though that narrow pass the goat youkai scouted for us. We should be just a couple of days behind you – faster, if they haven't moved to the new camp yet." The houshi leaned towards his wife, and for once grabbed her hand instead of her ass. "You will be careful, my love."

"Of course," Sango responded with a smile that spoke volumes about her feelings. She still hadn't told him, but Inuyasha was staying out of it. She had agreed to fly messages back to Sesshomaru, and so as

long as she had an assignment that kept her out of direct danger, Inuyasha was trying to let it go.

“Don’t push too hard,” the hanyou couldn’t help but admonish her. She glared at him and he quickly amended, “Sesshomaru probably won’t get back to the palace for a few days; he’ll take his time with Kagome.”

“I bet he will,” Miroku said suggestively. A smack to the back of his head sent him stumbling forward.

“Pervert,” Sango muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t talk like that about Kagome and the ice prick,” Inuyasha ground out, “anybody but them.”

“Really?” Miroku’s eyes lit up even as he rubbed the knot forming on his scalp. “Then let’s talk about your love life, my friend. You could really use a-” Inuyasha wasn’t sure who hit the monk first, him or Sango, but the idiot was out cold either way.

“Great, now we have to carry him. Lazy lecher probably planned it.” Inuyasha groused to cover the red stain in his cheeks.

“Speak for yourself, I’ve been ordered to deliver mail, so I’m afraid I’m too busy to help.” Sango threw him a mock salute and an overly sweet smile and flounced away, presumably to prepare Kirara for their journey.

“Why is it that I always end up havin’ to carry somebody,” Inuyasha muttered to himself as he none-too-gently slung his friend over his shoulder. “Moron better wake up soon. I am not havin’ his ass in my face when I’m elbow deep in dragon guts.” He turned and yelled general orders to the camp, “Pack it up! I’m leavin’ at sundown, if ya ain’t ready, ya might as well go home.”

The last time his frigid brother had asked for his help, Inuyasha had said no – hell no – and Sesshomaru had still succeeded against an invasion. This time the forces challenging the West were greater. This time his allies were fewer. This time there was more to protect. Kagome, Shippo, Rin. A little Miroku and Sango baby, that wasn’t even born yet. He wouldn’t let his brother stand alone. He couldn’t.

Chapter 36: Make Like A Tree

Kimi concealed her presence, as usual, and listened to Sesshomaru's advisors in the next room. Kento was adding notes to short list he had been working on, doing his best to ignore Hisao's impatient tapping. Her invitations to the Full Moon Council had gone out only a few days ago, but responses were already coming to the palace. The scrolls from youkai were affirmative and as swiftly delivered as possible. They were writing to their superior, and were aware that Kimi had sent the invitations on behalf of the Saidai Mao; Sesshomaru's position, power, and personality demanded prompt reply. However, the demons were obviously more concerned with Kimi's reaction to their messages than Sesshomaru's – which she found absolutely delightful. The Full Moon Council would be a war council, certainly, but it was also traditionally a time for socializing, vengeance, and jockeying for position among the daiyoukai. And there was none better at such tasks than Mikadzuki Iwakura Kimi.

If it had been Sesshomaru sending out the invitations, most youkai would have simply sent a messenger with their affirmation and expected date of arrival. Where the Lord would prefer concise obedience, Kimi purposefully inspired youkai to try to sway her opinion in their favor – before the politics of the Court had truly begun. It allowed her the opportunity to know where each of her potential enemies and allies stood. Their need for her approval and assistance gave her power. Artful calligraphy on fine papers was accompanied by small, but valuable, gifts for the hostess. Kento's desk was littered with tokens of admiration, respect, and – although the givers would be wise to never admit it – a healthy amount of fear for the dowager Western Lady.

Kento sighed, the small sound easily discerned by her keen ears even over distance. His attempts to ignore the captain were fruitless. Kimi gathered her mokomoko and left her tea, deeming that she had let the disrespectful dog pace long enough.

Hisao let out an annoyed grunt, “Why do I have to be here for this?”

Perfectly timed, Kimi opened the shogi screens, “Because This One has summoned you,” she answered evenly. Hisao immediately stopped fidgeting and bowed his head as she entered. Although he was quite skilled at hiding his scent, his emotions were clear to Kimi – shame, regret, and a tightly controlled anger wrapped in the metallic taste of vengeance. *Ah*, she thought, allowing herself a small smile, *so the pup has learned his lesson and is ready to focus on important things. Good.* She was aware that his reformed behavior could not be entirely credited to her recent displays of power and competence. The return of the miko from the North and Sesshomaru's accounting of her escape had settled many things in the Western Palace.

“My Lady,” Hisao greeted her. Kento's bow followed quickly. Kimi scanned over the objects on his desk. They would have to be assessed and catalogued before they could be placed in storage with all of the other trinkets that were received by the House of the Crescent Moon, and Kimi would personally consider the value and meaning behind every little gift – to better understand the motivations underlying them. There would be time for such things later, she first needed to deal with the issues at hand.

“This One will hear the list of attendees now,” she stated, arranging her kimono and seating herself next to Sesshomaru's desk. Her sound barrier went up with a whisper of will. Kento began, but the list of confirmed youkai to attend was short. Lord Hirimoto would bring his children, leaving his sister to rule the South during the Council. The otters would send a representative, and the eagles as well. The trees had not yet responded, but to be ponderous was their nature and Kimi would not have been

surprised if their answer arrived weeks after the Council was concluded. The leader of the wolf clans sent his regrets, he could not attend due to his age, but would send his granddaughter Ayame in his stead. The last water daiyoukai would come, but that was it. Four daiyoukai. Six counting Hirimoto's cubs. Seven if a tree managed to get to the palace on time. A few lesser youkai that were of strategic importance would also attend, but the number was still staggeringly small. They would need the humans to bolster their ranks.

This was what Sesshomaru was fighting for – what the West had always fought for. Kimi was filled with parental pride for a moment. Inu no Tashio had been a great leader, he opened the door to peace for youkai, enforcing long-ignored rules for personal combat, war, and territorial disputes that placed order on savage chaos. His son had exceed him. Sesshomaru, despite his taciturn personality and self-imposed solitude, had fought wars and created alliances that brought an end to the worst, the most bloodthirsty and destructive of their kind. He had walked a path that paralleled the humans and allowed the two species to coexist in a way that had never been possible before.

And he will do greater things.

Kimi knew what it would mean to have the little miko mate her son. Only a generation prior the human would have been ripped apart and displayed in front of her village – before it too was destroyed for the audacity of believing a mortal could stand equal with a youkai. Kimi's own father would have slit the miko's throat as soon as look at her. Grandfather Iwakura would have probably eaten her. A tasty treat – but a wasted opportunity.

The couple would still be challenged, the rise of the North was more than proof of that, but they could also take the West – Japan – into a new era. She would not have thought it possible, but there was a future where youkai were no more. Sesshomaru had the power to prevent that. With a blink, Kimi set aside her thoughts and focused again on Kento's recitation. Impatiently, she flicked her fingers in the air. "Enough. Tell This One of the humans."

Kento paused, his gaze cutting furtively to Hisao before he spoke, "My Lady," he began, then hesitated.

With deadly precision, she focused on Kento's face. He met her eyes, and she allowed a wisp of her displeased aura to escape her barrier. The secretary did not shiver, but his eyes closed for a long moment. With icy calm, she asked, "Who has denied This One's request?" Where another might have felt trepidation, for Kimi there was only strategy – recalculation. If the humans refused to attend, if they refused to join Sesshomaru's army, the results would be devastating. Not only were their swords essential to ensuing victory, an alliance during wartime would help ease the humans into a time of peace when youkai would be weak from civil unrest. She had no doubt that her son could defeat the north and the human lords as well – if things came to that. But it would be the end of youkai, a reduction in numbers and strength from which they might never be able to recover.

"They have all responded, My Lady," Hisao stated, his nostrils flaring as he tried to gauge her mood. Kimi plotted and seethed invisibly. She had endured much, killed many, destroyed more. She would not allow human warlords to thwart her plans. If their short-sighted arrogance caused losses to the West – to her pack – they would regret it in the most painful of ways.

That, and she would have to completely reorganize the seating arrangements.

“Positively!” Kento burst out, “They agreed, they agreed!” His eyes looked a little wild, and Kimi was reminded of a time, long ago, when Kento and his cousin Jun were very young, and a dinner guest had snidely remarked that the tea was over steeped. Kimi had torn out her throat. Of course, the demoness would have been killed either way, she was spying on Toga, but Kimi would have preferred to do so where the spatter would not ruin perfectly beautiful cushions. Unfortunately, in that instance her temper had gotten the better of her.

Thankfully, with age came self-control. She was in no danger of actually killing anyone over the current matter, but she appreciated Kento’s concern. She smiled slightly at the secretary, forcing her violent nature into absolute submission.

“How wise of them,” she said quietly. “Perhaps humans are more prescient than This One has believed.” *Or perhaps they have a care for their frail little lives.*

“More likely they are afraid of not attending,” Hisao snorted and Kimi was pleased with his conclusions, if not his inability to keep his observation to himself. Or at least phrase it more diplomatically. *Ah, the curse of a blunt instrument*, she lamented.

“I have some small concerns for their responses, My Lady.” Kento continued as though the other two had not spoken, “Although their messages are circumspect, they indicate they intend to bring a significant party with them.”

“How significant?” Kimi felt her brow raise with interest. Her sudden anger had cooled, and her generally amused disposition was once more on display. Kento named a number that far exceeded what should be expected of a visiting dignitary. Too large to be overlooked, but too small to be considered a threat – even to other humans. “Each of the humans on the list proposes such a group?”

“More or less, Kimi-sama. We have more than adequate accommodations and stores, but-”

“More importantly,” Hisao interrupted, “that number is a show of force, and I recommend that you keep the visitors restricted to less than half of that. For their safety and ours.”

“Ours?” Kimi’s eyebrow was in danger of being lost into her hair, it had risen so high. A bubble of laughter pushed against the back of her throat. “Do you imply that This One might be in danger?”

“Nooo,” Hisao drew out the word in a strange way. His eyes met hers and she could smell his emotions as he struggled to find his way out of a verbal trap.

She let him escape with a flick of her hair over her shoulder. “Obviously. Your vigilance is appreciated. They are all welcome. You,” she pointed one sharp claw at Kento, “shall assign stewards to each lord to insure against misunderstandings that might otherwise become unpleasant.”

“With that many trained warriors in close proximity to our youkai and each other, unpleasant is the least of it,” Hisao muttered.

“Noted,” Kimi stated dryly. The captain flushed slightly, once again caught with his mouth speaking before his brain considered the consequences. She enjoyed his discomfort, but knew it would not do to show a preference for it. “The soldiers, those with the most experience among humans, shall practice in the lower courtyard, near the guest quarters.” Kimi continued with her orders. The lords were necessary

to make certain that the North would not only be defeated, but that peace would be possible in the wake of war. This was her duty to the West, and her gift to her son. The warlords would come into the military fold of the Saidai Mao, and they would do so willingly. She would not allow less.

Once her meeting was concluded, she left Sesshomaru's study and made her way to the family quarters. Kimi sat with the pups while they ate, listening to their chatter and assuring them their miko would soon return. Then she discussed domestic matters with the crass little imp, Jaken, before returning to business. She had only just been poured a cup of tea when a commotion in the hall disturbed her.

Kento knocked perfunctorily before entering. He began speaking even as he bowed, "The trees have sent a response. Bokuseno demands the West attend him."

Kimi could feel the tension in the hall. The tree messenger radiated the scent of damp wood and barely repressed anger. Flora youkai rarely expressed deep emotions, but the hot, dry taste of smoke scratched at her throat. Whatever matters the trees needed to discuss with the Saidai Mao were enough to push the messenger to the edge of violence. "Get the fastest flyer," Kimi ordered. The trees were slow to make decisions, but a powerful ally. Bokuseno had long favored the West, and if he was making demands, it must take priority before all other things. "This One will send an alert to Sesshomaru. That One will attend Bokuseno personally – notify the tree messenger." Kimi sipped her tea impatiently while the hawk youkai that would give her son the news was summoned. Her spies had not brought her any news that concerned the trees, but something must have happened – something dire – to stir the great magnolia in such a way. She would have to get more information.

A tall soldier, her feathers cascading onto narrow shoulders, entered and knelt, waiting patiently for her orders. Kimi felt the pressure of a laugh again, despite new, weighty concerns. Sesshomaru would be most displeased to have his time with the miko interrupted – but playtime with an intended would have to wait until a more appropriate moment. She gave the hawk directions to find the Western Lord, but called her back before the screens could close, "Do be certain to make your descent *noticeable*."

The Tashio males were incorrigible.

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Kagome sat on the step of a tiny hut deep in the border woods between the East and West, breathing slowly and trying not to let herself get angry all over again. She had hated the dragon lord after what he had done to Ko, to his soldiers, to herself. She hated him, and she wanted to kill him, to encase him in a sphere of purity until he turned to ash, screaming. And then she wanted to vaporize the ash. The woman in the woods had painted Ryukostokken in an even worse light – which she hadn't thought possible. He was a monster who abused and tortured men, women and children for his personal gain and sadistic tendencies. But what he did to the woman - not just the abuse, not just her death, but *erasing* her, making her over into Kagome just to get back at the priestess - it was unconscionable. Unforgiveable. Not only was the woman made to suffer, degraded in life, she was not allowed to die as herself. Kagome would have taken that woman's place in an instant if it had been possible, not just to spare a life, but to show the dragon that he would pay for his crimes. That he could not do as he pleased. That the world would not suffer his existence any longer.

She shook her head, trying to put those thoughts, and the nearly uncontrollable anger, away. Sesshomaru had reassured her on their journey to the outpost that the woman would be laid to rest with her family. That he would find where she belonged and ensure that she was honored, despite the

manner of her death. And when Kagome had asked to join him on the battlefield against Ryukostokken, to be there to watch his days' end and make a strike against him if possible, Sesshomaru had become quieter than usual.

He had tensed, his youki bucking enough to make their flight uncomfortable for a moment. Kagome felt disappointment in him starting to grow, and she tried to smother it. She *was* weaker than him, less capable, less experienced. Hell, she had been kidnapped, *again*, just over a week ago. Still, she wanted him to give her the opportunity to defend herself, to mete out the justice that was deserved. To bring balance again, as was a miko's duty.

The low rumble of his voice brought her out of those thoughts. "I do not wish to ever see you in combat again, Kagome. Risking your life. Fighting to the death." Her heart sank, she understood, but she did not want to understand. In this instance, as obstinate and perhaps foolish as it was, she wanted him to bend instead of her. "However," he paused, brushing his nose against her hair and tightening his arms around her, "risk is inherent in life. The miko, the female, which has captured my interest above all others is not one who must be sheltered. You are a righteous warrior, Kagome, and I will be honored to fight our enemies with my mate at my side."

She was speechless, so tenderly shocked that it did not even occur to correct him that she was not yet his mate. "If," he continued, this time with a stern gaze and tight mouth, "you complete whatever training I see fit and take whatever precautions I deem necessary."

That rankled. Sesshomaru would place conditions, would determine that he knew best and would make the final decision. It wasn't unexpected, it wasn't even a deal-breaker for her, but it still rankled. "Okay, but those precautions can't keep me locked away somewhere safe or anything else like that. No loopholes, Sesshomaru." He had nodded, pressing his lips to her forehead and they had continued on their way in contemplative silence.

It had been only an hour on Sesshomaru's cloud from the site of the body to the Western outpost. Kagome wasn't sure what she had been expecting, perhaps a small fort or a stone tower, but the ancient shelter was not it. The place was clean – if not particularly tidy. One futon was still laid out and a few kimono and happi coats emblazoned with the symbol of the West were scattered on the floor. The soldiers had not been expecting them, but thanks to a few discreet blasts of youki they were waiting at attention in the clean swept yard when it came into view. The two women were holding practice weapons and glowing from exercise. Even sweaty and in simple practice attire their beauty and strength inspired admiration in the priestess.

Without using her reiki, which she felt would be rude, Kagome could not be certain what kind of youki they were, but their attitudes seemed to confirm her guesses. The shorter of the two had silky grey hair, bound into a bun, and eyes that matched. She had no markings, and was submissive in the extreme to Sesshomaru. The twitch of her pointed ears whenever Kagome shifted indicated her superior hearing, the sweep of a fluffy tail spoke of a most likely inu heritage. The other female was tall and long-legged. Thick golden feathers dripped like honey from her head. She had no ears to speak of, but her eyes were overly large and red, her mouth thin and hard. She stood, motionless, watching and listening while her lord gave orders to her partner. *A bird of some kind*, Kagome thought, trying to keep herself occupied with observations rather than images of the body lying desecrated to the east, *probably hanyou*.

Kagome frowned again at the deal she had made with Sesshomaru, and then conversely smiled. If his

methods of ‘training’ Inuyasha were anything to go by, she had a difficult road ahead of her. Then again, Sesshomaru was always concerned for her health. That dichotomy could end up being a hilarious balancing act for him. She put away her sandals and tabi and pulled out her socks and cheap modern boots. They looked ridiculous with her kimono, but considering what they had found in the woods and the quiet discussions between Sesshomaru and his two soldiers, she had the feeling she might need the mobility – soon.

As she stood, boots firmly in place, the bird youkai gave a sharp nod. Youki, yellow and light on the air, swirled in the yard concealing the tall female’s form for a moment. When it dissipated, a golden hawk the size of a motorbike stood in its place. The grey inu took off at a quick jog into the forest and with a powerful beat of its wings the hawk followed in the sky.

Kagome blinked in shock. “Hanyou can change?” she blurted, then blushed at her unintentional disrespect. Sesshomaru did not seem to take notice.

“It is rare and requires great self-control. The youkai parent must possess considerable power to pass enough on to the offspring to enable such transformations, and many hanyou do not live into adulthood, where such transitions between forms becomes possible.” His eyebrow quirked, just a fraction of an inch, as he walked to her. “How did you know she was a half-breed?”

Kagome frowned at the terminology, but knew that Sesshomaru did not use it as a slur. She had heard him say it insultingly before, and the acidic condescension and heavy disgust were absent from his tone. “She looks more animal than human, er, humanoid. And her youki is rougher, not quite like Inuyasha, but more like my friend Genshi.”

“Explain,” Sesshomaru ordered even as he took her elbow and led her back to the step to remove the boots she had just put on.

“All the hanyou I have met have youki, just like full-demons, but theirs is wilder, less...under their command I guess. Inuyasha’s is like a hurricane held back by a window. Genshi is more like overgrown vegetation – harmless and beautiful until you go digging around in it and find poison oak.”

“So my hawk soldier is an untamed garden,” he stated. The undertone of amusement in his voice was real, but Kagome knew he only allowed himself to express it to take her mind off of what they had seen and distract her from their grave circumstances. She was grateful, and now that she knew she loved him, the trip of her heart was less staggering, but the warm comfort of the feeling was even stronger.

“I did not say that,” she played along with his attempts at distraction, allowing him to remove her boots and usher her back into the shelter of the hut. Sesshomaru seated himself regally, which Kagome took as an indication that they would be staying, at least for a while. “Not exactly. But something like it. It’s strange,” she said conversationally as she started a fire to ward off the winter chill, “when I first began travelling through the well, youki was almost incomprehensible to me.” She laughed, “Almost as difficult to understand as reiki. The most I could tell about a demon was their general location. Well, except for you, of course.”

“Of course,” Sesshomaru stated, ego in evidence.

“Don’t think you are so special,” she cautioned with a grin, “you’re just so big!” There was a long pause, during which Kagome wished she could rethink her words as her face flushed dark red.

Sesshomaru's eyes took on an intent gleam. "Of course." This time the words were more purr than speech.

"Tea?" Kagome managed to choke out. She knew he was teasing her, knew that she could tease back and he would probably enjoy it, but embarrassment was hard to shake off. The change in the intimacy of their relationship was just too new to be comfortable. Enjoyable, definitely. Desired, obviously. But finding an easy demeanor in a strange, unimagined situation would take time. Coolly, he gave a brief, regal This-One-Shall-Allow-It nod, but she wasn't fooled. The corner of his mouth had lifted up and his youki seeped along the floor, curling around her ankles and calves predatorily. "I'll just get water, then."

She beat a hasty retreat through the mat that hung over the doorway and slipped on her boots to walk to the well. It was less than fifteen feet from the hut, but the exercise and winter air gave her a chance to cool her cheeks and wrestle her ridiculous grin into something resembling a mischievous smile. Life had not been easy for Kagome since she had fallen down the well years ago, but she had always been able to find the good in her situation. Sesshomaru's heated gaze was definitely part of the good.

Kagome had a full bucket in hand and had turned to head back inside when she felt a whisper of something familiar. She barely had a moment to place it and know it was no threat before Sesshomaru was in front of her, the breeze of his movement still stirring his hair. She glanced up at his face, and found that the Killing Perfection was once again living up to his reputation. His expression was carved from a block of ice: beautifully sharp and without mercy. He was prepared to eliminate any menace.

"It is all right, Sesshomaru," she said softly, placing one hand on his sleeve. The muscle in his arm flexed, but he did not look down. Kagome followed his gaze to the sky, but saw nothing. The faintly familiar youki was drawing closer, but its power remained indistinct. After a few moments of tense silence, he relaxed marginally. He was still stiff and ready for any action, but his aura no longer crowded hers.

"I believe it is for you," he said.

Puzzled, she turned to tip her head back against his chest, scanning the sky. "Where-" He lifted her hand in his and pointed one claw; after nearly a minute, it finally came into range of her human eyesight. A single leaf was caught in a draft, curling and winding slowly through the air in a gradual downward spiral. It would not have been strange, except that no breeze stirred the trees or brushed against their skin. Down and closer it floated, twisting gently. Kagome could clearly make out the blackened color before she recognized the youki.

Ko.

She gasped, involuntarily dropping the bucket to put a hand over her mouth. Cold water splashed against her boots and seeped into the cheap fabric, but the priestess could not spare a thought for it. She recognized the silvery green currents of power that bore the leaf – it was the same signature that had carried her from the North. Tears pricked at the backs of her eyes and she held out her free hand, Sesshomaru's palm still cupping the back of it. A single black leaf, the edges curled as though burned but the center still flexible and waxy, settled against her skin.

"Stay quiet, and remember this: black for treason, blue for danger to your allies, red for

attack."

"Treason," Kagome breathed. Her heart and mind were blank, and then a torrent of emotions and thoughts rushed at her. *Ko is alive. Ko is still at Ryukostokken's mercy. Ko is warning me. There is a traitor in the West. Ko is alive.*

Demon ears caught her whisper easily. "Among our own, or the dragons?"

That question pulled Kagome's jumbled thoughts to a standstill. "I don't know." She frowned, "we didn't have time to come up with a very complex code. And I didn't think to – oh," she stomped her foot in frustration and tried to stem the growing anxiety inside herself, "how stupid of me! I should have known better. This doesn't even help if we can't-

"No," Sesshomaru turned her in his arms, his voice stern, "you will not feel inadequate. To have made an ally and secured a spy among the enemy, to prepare for secretive communication, all while imprisoned – I would feel pride over any of my trained soldiers who accomplished this much. This is an excellent thing, Kagome. It will be extremely beneficial in our strategy to defeat Ryukostokken."

"But-

"Do you not believe This Sesshomaru?" He asked, refusing to give her room to criticize herself. "Do you think you know better than I what accomplishments merit praise in times of war?"

He was right, of course. It was damned frustrating; but also a relief. Kagome wanted to punish herself all over again for getting captured, hurt, healing the enemy. For leaving Ko behind. For not being better. The arrogant dog demon refused to allow it, and she was as grateful as she was put out. "Then what do we do, O Great Saidai Mao?"

"Hn." He seemed pleased by her respectful words, if not the sarcastic tone. "First you will explain your code. Then we will think on the meaning. By the time my soldiers have returned and we are ready to begin travelling again I will have determined a course of action and-

"With my help," Kagome interrupted insistently.

"With your input," he conceded, "I will have determined a course of action. You will make us tea," he held her wrist, careful not to disturb the leaf, and pulled her back to the hut. "We will sit. You will talk, eat, and rest. I will strategize."

"Is that all?" She mocked, trying to hold onto her irritation despite the warmth she felt towards his protectiveness, his praise, his willingness to admit that she might be of intellectual value. She wasn't going to let him think that reasonableness and having her best interests in mind excused mind-boggling arrogance. She toed off her boots next to his and followed him inside. "What will we do after the first twenty minutes?"

He settled himself down, producing the remaining half-full bucket of water ready to be made into tea. His response was as easy as it was shocking, "We may also have time for additional intimacy."

For some reason, Kagome thought she should have seen it coming. A pink blush covered her cheeks as she prepared the kettle. "Dogs," she muttered. "Why can't I stay away from dogs?"

Chapter 37: Taking Sides

Arashi should have gone directly to Ryukostokken when he arrived at the Northern Palace. He should have, but he was immediately waylaid by a young guard and taken to the barracks infirmary. He listened, he looked, he considered. When he was finished there, he delayed his meeting with the Saigo Mao further.

On his way to the training grounds, staying close to the shadows to avoid drawing attention to himself, he allowed his expression to reflect his thoughts. Ryukostokken was a child. A temperamental, sadistic little brat. He had the loyalty of every living dragon, despite the disease he had inflicted upon them. He had in his service some of the best warriors in Japan, even the mainland, despite his cruelty to the soldiers. He was capable of great strategy and intelligence, but often ignored his own logic to indulge his personal desires.

Ryukostokken was more than four hundred years his senior, but Arashi often felt that his most important task, his greatest burden, was to circle the lord like a watchful parent – moving sharp objects out of the way and picking up broken crockery in his wake. It was exhausting. So many things had been falling into place; Arashi finally had the piece of information he had been missing – the key knowledge that could secure the long-standing shogi game. Then he returned to the North to position Lord Ryukostokken correctly and found that the ruler had made a bigger mess than usual. One that was, again, Arashi's responsibility to clean up.

The dragon lord had lost the priestess. Not just lost her – she had escaped. That end result could have been worse, considering that Arashi would rather have the Shikon priestess alive with the potential to recapture or ally with her than dying under Ryukostokken's cruel claw. An alliance – even manipulated – might still be impossible, after what she had seen the lord do. Arashi made a mental note to seek out the wind youkai and hear her account of the matter. Although the more pressing concern was how to deal with the aftermath of the Saigo Mao's temper.

Three soldiers were in the infirmary after a sparring match with their lord; his violence had permanently maimed one. The same number of guards were now urns of ash and charred bone. Two valuable prisoners, who might have given up vital information, were dead. Not to mention the repairs to the palace that were necessary.

And then there were the ripples the priestess had left in his little pond.

Ryukostokken's consequences were frustrating. The human's actions had repercussions that could be far more dangerous to the future the Saigo Mao had envisioned. It was why Arashi made his way to the training grounds, to meet in secrecy with the more reasonable of the two captains in the Northern army. Arashi stopped in a deep alcove made for storing broken training weapons and picked up a worn pike. The ragged gray flag tied to the shaft fluttered half-heartedly as he stabbed it into the ground where it would be visible from the field. Within minutes, a tall youkai strode into the area carrying the severed pommel of a practice sword.

He called back over his shoulder, "That is the third time this week, you lazy, good-for-nothing slobs. If you can't parry my attack, how will you fare against an acid whip? Thirty laps – no youki!" The sound of muttered complaints and feet pounding away slowly faded as the two dragons considered each other.

"Captain," Arashi greeted him with a shallow nod that did not require him to look away.

“Hanyou,” the captain responded in kind. “Took you long enough. Another day and the castle might not still be standing.”

“So I have heard. Your ranks have taken some damage as well, it seems.”

“Yes.” Arashi waited patiently while the captain seemed to struggle with what to say. He had summoned the spy to this meeting, it was his place to set the agenda. “And yet the number of strong soldiers at my disposal is the same.” The Captain explained, in a careful monotone devoid of any censure, how several of his men had been ordered to the palace to guard a prisoner – the miko. They had returned soaked with the taste of pain, fear, and holy power. It had taken him a few hours to get the truth of the matter, but Ryukostokken had ordered the men injured, some brutally, so that he could discover if the human could heal youkai.

“The results?” Arashi asked, allowing interest to color his voice. Of course, he already knew she was capable of it, but he preferred to keep that knowledge to himself, at least for the time being. More importantly, he wanted to know if she had completed the task – healing the enemy of Sesshomaru.

The captain was silent for a long moment, his jaw clenching as though he did not want to answer. Their relationship had been centuries in the making, neither willing to commit emotions, opinions, or details to the other without the same in kind. Trust was still not absolute, but it had come a long way between two youkai who were seeking the best possible future for the North – a return to prestige and prosperity long gone. “I inspected them myself,” he finally admitted. “I did not believe their allegations of the human. It is true.” He paused again, and again Arashi waited. “That boot-licking administrator, Wei, came up with the brilliant idea to have her grow a wing...just to see if she could.” The two males shared a pointed look. The most carefully guarded secret in the North was not as secret as Ryukostokken would have liked. They both knew why the miko had been put to that test. The captain’s voice dropped a notch, “He had Jina brought in. The Saigo Mao cut it off himself.”

Arashi stilled. Jina was a golden female dragon Ryukostokken had brought back to the North when he returned from exile. No physical harm had ever come to her, ostensibly due to her age; she had not quite reached maturity. However, no one with eyes and ears would believe that she remained whole and unmolested for that alone; it was clear from her education and clothing that she was part of a treaty with some powerful foreign youkai. Arashi knew she was most likely the daughter of a Hindu dragon, traded to Ryukostokken as insurance on a promise of military alliance. If the Northern Lord was no longer concerned with keeping her in good condition, it implied that he did not feel he would ever have to trade on that agreement. The Saigo Mao was flying in treacherous skies if he was cutting ties to foreign powers.

It did not bode well for Jina’s future either.

Arashi purposefully waved a hand, dismissing her probable fate, “She is his property to do with as he sees fit.”

“Property that is not well-maintained is not long-owned,” the captain muttered. Arashi could not refrain from raising an eyebrow. The old saying was a veiled attempt at implying Ryukostokken should not have what he did not take care of. If it were true, there would be little belonging to the Saigo Mao. More importantly, if the Lord, or the boot-licking administrator, heard those words, it would be lashes for the captain - at best. The punishment for treason was more severe. And more final.

Arashi moved smoothly on, cataloguing the new information he had gleaned on the captain's loyalty, "It was successful?"

"More than Wei knows, or our Lord bargained for. Jina has confined herself to her room – Wei thinks she is frightened. She is, but it is because she fears what the Saigo Mao will do when he discovers it was not just her wing that was returned to her." The captain held Arashi's gaze seriously, "All traces of the pox have been removed as well. Her face is not scarred, her lungs no longer wheeze. The same is true of my men. Any damage that the pox had caused them has at least been reduced, if not completely erased."

Inappropriate laughter threatened to escape the spy's control. *A jewel beyond compare in his talons, beyond all compare, and he wasted it.* He cleared his throat to cover the reaction. "Anything else?"

"Some half-breed has collected the remnants of Kuren's soldiers and is causing problems along the border." *The prodigal son*, Arashi thought, *could prove extremely disruptive.* "My counterpart wants to move up the invasion and attack; I have counselled that we wait for reports from our agents."

"I had better report, then," Arashi stepped away from the wall where he had been casually leaning.

"We agreed on an exchange, hanyou," the captain frowned. Arashi paused, waiting to be asked for information. "If circumstances...of fate or...*right*...should change...on the field of battle..." The captain turned and pulled the pike from the ground, tossing it back into the weapon pile. He did not look at Arashi as he continued, "will there be a sign?"

It was not what he had been expecting, and Arashi considered the broad shoulders and scarred forearms of the captain for a long moment. It never hurt to have more pieces available to play with. "If such a thing happened, it could not be mistaken." The two dragons went their separate ways, saying nothing more. The captain to prepare his men to face the full might of the Great Saidai Mao and his army, the spy to salvage what he could and lead a child to his future.

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Sesshomaru waited impatiently for Kagome to finish her instructions to the little inu soldier, although none looking at him would know it. The two warriors had returned expeditiously, as was expected of those under his command, but it had cut short the distraction he had prepared for his intended. Her appearance was completely repaired before they had stepped into the yard, but her scent still announced their activities. He had not allowed himself more than touches and kisses, but despite the serious mien she had adopted as she set out orders for the treatment of the corpse, despite the sadness and anger about her, she still smelled of him.

The inu female was painfully aware of it, he was sure. She was barely old enough to be sent on such an assignment, and had been paired with the more experienced hawk hanyou for that reason. But even at her young age, she could still accurately interpret what her nose was telling her and was having trouble controlling her own reaction. Surprise, pleasure, a sense of security, a tiny bit of envy, and overwhelming awkwardness. He understood her emotions. A strong mate made him stronger, and in turn strengthened the West. Rumors of the Miko no Mao had no doubt spread with supply deliveries, and so the inu knew how powerful Kagome was. The envy was expected. Sesshomaru was always honest with himself, and any female would be envious of the one he choose to receive his attentions.

The hanyou was more circumspect in focusing on the task at hand, no doubt made easier by her dull sense of smell as well as her practical experience. The miko emphasized again that the soldiers would not be harmed in Edo, but that they could leave the body only with the old woman, Kaede. Sesshomaru repressed the urge to shift his weight. He had delayed their journey long enough. It was time to return to the safety of the palace and their duties. He opened his mouth to call to her, then closed it silently again. The daiyoukai would not let it be said that he did not know the value of patience

“Please answer any of Kaede-sama’s questions; I trust her completely and she can pass any information you give her on to our allies.” Kagome reached toward the body one last time, and a gentle pink glow left her hand to settle over the wrapped corpse. “Please, keep her safe.”

“Yes, Miko-sama,” they chorused, bowing. Kagome returned the bow, surprising the guards, and moved to his side. He handed her the bag from the future without comment.

How, he was not sure - given her weaker senses and his certainty that his face remained impassive, but she responded to his mood. “I’m sorry if it took too long, but this was important. If you are so worried about the time, can’t you use your light-ball thing?”

He might have responded to her uncanny observation, had he not sensed an unnecessarily public youki announcement of an approaching demon. He recognized the demon, as did the hanyou still in the yard. Kagome’s power reached out to him briefly, reminding him that she was not familiar with every youkai in the West. She spoke lowly, “Should I-”

“Sister,” the hanyou called out, and a golden-brown hawk dropped down from the sky to land in a flurry of youki and feathers at Sesshomaru’s feet.

“My Lord,” the guard greeted him, once the dust had settled around her human-like form.

“Why do you approach This One,” Sesshomaru asked without inflection.

“A message from Kimi-sama for the Saidai Mao,” she replied, still kneeling on the ground.

“Speak,” he commanded, silently curious as to what could have prompted his mother to send one of the best castle guards to find him. It was either something of great import – or conversely completely frivolous and designed to irritate him. He would not have been surprised if his dam managed both at the same time.

“Word has come from the trees. Bokuseno-sama demands your audience.” The guard waited for his response anxiously. The little inu gasped audibly. The hanyou ruffled her head feathers. Sesshomaru did nothing. He had not been summoned by another since before his father’s death. None had dared. If any had attempted to do so, he would have been forced to put them in their place for such disrespect. He was the Saidai Mao, the highest of all demons. Of course, Bokuseno had been one of his father’s most trusted advisors. He was an ancient tree that often took liberties considered disrespectful to Sesshomaru’s station – liberties that had earned him little more than verbal admonishments. Sesshomaru was aware that the magnolia youkai considered him to be a pup still; at nearly 800 years of age, the Killing Perfection was painfully young in comparison to one of the oldest demons in Japan.

“Demands,” Sesshomaru repeated coldly. He could have cursed the tree for placing him in such a

position. Although he would come if asked, for Bokuseno did not ask unless the matters were momentous, he could not allow his subordinates to see him agree to the *demand* of another. It was a requirement of his position. His will was his own. It had to be.

“Oh,” Kagome’s voice caught his attention. “That must be my fault, I am so sorry Sesshomaru-sama.” *What is she saying?* He did not have time to ask, as she continued, “I am sure that the messenger intended to say that *my* presence was demanded – and it was anticipated that Sesshomaru would escort me, yes?” The guard blinked – more like an owl than a hawk – and confusion rolled over her scent. Sesshomaru could sympathize, although he had a suspicion as to what Kagome was doing. “I’m sure the tree messenger – or...” she faltered for a moment, “it was a tree, right?” At the guard’s bemused nod, she smiled, “I’m sure the tree just got flustered in Kimi-sama’s presence. Who wouldn’t be with all that beauty and grace? His error should be forgiven, shouldn’t it, Sesshomaru? After all, it is really the fault of Kimi-sama and her overpowering youki that caused this misunderstanding. When we see Bokuseno-sama, we can let him know that the offense won’t be held against him.”

“Hn.” Sesshomaru fell back on his standard response. It was fortunate he was well known for being aloof, because he wasn’t certain he had anything else to say. When faced with a challenging political situation, he would not have expected the clumsy miko, who in the past had often been shockingly disrespectful and ill-dressed, to create a solution. She had made what was most likely an intentional insult that he did not wish to punish into a mistake that could be blamed on the one person whom no one would fault him for ignoring – his own mother. And she had done it in a way that complimented Kimi. His miko grew more breathtaking each day he knew her.

“Would you escort me, please, Sesshomaru-sama?” She looked up at him, her blue eyes wide and her red lips smiling, but the suppressed scent of anxiety emanated from her. *Breathtaking*.

“This One will take the miko to Bokuseno. Return to the Western Lady and inform her that this misunderstanding has been resolved.” Without any further commands, or acknowledgement that he would be obeyed, he formed his cloud and pulled Kagome close. They rose swiftly, and soon were speeding above the trees, far from prying ears and eyes. “Well done, Kagome,” he murmured against her hair.

She let out a heavy breath. “Holy hell, they acted like you were going to disintegrate something. All that anxious youki makes my stomach ache.”

“Your explanation was most fortuitous. I did not expect it,” he admitted.

“Even scandalous girls that pop out of wells know a dis when they hear it.”

“Dis.” Sesshomaru tasted the strange word carefully, wondering if the mandatory schooling she had spoken of included diplomatic training.

“An insult. Disrespect.” She leaned her head against mokomoko and he felt her tension ease. “That wasn’t exactly like Inuyasha calling a wealthy samurai a moron, but it’s nice to know that the principles to diffuse the situation are the same.”

“Such things happened often on your travels with my brother?”

“Oh, yeah. In fact, I remember once...” He listened to the fondness in her voice, if not each word, and

held her close as they traveled. While he planned for how to deal with Bokuseno, a small part of him whispered that in the miko he had found something worth protecting. The teasing laughter in his head sounded a great deal like Inu no Tashio.

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Kagome was not certain how long they were flying, but it was long enough that she began to fantasize about udon and rice balls, long enough that her mostly one-sided conversation with Sesshomaru ran out of steam and fell into comfortable silence. He finally descended into a small clearing, little more than a few yards of short grass next to a narrow stream. Without even expanding her reiki, Kagome was overcome with the sense of *presence* in the woods. The sun was low in the sky, and narrow shafts of light filtered through the branches overhead to glint on the water. Dust motes danced in the air, and added to the quiet serenity. But beyond the peace of the moment, there was something more, something waiting in those woods.

It was not malevolent, but it was watchful. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled with awareness; it was as if the forest was waiting for them cautiously – even suspiciously. Slowly, she reached for her power.

“Do not,” Sesshomaru said quietly, and so she stopped, puzzled. She would have thought he would encourage her to be aware and defensive. “We are guests in this aged place, it deserves our respect.” He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and Kagome noted that his youki was tightly reigned in as well, no longer rolling possessively over his surroundings. “Stay at This One’s side, and walk softly.” She nodded in understanding, although her anxiety rose a few levels. Never before had she seen Sesshomaru express a concern for the opinion of another, and he had reverted to the formal speech he used when there were other people around.

“Is-” She stopped herself, lowering her voice to a near whisper, and barely restraining her head from pivoting to look for unseen eyes, “May we talk?”

“Hn.”

She took that as a yes. “I thought Bokuseno was a friend of your father’s? Inuyasha has spoken of him.”

“Bokuseno-senpai advised the Inu no Tashio on several matters,” he responded noncommittally. Kagome was struck by the discord between the meaning of his words and the form he used. He implied that the youkai they were meeting with was a distant, respected colleague of Toga, but the honorific was one she would have attached to a more senior nursing student. Sesshomaru may have intended her to view the tree as a respected, more experienced youkai than himself. Kagome was aware that the daiyoukai always choose his words carefully, so she suspected there was a reason for his strange phrasing. What had been moderate anxiety rose to true concern. *Who could be listening that he is so guarded*, she wondered. Rarely had she ached so badly to use her power. Time crawled by as they walked

“Do you...” Her voice faded away as she tried to find a question that would give her the answers she needed without offending whatever was in the forest with them. *Is this dangerous? Is Bokuseno your ally? Who the hell is watching us!?* She swallowed hard and her shoulders twitched, trying to shake off the feeling that someone was just behind her, reaching out for her. Sesshomaru would not let anything

happen to her, she knew, and her imagination was getting the better of her. “Is – ack!” The toe of her boot caught against a root and she tripped, falling toward the ground with arms flailing. Sesshomaru caught her just before she would have hit dirt, and set her back on her feet with a gentle squeeze. His left hand remained below her elbow. *Just in case I want to go and make an ass of myself*, she thought sourly, *again*.

“So it is true,” Kagome glanced up, startled by the sudden consciousness of another youkai, “the Shikon Miko has made a second alliance with the Western Lord.” The voice was dry and genderless, the sound coming from all around her. Sesshomaru, though, seemed prepared and faced a huge magnolia tree. The perimeter of the trunk was at least sixteen feet, and the roots twisted and emerged from the ground as though they had dug so deep they had run out of soil and were forced to grow up instead of down. Although a wide open space separated the magnolia from the rest of the woods, there was no sky to be seen – its branches were so thick and spread so far that it touched every tree around it.

“This One has been informed you wish to speak.” The daiyoukai did not bow or offer introductions, and Kagome worried for a moment that the tree had been offended.

“Speak?” The disembodied voice spoke after a lengthy pause, “No, that is not my wish, Sesshomaru. I do not wish to speak. I wish to walk upon the land as I have not done since time forgotten. I wish to let my roots run across Japan. I wish to find That One whom has the power and responsibility to protect all others. I wish to seize That One in my branches and slap him for the rot he has allowed to fester. I wish to end a life, heir-to-the-West.” Leaves trembled overhead and Kagome tasted bile in her mouth. She still could not pinpoint the youkai, not without her holy power, but Sesshomaru had told her not to use her reiki. Every muscle in her body felt tense, every nerve ending frayed and anxious for something terrible to happen.

The forest was alive. Not just this one tree youkai, Bokuseno. Not just the fleeting presence she had sensed when they arrived. The entire forest; a living, breathing thing with one mind and purpose whose thoughts were centered on Sesshomaru and a wrong that had been committed.

“A wish is not action,” the silver-haired inu said calmly. Kagome blinked. There was simply no way that he did not feel the anger, the terrible retribution that was barely suppressed in Bokuseno’s aura.

“You are familiar with inaction, and I with the results. They are too atrocious to allow delay.” The voice became harder with each word, unflinching and certain.

Branches creaked, and the earth under her feet tremored. Gnarled roots popped free of the ground and leaves fell as the canopy began to descend. Kagome seized Sesshomaru’s sleeve with one hand even as her reiki sprang to attention. Without thought she summoned her power.

“This One agrees,” Sesshomaru stated flatly. Kagome blinked again. The tremors ceased abruptly. The forest stilled, and her power waivered and flickered in confusion.

“Then it is settled.” *What?* She had been certain only moments ago that the tree was going to attack, and this wasn’t Kagome’s first fight, she knew an aggressive youkai when she saw it. The bark on the trunk cracked and twisted, splitting apart to reveal the crude carving of a face. It was difficult to make out at first, but became more distinct – if not more attractive – as it spoke. “I will hold you to a personal oath, Sesshomaru. This shall be ended before Shutsuga, or by summer the trees will sever ties with the West.”

“Yes.” There was a flair of youki, and with her power raised Kagome could see a small green orb separate from Sesshomaru. Rich red power, slow and massive, twined up from the earth and wrapped around it, pulling the small bit of Sesshomaru’s power with it back into the ground. It was an oath, a binding, Kagome was sure. She had never seen anything like it before, but she knew what it felt like. Sesshomaru had made a promise and secured it by giving away a piece of his power to the tree. It wasn’t enough to make him weaker, but it might give the holder a measure of control if the promise was broken. Even the Great Saidai Mao couldn’t fight against his own youki. The strangeness of it all, the absolute confusion of the conversation and the conclusion, would have stolen her breath if the priestess from the future had not become disturbingly accustomed to the strange, unexpected, and downright weird.

“Okay,” she said, trying to remain pleasant and respectful, “this is not settled.”

“Miko,” Sesshomaru began, but Kagome held up a hand in the universal gesture for ‘shut the hell up’ and stepped around him, hands on hips.

“I apologize for not understanding the formalities here, you seem like an honored youkai, Bokuseno-sama, but whatever you think it is that Sesshomaru owes you, I want to know right now. Because if there is something threatening you or the West – we would have taken care of it anyhow.”

“Kagome-” She felt a firm claw on her shoulder but did not let the daiyoukai finish.

Blue eyes narrowed at the wizened face of the tree. “We are pretty busy right now getting ready to kill a dragon, but I’m sure we can find time to take care of your issue. There is *no need* to bind Sesshomaru’s power. His word is good enough.”

The tree held her gaze, and Sesshomaru added an arm around her waist, “Ka-go-me,” he repeated, this time with an iron warning.

She ignored it, her temper rising. Even at the beginning, even before they became allies against Naraku, she had known Sesshomaru to be unswervingly noble. The idea that anyone, much less an ally, would try to bind him to his word was disgusting. It called Sesshomaru’s honor into question. Kagome wouldn’t allow that to be done to anyone she cared about. “Take it back.”

There was silence. Between one pulse of her blood and the next, Kagome was briefly aware that she might have overstepped. She might have, as usual, jumped into a situation heart first and then found out she couldn’t swim out, much less tread water. Leaves stopped rustling. Air stopped moving into her lungs. The weight of hidden eyes and ritual oaths older than written memory pressed down on her. As if it was struggling to expand, her heart pumped once more, slowly, and the moment was broken.

Sesshomaru yanked her back against his chest, for once heedless of the hardness of his armor against her body. The breath was knocked out of her even as youki exploded around them. Deep red power filled the air, rising from the forest to choke out anything that opposed it. Brilliant green light flashed around her – Sesshomaru, she knew, barricading them. Later she might remember that he was uncharacteristically careful to remain defensive, rather than attacking Bokuseno. At the time, Kagome could only focus on her struggle for air and the nerve of the tree before her. He didn’t trust *Sesshomaru* to protect the West. The youki oath seemed like the polite feudal equivalent of a shock collar for an ill-trained dog.

Every time Inuyasha had been judged by his ears instead of his deeds, Miroku by his smile instead of his heart, Sango by her occupation instead of her morals, Shippo by his size instead of his determination, it all flooded her and mixed with what she knew of Sesshomaru. He had flaws - his inability to communicate his feelings for starters - but he was the most honorable person she had ever met. She *loved* him for it. And she wished people would just stop judging others.

Reiki flared to life in her fists, "Take. It. Back." As though it had never been, Bokuseno's power disappeared. Pink holy sparks snapped in the air at the sudden release of pressure. A dry chuckle reverberated in the large tree and rustled its leaves. Kagome stared in confusion.

"I believe you have confused your father's words, Sesshomaru," Bokuseno said lightly. "It was you who are supposed to do the protecting."

"This One has been attempting as much," Sesshomaru replied. His voice remained cool but his arm was almost tight enough around her waist to hurt. Kagome became aware that her feet were no longer touching the ground. "The miko," an inaudible sigh puffed against the top of her head, "creates challenges." Bokuseno laughed again, and Kagome understood that she had been insulted, however mildly. She wanted to take offense, but her head was still spinning from the repeated shifting: Bokuseno was an ally, then he threatened Sesshomaru, then they came to an agreement to be allies again, then he bound Sesshomaru's youki – how that resulted in laughter and shared comradery over silly human temperament was beyond her. *Men*, she mentally huffed, then corrected herself, *men and trees. Dogs and Trees?* That couldn't be right.

"I can see that." Bokuseno turned his crinkled eyes toward Kagome, "I do not question Sesshomaru's honor, priestess. The youki oath will not hurt him, it only allows me to know where he is should I need to send him a messenger."

"Then why set a deadline?" Kagome could feel Sesshomaru's returned tension and irritation – he no doubt wished she would stay quiet, but she couldn't help herself. If he was going to act so completely out of character and allow himself to be insulted, someone had to stand up for him.

"Youkai have long lives and so often move slowly. But the trees cannot endure this enemy another season." Bokuseno spoke at the same time she realized how stupid her reasoning sounded. As if the Killing Perfection needed a defender. As if he needed a clumsy, mortal girl to defend *his* honor. A hot blush flooded her cheeks. *I am an idiot.*

"Has Ryukostokken attacked your kind?" Sesshomaru lowered her slowly, until her boots touched the ground and his arm was secured just under her breasts. She tugged on him to let go so she could distance herself from her embarrassment, but he ignored her.

"He has," Bokuseno's voice hardened again, all traces of humor gone. The foliage to his left parted and two youkai entered, their heritage difficult to discern under the thick fur that hung on their bodies and their more-animal-than-human posture. Between them they carried what Kagome first thought to be a bundle of sticks. They gently set it down before Bokuseno, then retreated. For Kagome, nauseating realization slowly dawned.

A tree youkai, in a form that resembled a man, lay on the ground. Thick, green hair flowed over the grass like smooth water. His eyes were closed, the skin of his face a rich brown that was dusted with

darker freckles. One hand had fallen away from the body to lie open and the fingers were long and slightly gnarled like dry twigs. It was the cloth wrapped around him that first began to make sense of Bokuseno's anger. It might once have been a simple kimono, but the material had been torn, even burned, so many times that it more closely resembled old bandages than clothing. Where the flesh underneath was revealed, she could see scars. Layers upon layers of rough, broken skin – some old and smooth with time, others still angry and pink. There were round, shiny burns. Long, narrow cuts. Starbursts of puncture wounds. And, most disturbing, jagged ripped half-moons made by jaws and sharp teeth. One whole side of the youkai had been destroyed by hungry mouths. The meat and bone was exposed, some white-pink stubs of partially regenerated flesh emerged from under the scars, only to end in more recent, bloody bites.

Sesshomaru barely gave way in time to allow her to fling herself to the side before she vomited. She listened to the rustle of silk as he crouched beside her, his hand on her back, while she retched. "Such a display was not necessary." His voice was taut with anger.

"It was," Bokuseno disagreed. "You must know what has happened while you have roamed the West. You thought that the actions of the Northern Lord were of no concern, as long as he stayed in his borders, and the youkai of Japan have followed your lead these many years. Even I, who have seen tyrants such as Ryukostokken come and go, was swayed by your assertion that peace for Japan required that the North be left to die in its own time – or heal if it could. Even after I lost contact with the last of the tree youkai across the water, in his domain, I trusted in your vision of time bringing about a solution without war." Kagome heaved again, bringing up the last of the food in her stomach and trying to drown out the image of the body with Bokuseno's words and the steady circles Sesshomaru rubbed to soothe her. "It is in my nature to be patient, to allow new growth to cover over the injuries and diseases of the past. This," he paused, and Kagome knew both youkai were looking at the mangled corpse, "is the result of our patience."

She wiped her mouth on the edge of her sleeve and sat back on her heels, trembling. She turned to face Sesshomaru's chest, away from her sickness, but she could not look at the ancient magnolia or the remains at his roots. Although she felt shame for her weakness, she could not stand to see Ryukostokken's savagery again.

"You condemn This One now for a peace made a century ago, a peace upheld twenty years past." His tone was even, but from her position at his side, Kagome could feel the coiled tension in Sesshomaru.

"No," Bokuseno responded, "I condemn a continuation of that policy. Nature is capable of tremendous change," he seemed to change the topic. "Forests can be burned, and with time, the evidence is erased. A limb can be lost to a storm, and in a few seasons, the hole filled with nests and surrounded by new growth. I did not know the name of this youkai, but he was young, young enough to bend easily, to grow swiftly. It would have taken years, decades perhaps, of systematic torture to bring his body to this state – to eat away enough to pain and scar and incapacitate and still leave enough to rebuild. This was cruelty for the sake of cruelty, not by only one youkai, but many. Ryukostokken has sealed the North and behind his walls we have allowed him to create a culture of sadism and malice that defies nature. He is a wound on the earth that will not heal, but has been covered and ignored to fester and spread. His rot has infected those that serve him, and it must be cut out – or it will threaten us all."

Chapter 38: Helix

“Denka-ue,” the spy greeted Ryukostokken respectfully. The genuflection was timed perfectly to miss the swing of Wei’s sword. Although the dragon lord would enjoy seeing the day that the half-breed’s head was separated from his shoulders, it would not be an administrator who had the pleasure. And that day had not come – yet.

“Wei,” Ryukostokken said in a deadly soft tone. He would deal with the impertinent action later. For the moment, his temper was under control and he wanted to keep his ire reigned in. He did not regret the damage he had caused, to bathtubs and soldiers alike, while he vented his frustration, but that did not mean he intended to repeat it. The Dragon Lord was aware he was quick to anger, and it was his right to expend that rage in any manner, upon any creature, as he saw fit. Such was the power and privilege of one who would be Emperor. Who *deserved* to be Emperor. However, when not allowing his fury free reign, he was a shrewd youkai. It had been his own intelligence and fighting skills that had seen him across the continent and deep into territories of demons unknown in Japan while he was in exile. Ryukostokken knew he needed to clear his mind to be able to bring his intellect to attack a matter – hence the release of fury before his meeting with Arashi. He had bled several of his own soldiers, raped and eaten his way through a number of his prison cells, during his too-long wait for the return of the spy. All in an effort to remain calm and clearheaded while he considered what must be important information, to have kept the half-breed away for so long.

It had better be absolutely world-shattering, he thought as he pushed away his irritation at Wei’s presumption to attack the long overdue spy.

“Report,” he commanded. The bastard nodded and began a recitation of troop movements and interesting tidbits. The fate of his bounty on the human child that Sesshomaru had taken in was aggravating, but more interesting for the fact that it seemed the Lady Kimi, not her son, had seized the unlucky dragon tasked with carrying Ryukostokken’s pearls and message of rewards. Ryukostokken had not thought she would enter the battle, he remembered her impressive youki from his childhood – before even the pretender Sesshomaru was born. He smiled to himself, thinking that the pup must be grasping at straws to have wailed for his mama to help him.

“I have given new direction to my associates at the Western Palace. There will be an opportunity put in place in a few weeks’ time to reach the miko, my Lord.” *Weeks?* Ryukostokken did not want to wait weeks. *It has been too long already.* His frustration began to heat, but he forced it back down to hear the rest of the report. As Arashi continued, the captains of his army entered, followed by the blind wind youkai. He idly considered her stiff movements as she knelt in her place by the door, ready if he needed her. Any consideration for why she was not yet recovered was dismissed as the spy concluded, “Hirimoto moves north, toward the West. He brings only a small contingent, but my sources agree that his soldiers are fully prepared for war, and await only his signal to march.” The news was not unexpected, although his plans had been prepared on the assumption that the South would not mobilize until Spring. The spy’s recounting ended with a bow.

The dragon lord did not immediately respond. He considered the unmarred, grey skin of his most talented spy. The bastard had caught the pox in his youth, and the only outward sign of the disease was his extremely average height. It would have spurred some jealousy in Ryukostokken, if the spy were not hanyou. *Half-breed, only half worth living.* He made a slight sound and Arashi straightened. Familiar, flat black eyes met the lord’s own and he felt a moment of hesitation. Stain upon the honor of the North or not, Arashi had always given his loyalty to Ryukostokken; but there was something about

that cool gaze, so similar to his own. He wondered what secrets might be hiding behind abject obedience.

“Tell This One what you know of the East,” Ryukostokken demanded. The younger of his two captains caught his eye. Natsuo had argued heatedly with his counterpart when they discussed the losses taken by the dragons. The last report they had received confirmed that there was a youkai warlord trying to claim what was left of Kuren’s holdings. Captain Sou had insisted on caution, on waiting to find out more about the demon that struck with ferocity and ambush tactics. They were not even certain what kind of youkai he was – wolf, bird, bear. One half-crazed survivor with the better part of a pine tree impaled through his chest and neck had insisted that a dog with the tricks of a kitsune and the mouth of a gutter snipe had killed the rest of his group and left him trapped under a magic rock. Then the savage ate a bowl of noodles. The injured man had only survived because another group of scouts had interrupted the enemy’s meal and accidentally cut off the arm pinned under the rock. The idiot with that story had died from his wounds shortly after the telling, but Sou insisted that such wild tales should be dismissed or confirmed with facts before more dragons were sent to investigate.

“There has been much confusion and fear following Kuren's assassination,” Arashi began, and Ryukostokken was pleased. The spy related the stories of two human villages that had been decimated in the wake of fleeing, terrified youkai. “The few who survived have banded together and are moving up the coast in an irregular pattern. They do not appear to have an intent to attack the North, but they have engaged any dragon patrols they have encountered – with not insignificant success.”

“A dupe that grasps above his station and skills,” Natsuo scoffed. Ryukostokken appraised the captain. He was strong, brash, and had a thirst for blood and revenge on the West that rivaled the lord’s own. Natsuo carried a massive two-handed sword that had brought death to countless numbers. The dark green of his hair and bulky musculature would have made him a highly sought male for breeding – if not for the deep, pervasive scars across his body.

“You suggest that our soldiers can be killed by any idiot with a blade?” Sou asked coldly.

Natsuo’s lip curled, “Those that allowed themselves to be beaten did not deserve to fight for our Lord.”

“Perhaps not,” the more experienced captain continued, “but you chose the raiding parties and claimed they were best suited for the task. If those dragons were our best, then we may as well open the gates to Sesshomaru today – for we have no hope of defeating him.”

“Enough!” Smoke curled in the air over his head, and Ryukostokken’s command was instantly obeyed. He did not care for the barely leashed resentment of Natsuo or the clenched jaw of Sou – he would not allow any under his command to speak of the possibility of defeat. “You dare to question the might of This One’s army?”

Sou bowed in apology, and Wei interjected with undeniable glee, “Such insubordination can be punished with-”

“You have overstepped once today, Administrator.” The scent of sulfur grew thick in the air. “Do not make presumptions that will cost you your skin.” In the silence that followed, Ryukostokken breathed deeply to reign in his frustration and stared at the newest tapestry on the wall. It depicted Japan in silver thread against a black background. The mountains had been intricately detailed in gold, the rivers in a blue silk that caught the light and shimmered. He had regained ground on the lower island. Land that

had historically been the birthright of his line; land that offered harbor for the ships that would carry his armies to war. It was not enough, however. He needed to make additional progress in order to attack Sesshomaru where he was weakest. His plague had been halted, by what means he did not yet know, so he needed a new distraction for the dog.

A knock sounded at the door, and while Wei dealt with the interruption, the lord glanced at Arashi again. The hanyou would die, eventually. He could not be allowed to live once the war was over and Ryukostokken looked to secure his new empire for future generations. He could wipe out the upstart in the East, or he could turn that unwanted youkai into an asset – as he had made Arashi an asset. When the time came that those assets were no longer of use, they would be permanently discarded. *The death of one who trusts in the hand of the executioner is sweeter.* Ryukostokken savored the thought of the future.

“Denka-ue,” Wei approached the dais, his every emotion displayed on his face, “one of the patrols encountered a crane youki just west of Kuzumaki. He was injured before fleeing-” Ryukostokken could feel his temper flaring again. *Incompetence! The idiots that allow my enemies to live will not receive the same favor!* “-they are searching for the body,” Wei added hastily. “They removed this from him. The crane risked his life to protect it.” He bowed, and held out a folded sheet of low quality paper. The simple wax seal was cracked, but not broken, and one corner of the missive had been crumpled. A fine spray of blood decorated one side.

His tongue flickered out, and Ryukostokken tasted the note as he took it. It smelled of Wei and several other dragons that had handled it. It tasted of sweat and the thin blood of a bird. Underneath all of those things, he detected the faint, unmistakable scent of humans mixed with something canine. No dragon would ever admit to a weakness, but by design, their eyes were far stronger than their sense of smell. He could not identify if the original owner had been wolf, dog, or fox. The heritage of the author was quickly understood as he broke the seal and read:

Bring supplies to the eel valley at Oritsume. Any that have hatred for my half-brother may join me. Kill his supporters.

Ryukostokken was torn; his claw tightened involuntarily around the paper. The bastard whelp of his enemy, the son-of-a-human-bitch, the killer of his father, the half-breed, was alive and gathering supporters. Fury rose like lava in his chest, burning for revenge. The only thing that held him back from ordering the gruesome death of the dog-ling was the brutal, furtive logic that was humming in his head. *Let them spar. Let the sons of the cur Tashio circle and fight. Let them wear each other down and spill blood. They will not see my jaws closing around them until they have both been devoured.* That image cut his face in an abhorrent smile that brought the already quiet room to unnatural silence. The taste of fear, of suppressed flight, of hunger filled the air and his mouth split wider to emit deep, howling laughter that echoed on stone.

For long minutes he laughed, but as he controlled his amusement, the fire of vengeance still burned in him. “An idiot with a sword has indeed killed dragons. Inuyasha stirs in the East and bites at the heels of his betters. Natsou, you will go to the upstart bastard. Offer him This One’s support in his quest to kill Sesshomaru. If he cannot be persuaded – kill him.” Natsou grinned and bowed with relish.

The taller general frowned. “I urge caution, Ryukostokken-sama. We know nothing of Inuyasha, or his motives.”

“He is the brother of our enemy, Sou-san,” Natsou sneered, “that is enough for his death.”

“Reason for us to kill him,” Sou argued, “not reason for him to accept allegiance with the North. And if he is amenable, what is to say that you can persuade him? You are more likely to attempt to do so with your teeth around his neck, and when he cannot speak agreement through the fangs in his throat, you will say he refuses.”

Natsou snarled and would have spoken, but the calm voice of Arashi interrupted, “Inuyasha is simple, and uneducated in politics or strategy. He has a long-standing feud with his half-brother, made more bitter recently.”

“You counsel This One toward alliance with a hanyou?” Ryukostokken’s eyes narrowed. He did not like it when Arashi tried to sway him; it reeked of manipulation, even when the advice aligned with what the lord had already been planning.

“I am not capable of such, my Lord.” Arashi bowed. “It is my duty to tell you the facts as I know them, only you can determine the future.” Wei muttered about filthy trash keeping its mouth shut. Natsou snorted, Sou frowned. Ryukostokken smiled again. It was true. A bald stroking of his ego, but still true. The future was his to lay out as he wished.

“Speak,” he ordered the spy.

“The half-breed Inuyasha broke into the Western Palace some weeks ago and caused a great disturbance. My source witnessed a fight with the captain of Sesshomaru’s army. It seems Inuyasha made a claim on the miko. The brothers destroyed part of the palace, arguing over her, and the younger barely escaped with his life.”

“Who is this miko, that the sons of Inu no Tashio draw blood for her?” Natsou spoke, and it was obvious he regretted his words, and the implication that was unspoken. *Who is this miko that the Saigo Mao desires her so greatly?* Smoke curled from Ryukostokken’s nostrils and what remained of the intercepted message was crushed into a ball.

“That, I cannot say,” Arashi answered. “Her origin and value to the brothers is not within my knowledge – although I continue to seek it out. I can only say that the hatred between the dogs resulted years ago in Inuyasha cutting off Sesshomaru’s arm, and their animosity has only grown since that time.”

“Did I not hear that they fought together against Naraku?” Sou asked, his brow furrowed. Ryukostokken recalled some piece of information like that as well. The legendary Jewel of Four Souls was said to have been shattered, and a spider hanyou wrecked havoc on the West and East as he tried to claim its power. The lord knew that Inuyasha was said to be responsible for the death of the spider, but few other details had reached behind the walls of the North.

“That story has been twisted, Taisa-sama.” Arashi supplied, “Inuyasha felt that Sesshomaru stole the kill from him, and prevented him from recovering the jewel. He and the humans that serve him were denied personal vengeance against Naraku as well as the power of the jewel.” Ryukostokken considered the information. If a hanyou found *His* miko, he would no doubt covet the fresh-smelling creature that could heal youkai. Inuyasha, the cowardly pup, would have tried to steal such a prize away from his hated brother at the first opportunity. The only question he had was how Sesshomaru

had driven the half-breed – the one who cut off his arm and killed Ryūkotsusei – away from the palace. He resolved the matter with an internal snarl, no doubt the weakling had called guards to protect him from his little brother.

“It will be done,” Ryukostokken affirmed his decision to approach Inuyasha.

“Then allow me to manage the negotiations on your behalf, my lord,” Sou offered. “Natsou is not experienced in matters that don’t end in organs on a spit.”

Wei coughed back laughter and Natsou looked furious at the insult. Arashi murmured, with surprise, “The senior captain would relinquish his place at our Lord’s side?”

Sou was correct, not that the lord considered a quick temper a detriment in his captains. But as Arashi had noted, the offer was suspicious as well. The assignment was not prestigious – so far from where the battle against Sesshomaru would take place – and Sou had always been an annoying voice of caution and even peace. Thin flames of fire escaped the corners of his mouth as he considered that he would need to keep a closer eye on Sou. “Arashi, attend This One.” The spy had not moved or even blinked during the display, which marred Ryukostokken’s enjoyment slightly. The half-breed should have been barely holding onto his courage, as was appropriate given his station and strength. “You will go with Natsou and manage the negotiations. The Captain will handle any...repercussions...if the outcome is not as This One desires.”

His subjects bowed and left Ryukostokken with a much lighter mood than he had experienced since the miko escaped. Sesshomaru was no doubt trembling in fear over the thought that his miko had been in the Great Dragon’s claws and could be taken again at any time. He imagined that the Saidai Mao was weak from his bout of pox, leaning upon his dam for courage, and gathering his guards close in a futile attempt to secure the human females he surrounded himself with. Soon the sniveling dog would be harassed by his own brother; either one of them would die, a cause for celebration, or they would weaken each other in advance of the Northern attack. His plans had not progressed as he had intended, but his destiny would not be altered.

They would all be at his mercy.

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Sesshomaru’s intended had fallen into an exhausted sleep shortly after night came to Bokuseno’s glade. He made her as comfortable as possible with mokomoko, and the magnolia assisted him by creating a sheltered bed of soft moss for her to rest on. While she slept, the two youkai talked of the dragon and what must be done. The Saigo Mao had intended for the trees to blame the West for the mangled corpse and others like it, that much was easy to discern. Although the youkai that found the bodies half-hidden on the Western border were taken in by the deception, the Great Magnolia was not so easily misled. He had still summoned Sesshomaru, of course, as it was the responsibility of the Saidai Mao to deal with the lesser lords, but Ryukostokken had not been successful in driving a wedge between the allies. Instead, his actions had brought the overly ponderous trees to a swift and brutal conclusion: the dragon must die.

Bokuseno spoke long into the night, imparting information gathered by the plant youkai and more

cognizant spirits of the earth regarding the movements and intentions of the northern troops. Darkness was deep and silent when talk of war subsided and turned to other topics.

“So you will take this child as your mate,” Bokuseno stated.

“Woman,” corrected Sesshomaru quietly, so as not to wake the subject of their discussion. He studied the curve of her cheek and the white puff of her breath in the winter air as she slept. With a thought, his fur slid tighter around her shoulders to keep her warm. “By human standards she is an adult.”

“Ah, humans. They all seem as children to me, even those grey and stooped and wrinkled.”

“Some are wise beyond their years,” Sesshomaru noted.

“This is so,” Bokuseno agreed, “but I would never have thought you would be one to notice.”

“Little goes unnoticed by This One,” Sesshomaru stated, then corrected himself, “...for any period of consequence.”

“Then it has not escaped your notice that your intended is quite human – and holy. I imagine that caused a disturbance at the palace.” The tree’s curiosity was tangible, and Sesshomaru indulged it for a while with a recounting of her arrival and reception at his shiro. He took no small satisfaction in the surprise and respect that emanated from the tree with the tale of Kagome’s kidnapping and escape. The daiyoukai felt his turbulent emotions from that time ghosting through him as he retold her story. Without thought, he lowered himself to sit beside her among Bokuseno’s roots so that her feet pressed against his hip and his hand could rest on her calf.

“You have found one worthy of you, Sesshomaru, worthy of what you may become.” Bokuseno spoke softly, almost reverently, “It is a thing to be cherished, for all the years you may have together.”

Sesshomaru felt his mouth draw down and his hand tightened in reflection of the frustration ever present in his chest. “Years?” He scoffed, his voice low and unusually bitter. “What years we may have are but a blink if This One cannot cure her mortality.”

“You think such is not possible?” Bokuseno’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Of course it is possible,” Sesshomaru answered immediately. “This One will not allow her to die. It will not happen.” He knew that his statement would seem arrogant, but it was only the truth. He wanted Kagome at his side, smiling across from him, moaning under him, walking ahead and teasing him, protected in his arms, yelling up at him with her red cheeks and ridiculous threats, for all of his long life. He would put every drop of his determination and power into securing that end, and so he could not possibly fail.

“But you-”

“This One,” Sesshomaru interrupted the tree, “only states that it has not yet been resolved.”

Crackling laughter, loud enough to cause Kagome to stir and several nocturnal animals to be startled in the darkness, burst from the tree. Sesshomaru glared at him and wrapped his youki around the miko to muffle the noise and keep her slumber undisturbed. “You find This One’s frustration amusing, tree?”

“Indeed,” Bokuseno smiled. “I am most amused that you have not found the answer.” His eyes sparkled with sap, not dissimilar to unshed tears of mirth. Sesshomaru’s irritation rose, but he was not given the opportunity to vent. “Tell me, young inu-lord, have you not given the miko a bit of your youki?”

Sesshomaru nodded sharply. That much would be obvious to a demon of Bokuseno’s power. The green energy that he had used to cradle her damaged reiki had dissipated long ago, but he had continued to place more inside her. The female seemed to constantly be damaging herself and needing his assistance. The daiyoukai would not admit it to the tree, but he would have found any excuse to do so if she was not injured; he liked the sensation of his power inside her. Liked the smell of her, the taste of her, the feel of her with his essence entwined with hers. Even as he thought it he sent another thin thread of youki heat under her skin. Kagome sighed in her sleep and relaxed further with a soft smile. Bokuseno laughed again and Sesshomaru knew the tree had sensed his action.

“You have already found your solution, Sesshomaru, and instinctively put it to use.” Information and experiences began to fall into place in the demon’s mind as the tree explained, “A human life force burns hot, and quickly uses up all of the fuel their delicate forms can sustain. A demon’s life force is strong, and burns so slowly it does not even seem to consume any fuel. It is nothing to an exceptionally powerful demon to add the substance of another body to his own. If the youki is strong enough, plentiful enough, it can keep a human vital and young for as long as it would have sustained the demon alone.”

Sesshomaru had to force himself to remain still. His claw, already holding Kagome’s leg tightly, wanted to pull her to him. To crush her against him and breathe in her scent to find the truth. His mouth wanted to open, to drink in the taste of her and search for her mortality. His youki wanted to surround her completely, flood her body and make absolutely certain that she was truly a part of him. He did none of those things. Instead, he inhaled, only slightly deeper than usual, and considered Bokuseno’s words.

The solution was so simple, perhaps too simple, and that was why it had not occurred to him. He had assumed, given that no human he knew had been given the lifespan of a demon – even those few who happily mated youkai, that the answer would be complex and fraught with hazards. Then again, perhaps it was – had been. Simple and intricate. Serene and dangerous. If the tree was correct, then only the most powerful youkai would be able to provide enough energy to extend a human life. There were few that even approached his level, and the chances that any of them had desired to keep a human were small and diminished the pool of potential successful instances that he might have heard of. Complicating matters further was the innate substance of youki. It was a personal thing, and extension of body, mind, will, and soul. Few beings would welcome the invasion of another’s will into their own body – few would want to experience such a sensation from the giving end. If both parties were willing, and the youki strong, problems could still arise if the human body was not receptive or resilient. Sesshomaru considered that such an issue may have prevented his father from creating a lasting bond with Izayoi. The hime had been willing, Sesshomaru had never questioned her love for or devotion to Toga, even in the bitterness of his youth. However, she had not been strong – not like Kagome was strong.

His intended had toned her body with years of fighting and working. Her mind was sharp from formal education and strategy learned in the heat of battle. Her will was impressive. Never had Sesshomaru met another as determined, as focused, as Kagome. Except perhaps Inuyasha, and that could be

attributed in no small part to the hardness of his head. Her soul as well was not only generous, willing to share space with his youki, but also willing to give up a part of itself as she had done for the clay priestess. And although in theory her reiki should have made such a joining more difficult, battling his youki instead of allowing him to fuel her – dominate her at times, it made the process so easy as to be...not forgettable – never that - but almost a foregone conclusion.

She had invaded him first, given to him, supported him. Merged with him, on a certain plane. Sending his youki into her had been something he did almost without thought; which, upon reflection, was nearly alarming. He had never attempted such a thing prior to her reiki being injured. He had never considered that such an act was possible or desirable. Perhaps it was merely the recent memory of her successful use of power to assist him, perhaps it was some long-dormant instinct in him that knew, even then, that she needed his power. He needed her to have it.

Bokuseno was correct. He had already found the solution to the dark seed of fear that had been planted in his heart. He had everything he needed to keep Kagome vibrantly alive. As long as he took breath, she would as well. He must only endeavor to hold her at his side and maintain a connection with her that he avidly desired – one that he would deepen and expand at the soonest opportunity. *White blossoms and cherry wood. Cinnamon and sweet carnations. Warm, salty breezes.* Sesshomaru slipped more of his youki under her skin, gradually increasing the power until her cheeks grew pink and she murmured in her sleep. Until his mind swam with the knowledge of her that flooded in - overwhelming and tantalizing at the same time. Until his skin tightened and grew warm. Until her reiki responded, snaking back into him and curling into a ball of heat deep inside him. Until the creak of wood snapped him out of an intimacy that he was shocked to realize he had initiated in front of Bokuseno and might have continued if not for the scrape of branches that amounted to a discreet cough.

He forced all emotion from his face and straightened from where he had unconsciously leaned over his intended's prone form, breathing in her scent, his body preparing for further intimacy. Once he was certain his thoughts were locked behind an icy mask of indifference, he raised his gaze to the magnolia.

“Hn.”

The laughter of the ancient tree did not detract from the sense of tranquility that settled over the daiyoukai. Not even time could take her from his side. Of course, it had been inevitable, he assured himself. He never failed in a conquest.

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“Off to follow Natsuo, hanyou? Do you never tire of being on your knees?” Ko let her barb hang softly in the cold air of the courtyard. Arashi paused in his movement, halfway down the opposite arcade, and slowly turned to face her.

“Do you?” He fired back, but his voice was honest and smooth, softening the blow.

“It does afford certain opportunities, does it not?” Ko was shivering in the winter night. She had waited for hours for the spy to appear where they could speak without being heard, and she longed to move past the dance of insults and probing so that they could exchange information and go their separate ways.

"I myself appreciate the opportunity to remain breathing. But it can also provide unique experiences – I get to meet many individuals."

He got to the point quicker than usual, she thought with some mirth. "As do I. The most recent guest of the North was most unique."

"I understand the guest was not...satisfied with her stay."

"She will live," Ko responded shortly. She almost stopped there. Arashi was sly, and after years of dancing around an association, she had come to trust that whatever information she gave him was not used to hurt her. What the hanyou did use it for, she still did not know. The stakes were higher, now; she had other outlets for her news. If Kagome still lived, she would receive the messages Ko sent and that information would help to destroy Ryukostokken. If the miko had died... "Unfortunately, the etiquette of this court was not to her liking," Ko said. "She prematurely cancelled her stay."

Arashi was silent for a long time, but Ko could feel his eyes on her. She wished she could risk removing the film from her sight so she could take in his expression. He finally asked, "Was she dissatisfied with the environment, or the host, do you think?"

That gave Ko pause. *What is he up to, with such a distinction?* "She seemed unusually...forgiving. Her...her..." She struggled to find the right words. Words to describe the miko that might be her salvation, *was* her hope, without giving too much away. "Her heart is generous," she finally settled on an opinion, "but some few cannot be forgiven even there."

"That is...interesting."

Ko could feel her eyes widen involuntarily. An uncertain shiver ran up her spine, making her wonder if she had said too much, if she had misjudged the spy that seemed to thrive under Ryukostokken's boot - the hanyou with the careful speech and the respect of many, many dragons. Her uneasiness lead her to ask, "Is your interest personal?"

"Is yours?" He countered.

"How dare you," she uttered with a hiss. For the first time in years her anger was uncontrolled, instantly sparked. Wind swirled around her. "My family, my entire people murdered, my body and honor no longer my own, fouled and shamed by that high and mighty *thing* – how dare you ask-"

The rest of her accusation was cut off with a claw around her throat. The pressure did not close off her air, but the sudden sensation of hot skin, rough callouses, and dangerous claws was enough to snap her mouth closed. The urge to fight back was strong, but years of captivity had taught Ko that while she might win one such battle – the next one would leave her twice as bruised. "Do not," he hissed in her ear. "If that is what is in your mind, do not speak it. Do not dare to voice such treason against Ryukostokken."

"Why not?" She blurted the question without thought, but did not regret it. Arashi could have killed her for what she said; he could have dragged her before Wei or the lord himself and been rewarded for bringing her sedition to their attention. He did not. If his careful but unyielding grip was any indication, he would not. The question repeated in her mind, *why?*

“The North of Ryukostokken is not a place for dissention, Ko-san.” She held her breath at the use of the honorific, something she had not had attached to her name in years. “You have survived, hold that as your honor and continue for a while longer. Speak your heart again, and I will not be able to be so forgiving – or forgetful.” His hand fell away and she listened to his near-silent footsteps as he moved across the courtyard. No other ears in the palace but those of a blind youkai could have caught his low mutter, “I should not now.”

Her thoughts were tripping over themselves, trying to make sense of the hanyou’s strange behavior. She had never considered him more than an outlet for her impotence during her slavery to the North. He parried words with her as though her station had no bearing on her honor or person; his barbs were accurate, but not used to denigrate. He was not kind, but she had never seen or heard of him participating in the overt cruelty Ryukostokken and many of his soldiers enjoyed. He had a quick mind and a polite demeanor that was refreshing for one like her who spent her days ignored or degraded. To imagine that he would threaten her, protect the name and position of the daiyoukai that had leashed them both – held their lives in his bloody claws, it was completely foreign to her. The idea that he might do so out of a concern for her welfare, perhaps at the expense of his own, shook her enough that she physically stumbled, falling back against the rough stone wall behind her.

In the next instant, his strange manner was dismissed as though it had never existed. “Was the guest well enough to travel safely?”

“Y-yes,” she answered. She blinked several times, trying to recall the controlled cool that she reserved for their brief interactions. It was nowhere to be found.

“We part ways, now.” A wry tone affected his speech, but it sounded forced to her ears, “Back to our knees to serve-” his voice hardened, the change so fleeting she wasn’t certain she had heard it, “-to take opportunities where we may.”

Ko listened to him turn away, his boots stepping lightly on the snow-dusted stone. At the last moment, she banished the mist from her eyes to see the spy for the first time. He was not overly tall, but the width of his shoulders and his bulk was surprising for a figure that walked so quietly. His hair had been bound into a short, thick tail with wide bands of leather, revealing the pebbled grey skin of his neck. It was only a glimpse, but she ingrained it on her memory, puzzling over the familiarity of his voice when he had spoken so seriously. It reminded her of something or someone, what she could not say for certain, but a whisper in her mind told her that the knowledge was important. She reached a trembling hand to her neck and felt the lingering sensation of heat where he had held her.

Kagome, she thought desperately, live and bring your Sesshomaru down upon the North like a vengeful kami to obliterate this place. Soon, before the wind changes.

Chapter 39: Conception

A glorious morning, Kimi thought with satisfaction as she transformed, letting her youki settle around her. She smoothed one elegant hand across her kimono and licked the last drop of blood from her fangs. *Fresh, cold air and fresh, hot breakfast*, few things could bring a finer start to the day. Of course, her mood had been helped by the return, just before dawn, of a tired hawk youkai. The guard informed Kimi that the message had been delivered and Sesshomaru had taken the priestess to meet with Bokuseno. The exact details of the conversation had left Kimi chuckling, and nearly beaming with admiration for the little miko. Any female that could handle the pride of one such as Sesshomaru so delicately was a great find. It certainly did not hurt matters that Kimi herself had been so well complimented at the same time. Her only disappointment in the matter was that the hawk had not interrupted any intimate activities. It would have irritated Sesshomaru, and she did so love to ruffle his fur.

Kimi used a bit of youki to lighten her step as she walked into the castle, intent on checking on the pups before she began the day's tasks. Kento appeared at her side, as if from thin air, and began reviewing important items without hesitation.

"Good morning, Kimi-sama. I trust your hunt was satisfactory. A scout has been sent out to greet Hirimoto-sama, as you instructed, and escort his party here. Your correspondence has been drafted, and awaits your final approval. The sentencing of the thief suspected of stealing from a house abandoned during the plague is scheduled for today; I have taken the liberty of preparing your needles, should you wish to conduct interrogations yourself. Aki-san will arrive in an hour to offer you a selection of materials for the garments you ordered. Hisao-san is available now to report prior to beginning today's training exercises. A kitsune has requested employment at the palace, Jaken's objections have been noted in my report. And your tea is ready." He offered her a neatly inked document and continued at her side, a charcoal stick scratching softly on the stack of paper in his hand as they approached the family wing.

Kimi read over the single sheet with a raised brow and a smile. Once Kento had accepted her as a competent superior, and with some pointed direction from Sesshomaru, he had shown himself to be an outstanding secretary. Nearly every desire was anticipated and provided for with excellent penmanship and calm demeanor. *If he had only-*

"I have directed the kitsune to wait in the tori room, should you wish to interview her."

Ah, there it is. Truly, an excellent subject. Kimi refused to compliment him, changing the subject instead. "This One has not seen such a writing instrument before." The scratching stopped, and she watched him study the unique item as she looked in on the pups. Emi and Shippo still slept, but Rin smiled and waved from her futon where she was looking over several bound scrolls with pictures. It was still early, but Kimi judged the light coming in through the outer screens to be sufficient for enjoying the artwork. She nodded in response and slid the door closed again.

"I cannot take credit for the design. It is a crude attempt to replicate something similar that Kagome-sama uses." He fingered the thin reed that had been wrapped and bound with string around the charcoal. "Still, it is considerably more portable than brush and ink." He returned to his notes and they descended again. She wondered at the strange articles the miko had with her. Curiosity about their origin and creation had thus far been answered only with ignorance or vague, poorly executed misdirection. It was extremely curious. The charcoal stick, the bound scrolls with impressively detailed art, the sticky paste for cleaning teeth, the prophecies – they combined with the already fantastical combination of

power and humility, intelligence and ignorance, easy joy and fiery temper, a graceful face and ungainly form. The human was an intricate confusion. It would be entertainment for at least a few hundred years to watch Sesshomaru attempt to untangle the mystery. Kimi herself already had several possible explanations in mind, but she would test them on her own counsel.

Hisao's youki was already lapping at the entrance to her reception room when she approached. Unlike Kento, Sesshomaru's personal approval of Kimi's position during his absence was not enough to bring the captain's personality under control. That he bowed to her authority and expertise was not in question, Hisao was simply not one to trust easily. His scent, at least, was devoid of irritation as she seated herself and allowed Kento to pour tea. In deference to her excellent mood, she did not make him stew in his own impatience as long as she could have.

"New preparations for training and security during the Full Moon Council have been completed, Kimi-sama." He gestured to the map laid out on her low table and continued, "Border patrols have..." She took in every word, all the while surreptitiously seeking out the youkai waiting in the tori room. The kitsune was quite powerful, although she did an admirable job of controlling and concealing her youki. There was little even Kimi could discern from the aura around her except her gender, heritage, and a range for her energy level. *Admirable, indeed.* She focused her gaze on Hisao, who went on about specific skirmishes the soldiers had put down with wild youkai and human bandits. Minor issues such as those had been steadily increasing in the wake of the plague, and the strain of dealing with them while holding back from the enemy he wished to attack was clear in the tightness around his eyes. His jaw and neck were so tense from the effort of holding his instincts in check that Kimi wouldn't have been surprised to see a joint pop out of place. *The rigid captain needs a distraction, she decided, before he injures himself.*

"Kento," she interrupted the military report, to which Hisao repressed a snap of pique, "bring the other matter forward now." Pleased that she did not have to be more specific, Kento disappeared and was back before Hisao could decide his audience was over and excuse himself. The small, sassy sparkle of orange youki garnered the captain's attention and he straightened, tightening his jaw further. Kimi almost rolled her eyes, he most definitely needed to relax or he would transform and rampage north before everything was in place.

"My Lady," Kento bowed, "my I present Aina-san, teacher of the Nara school for kitsune. Teacher-san desires employment at the shiro."

"Step forward," Kimi commanded. Light steps, accompanied by the almost imperceptible, and unquestionably magically contrived, sound of bells, quickened across the floor to stop an appropriately respectful distance from the dais. Thick, coppery hair slid over one slender shoulder to fall on the floor as the female knelt. Her form was lithe, her skin pale and faintly pearlescent. If Kimi had not been so attentive to all of the youkai in the room, she might have missed the lightning flash of interest from Hisao as the kitsune's scent reached him. The Lady took in the sweet fragrance with a wicked gleam of intent in her eye. *White fukiran. Candied plum.* The perfect distraction to keep Hisao from being an annoyance or prematurely starting an open war.

"You may look upon This One," she stated, not bothering to hide the glee in her voice. Hisao smelled grimly inconvenienced. Kento smelled concerned. Dramatic cheekbones and dark red lips would draw the eye of any male, but it was the teasing glint in the kitsune's eyes that promised to make any chase of epic proportions. Vivid green met devious citrine and the two females shared a smile that exchanged

a great deal of information – all along the lines of *stirring up the cold, straight-laced ones is the most fun and excitement ahead*. “What place would you have in the House of the Saidai Mao?”

Kento looked up from his charcoal scratching, mouth open to offer a correction, and Hisao frowned even deeper. Kimi was aware that the little fox had approached about working *at* the castle, not *in* the castle, but she simply could not let the opportunity escape.

“Any skills I have are yours to put to use as you wish, Iwakura-sama, Lady of the West,” she said demurely.

“And what skills would those be?” Hisao practically growled, interjecting himself into the conversation. “Illusions? Trickery? This is not a *road inn*,” the disdain in his voice implied that something less virtuous than kitsune schooling was expected in such an establishment, “but a place of honor and rule.” Kimi wanted to clap her hands in glee. The kitsune rose to the bait, ready to play the game of words, but the captain was so serious that he would be an easy target for such an accomplished teaser.

“Oh,” the fox’s brow furrowed prettily, “I had not realized that the residents of the palace were so straight-laced, Rojin-sama.” Hisao bristled at the respectful title – for an elderly uncle. Kento coughed discreetly and covered his mouth to hide his smile. Kimi did not bother attempting to conceal her enjoyment. “Please do direct me in what sort of manner you feel the Lady might best be served, if you speak for her.” The gauntlet was thrown down with an innocent smile.

“I speak,” he answered tightly, “for the security of the West. Slight-of-hand and foolish jokes will not be tolerated.” The black markings on his jaw and neck began to shimmer.

Reluctantly, Kimi ended the confrontation before Kento would need to consider replacing furnishings. “Are you trained in weapons, as well as words?”

Green eyes turned back to her, still sparking with the excitement of a frivolous argument, “Yes, Lady. I have trained many years with shuriken and hamidashi. My martial skills are humble, but sparring partners have credited my ‘trickery’ as making up for lessor experience.”

“You come from Nara school,” Kimi continued, rolling over the confrontation Hisao was obviously itching to rekindle. “Tell This One of your teaching experience.” The kitsune named an impressive number of years spent at Nara and other, similar, schools as well as naming a few of her students that had made legends for themselves with their magic. Kento was suitably impressed and the note-taking resumed with vigor. Hisao was still fuming, and did little to hide it in his scent or youki. That pleased Kimi immensely, as it indicated he was working to hide other things from her nose. “You will assist in instruction for This One’s pack,” she announced.

Aina’s eyes widened momentarily in surprise. *How humorous that she did not think she would receive such a position*, Kimi observed. Kento nearly dropped his papers and his mouth opened and closed several times, no doubt searching for a respectful way to tell the dowager Lady that she did not have the authority to make such a decision for the assorted brood Sesshomaru claimed as his own.

The captain of the Western Army was less discreet. He snorted, “Kagome-sama will *love* that decision being made in her absence.” Some of the tension left him at that observation, and Kimi was pleased to see that he thought so highly of the miko’s ability to confront a daiyoukai of her stature.

“Kento, fetch Rin-yojosan and the others. Hisao, you may go.” The captain was bowing perfunctorily and walking away before his colleague had managed to set down his tablet. The two left together, the shogi screen sliding shut behind them. Kimi’s barrier snapped into place, and the kitsune’s body mirrored the action. All traces of triviality disappeared and she kowtowed.

“My Lady,” she intoned formally.

“Aina,” Kimi responded lightly. “It is so good of you to arrive at the West...so fortuitously. Tell This Kimi, is it divine fate that has brought This One’s most skilled spy to the door, or have you merely longed to bait a leashed dog?”

“Although the latter is a passable exercise, and the former possible, I must admit to a more curious circumstance, my Lady. I recently was approached by an old acquaintance...”

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Kagome yawned and stretched, comfortably warm and cozy. Soft sunlight danced across her eyelids and she smiled, well-rested, but contemplated remaining in bed for a while longer. If her stomach had not chosen that moment to make her audibly aware of its cavernous state, she might have fallen back to sleep. Instead, she opened her eyes to a creaky chuckle.

“Good morning, child,” Bokuseno’s bark shifted and split to reveal a kinder version of the same face from their confrontation the day before. “I trust you slept well?”

“Oh, yes, I-” she let out a little shriek of surprise as her pillow shifted, pushing her upright. Mocomoko was her blanket, protecting her from the frosty morning air, but her bed consisted of a soft layer of moss over huge roots. The roots belonged to Bokuseno, she could feel the youki coursing through them, and they continued to move as he spoke.

“That is good. Expending a great deal of power, as I understand you have done recently, takes a toll on the physical body. Particularly if you are not used to – what is the human phrase – flexing your bones.”

“Your muscles,” Kagome corrected automatically, “flexing your muscles.”

“Ah, yes that does make more sense. Although flexible bones would be an interesting advantage to your little species. You should consider evolving that way.”

“Eh, yeah...that would be...something.” Whether she meant having an elastic skeleton or controlling evolution, she wasn’t sure. The tree continued to smile in a familiar sort of way, and Kagome tried unsuccessfully to reconcile the angry, awesome red youki that had threatened Sesshomaru with the gentle, soothing energy that pulsed through the forest around her. Thankfully, their strangely companionable conversation was discontinued as Sesshomaru arrived.

He had been running, she recognized that only by the sway of his clothes and hair and the stirring of dry leaves at his feet. His stop was sudden, only a few yards from her, and his gaze was piercing, raking over her both systematically and intimately. The heat and concern she saw there made a pink blush rise on her cheeks. Mocomoko subtly tightened around her.

“You are well.” His statement demanded a response, despite her confusion.

“What? I mean, yeah, but-” Kagome flushed darker, remembering her cry of surprise when she woke. That combined with her rather unnecessary display of protectiveness the night before no doubt led Sesshomaru to have concern for her safety. Probably from herself. *It sucks when he’s right*, she grumbled internally. “I’m fine,” she managed aloud, in a calm voice. “Just disoriented when I woke up. And hungry,” she added when her stomach rumbled again.

“A meal is prepared,” he turned his attention to the tree, “away from your woods.”

“Thank you for that consideration, Sesshomaru,” Bokuseno’s branches shifted and unseasonably green leaves drifted down on her. “I will send an emissary to your home at once. It has been a pleasure, young miko,” the great magnolia lowered his eyes to meet hers, and she felt the barest touch of twigs upon her shoulder. She turned, and a branch, heavy with blossoms that should not have been alive, much less thriving, in the winter, descended before her. “Please do return one day, when we will have more time to speak and fewer evils to dwell upon.” With a snap, the largest of the blooms fell into her lap and the branch returned overhead. She cradled it in her palms, and even without bringing it to her face she could smell the fragrance.

Kagome was awed and honored. It was not just a bloom, but a demon flower, infused with power from an ancient youkai; she tucked it carefully into her obi “Thank you, Bokuseno-sama.” She struggled to stand until Sesshomaru cupped her elbow and mokomoko relaxed to return to his shoulder. “I appreciate your understanding, and patience with someone new to this ti- world. Of youkai. And nobility.” She paused awkwardly and smiled. “Thank you again, and I do hope we can see each other in the future.” She winced. *That couldn’t have been more disturbingly true.*

“Come, miko,” Sesshomaru tugged gently and Bokuseno rustled a goodbye. Their walk back through the forest had an even larger unseen audience than before, but the aura of suspicion was absent. The daiyoukai leading her remained silent, even as he helped her across the stream and they left the isolated glade behind. His youki rolled out again, and she flared her reiki momentarily, just to assure herself that they were alone. Green power drifted and swirled over the landscape, giving Kagome the impression of a puppy let out after a long day indoors. She stifled a giggle and glanced at Sesshomaru’s profile. His expression was as smooth and cool as ever. She doubted he would appreciate the analogy, but it was true, nonetheless. She even sensed the pull of his power on hers, urging her to play. It was undoubtedly unconscious, but she didn’t bring it to his attention, the feeling was too nice. She concentrated, and formed fingers of reiki to sift through his energy. A sweat broke out on her forehead from the intense focus, but it was worth it when he stopped in surprise and turned slowly on her.

“Miko,” he began. His eyes narrowed then relaxed again as she succeeded in raking the crests of youki in the opposite direction. *Just like brushing Buyo the wrong way*, she smirked. “Kagome,” he spoke her name in a low voice that sent tingles across her skin. “You are playing a game without first knowing the rules.”

“Then teach me,” she challenged breathlessly. It was a bit silly, a bit reckless, but she liked the feeling of being alone with Sesshomaru, of teasing him and skirting the edge of serious subjects and action. So much had been weighing on her for so long, and continued to grow heavier, that she relished the opportunity to let all of her attention center on him. On the way he could make her feel. *I love you*. She kept the words behind her lips, but the emotion made her radiate joy.

Sesshomaru led his clumsy human carefully, watching for the numerous opportunities for her to trip or snag her hair or clothes and silently steering her around them. He breathed in the dulcet scents of magnolia, from the bloom in her obi and her skin, and found he preferred her subtle sweetness to the actual flower. Her wonder in the small gift brought him a renewed understanding of the enormous power of a simple gesture, of the beauty in a magic that would disappear from the world if given the opportunity. The small miko at his side, with her bright smile and near-constant chatter that could border on obnoxious, refused to let fate have its way. She stood before a tsunami of time and destiny and the power of her determination held it at bay.

It was no wonder he had spent what remained of the night, after ending his conversation with Bokuseno, watching her sleep. It was completely understandable that he had passed several hours methodically kneading her leg and memorizing the curve of her jaw. It was right that he had gently slipped his power under her skin until she was full to the brim and her reiki answered his call so that he could know her, be connected to her, be with her.

Their proximity made him hyper aware of her state of being. The fresh bone that had grown to repair her broken arm was still tender. The bruises on her wrist and the cut on her cheek had healed completely, due to a combination of reiki, youki, and inu saliva. The muscles in her legs were slightly sore and her most secret places tender from his recent, thorough attentions. His innermost-self purred with satisfaction at the thought. She was tired; not dangerously exhausted, but tired in a way that spoke to long days and hard work. Which, he supposed, was what she had been doing. Even before her abduction, she had been sleeping little and expending enormous physical and spiritual energy to heal, to fix, and to protect. Over time, he believed that she could train herself to handle the strain of using her power better, but she was unused to such activity, and it was evidenced in her body. She was hungry, as well. That irritated him; it was not anger at her, but himself for not recognizing and immediately attending to her most basic needs. It was his duty as an alpha, as a future mate. It must be his priority, because she was his priority.

He had left her under the watchful eyes of Bokuseno, in the safety of his glade, and hunted. It was the work of less than a half hour to kill and prepare a boar and build a fire a safe distance from the tree youkai to cook it. He had taken the opportunity to also stalk his own meal. The last bone crunched between his jaws and slid down his throat when he heard her cry. He had hunted down wind of her, keeping her scent on his periphery at all times, and her moment of anxiety was punctuated by high-pitched shriek and followed by the smell of sour melon and sharp turnips. She was not in danger, he knew from the way she was quickly swamped with confusion. Still, his feet had barely touched the ground as he made his way back to her side.

The consultation with Bokuseno had been necessary to maintain alliance and gain intelligence. It had also been personally informative. As he shifted another errant rock away from her - it surely would have caused her sandals to stumble if he were not there - he allowed a pleased smile to drift across his features. She was his. Would be his. Forever.

He had not realized how much concern the unanswered question of her mortality had caused him until it was resolved. To keep her with him through time, he needed only infuse her with his power. It was not a hardship. He lifted her over the magical brook that surrounded Bokuseno's glade and allowed his youki to expand once again. It responded to his lightened frame of mind, marking his territory, domi-

nating his surroundings, and swirling around his miko possessively. He inhaled her happiness and felt his own chest lighten in response – right before her reiki stroked across him.

The warm sensation of a salty breeze brushed against his face even as his nerves stood at attention. He stopped, turning towards her, and called to her, uncertain if the action had been intentional. If her expression of gleeful triumph had not made it clear, the next caress of her power did. Irrevocably.

Youki could be manipulated and willed to act like an extension of the body, even a replacement for various motions and communication. Demons learned that at a young age, and began working to shape their energy to their command soon after. The more powerful, the older the demon, the more intricate and precise their youki could be. A word of warning, a lover's caress, a parental reprimand, a deadly strike. Sesshomaru had used his youki in all those ways and more, but it had never occurred to him that Kagome could do the same with reiki.

Her pleasant surprise and the moisture on her brow confirmed that she had not been aware of the ability before either. Although he knew she had done it teasingly, unknowingly, he could not stop his instincts from screaming that this female was inviting him to play an erotic game that would end in a struggle for dominance. One he would win. The ghosting sensation of her hand trailing up his spine, burrowing under his fur and lightly dragging against his skin had heat pooling in his belly and a low vibration stirring in his chest. "Kagome," he could hear the thrum of pleasure in his voice but did not bother to restrain it. "You are playing a game without first knowing the rules."

"Then teach me," she challenged him, skin glowing and warm breath clouding the air between them. Sweet carnations flooded his nose and Sesshomaru used his hold on her elbow to draw her close. Her joy, her stirring passion and excitement were obvious and heady and capable of waylaying his train of thought beyond repair. Her blue eyes stared up at him. The flush on her cheeks pinked her skin and drew him to her like a river to the sea. He held his nose less than an inch from her, maintaining their gaze and breathing in the air that kissed her flesh. *A cherry tree, freshly cut.* Other things familiar and still exciting drenched his lungs.

"You smell," he paused to run the tip of his nose across her lower lip. "Perfect."

Reiki spiked around him and he bit back a groan of sheer pleasure. Sheer torture. "So do you," she said breathlessly. Her head dipped under his and he tilted back to look at the sky, wrapping his arms around her to lift her, help her gain access to his body. Her nose and mouth brushed across his jaw, calling to him to dominate her. "Like cloves," she whispered against him. The plump flesh of her lip dragged for a moment on his neck. *Demanding* domination. "Like the woods, but better," her breath was hot, "darker," he felt the smooth flat of her teeth, "a secret." Her tongue flicked out and his groan escaped as something equal to her sensual assault.

The growl reverberated in his chest and her body responded. Even through three layers of kimono he was certain he could feel her breasts swelling, tightening. "Ka-go-me." He drew out her name, not to stimulate her, although her moan indicated that it had, but because if he did not speak carefully he would revert to his natural language. And that would be closely followed by crushing her with his youki and body and making her his mate whether she was ready for that step in their association or not.

"You smell like..." Her lips found the vee of his clothing and the shallow hollow between his collar-bones. She pressed a kiss there and the rising vapor of her passion made his head swim with spicy citrus. "Like cedar and...bacon?"

Sesshomaru stood still, only then realizing that he had been carrying her toward the fire that roasted her breakfast. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he had no doubt intended to ensure her warmth while he saw to their mutual want, but the fragrance of cooking pork brought other needs to the forefront. Kagome's stomach growled impressively and her immediate embarrassment eased his frustration enough to allow clear thought. Only she could stir him to such heights and bring him to deny himself with good grace. He set her feet on the ground, but kept hold of one arm while he plucked one of many spitted cuts of ham from the flames. Crisper than he would have liked, his senses assured him that the meat was cooked through and still juicy enough to be pleasing to her. He imagined he could hear the eager saliva pooling in her mouth as she stared at the food.

He drew her to kneel on the ground, and arranged himself to sit behind her, the half circle of his bent knees surrounding her. "Eat," he commanded softly, trailing his claws down her sleeve. She obeyed, without even her customary eye roll or sharp comment. It was further evidence that the demands of her body had been ignored too long. Sesshomaru vowed to himself that it would not happen again. He unconsciously traced circles across her back while he monitored their surroundings. There was no presence for miles save the animals of the forest and Bokuseno's glade. Kagome licked her fingers, both soothing and riling his instincts. He kept his thoughts to himself, however, until she was well into her second piece of meat.

"We will return to the castle today," he informed her.

"I've heard that before," she said around a mouthful of food.

"My responsibility-" he began to explain, a guilty sensation reminding him that she would not have had to see the remains that Ryukostokken left behind if they had not dallied at the well.

She waved her hands, gesturing with a nearly bare spit and almost losing what remained of her pork. "It wasn't an insult, Sesshomaru. I only meant to say that we keep running into delays. Although, some were kind of our own fault." She blushed, and shoved a rather large piece of meat into her mouth, looking anywhere but at him.

His guilt disappeared and he leaned closer to her, brushing a stray lock of hair back into her messy bun. "I consider any time spent in such a way essential." The few inches of bare skin between her collar and her hair were smooth and cool against his fingers. She shuddered in response, then promptly coughed, choking on her food. He watched with mixed amusement and concern as she wheezed and fumbled for a bottle of water from her bag. Once she was breathing normally again, he continued, "It will take us some time, even flying, but I have no concerns in having spent this day away from the shiro. My mother is..." he struggled for a moment with a description that was truthful but would not put Kagome in fear of the inu female. "...a formidable presence. With Kento and Hisao assisting her, I do not doubt she has things well in hand for the time being."

He watched her chew, much more thoroughly, and swallow before she spoke, "What would you have done, if she wasn't there?" For a moment, his ribs seemed to shrink in size, and his blood did not pump properly. If Kimi had not come, Kagome would not be with him. "I mean," she continued, oblivious to his struggle to remain collected, "even discounting travel time, you spent like a day and a half with Bokuseno and dealing with the...body...on the border. Could Kento and Hisao have taken care of things while you were gone? And who dealt with everything while you were helping us against

Naraku?” Deep frown lines appeared around her mouth as she reached for a third helping. “You had to be neck-deep in paperwork by the time you got back.”

Sesshomaru took a deep, silent breath. “During the hunt for Naraku, I returned to the West every few days, and Kento is more than capable of dealing with day-to-day matters - during peacetime.” he considered what had been a relatively short time, in a youkai’s lifespan, spent tracking the spider hanyou and then cooperating with Inuyasha and the miko. *If I had known then...* but he had not, and his association with the miko had developed in a more than satisfactory manner since then. It could also be noted that she had used the intervening time to grow and mature, perhaps making her more of the creature that he had come to desire. “In truth, Hisao would have preferred to hunt that irritation himself. He had been anticipating a fight for many decades, and was most disappointed when I determined to take care of the matter personally.”

Kagome giggled, twirling a bare spit between her hands. “I think maybe *you* were anticipating a fight, no? Were you getting bored? No one to play with?”

“Combat, not play, Miko,” he corrected with a smirk.

“Uh-huh. Is that why you were always ‘accidently’ crossing our path every week or so? I think if it was combat you wanted, instead of play, there would be one less Tashio brother around to annoy me.”

“Fighting with Inuyasha made him a better swordsman,” Sesshomaru explained seriously. At the loss of lighthearted amusement in her scent, he amended, “And I found it to be passable exercise.” She laughed, and he relished the sound. “Although, you should choose your words wisely. It sounded as though you found This One annoying as well as the hanyou.”

“This One,” she parroted, trying and failing to look down her nose at him, “finds waving a sharp object around while yelling to be annoying – from either brother.”

“Are you practicing, Kagome?” He asked softly, pressing closer and squeezing the back of her neck gently. “Once you are my Lady, it will be expected that you speak in that manner in front of others.”

Her eyes fell to his mouth. “I have trouble doing what is expected,” she said, her voice reaching a husky tone that he immediately wanted to hear more of.

“Hn. I am aware,” he assured her. He brushed his nose against her cheek, wanting to do more, to fulfill the invitation that she was sending him – consciously or not. He reminded himself, with a deep breath that was thick with her scent and his intertwined, that she would still be receptive to his attentions if they had to wait until they were closed in their room that night. The delay also had the potential to allow for anticipation, increasing her excitement. He willed his urges back under control, but not before he nipped lightly at her earlobe, barely grazing the tender morsel with his fangs. He allowed some space between them, and waited for her eyes to flutter open again and her parted lips to close. “I do not regret this time, the opposite is true, but it would have been beneficial if there were time to meet with another youkai before we return.”

“But you said your mom would be fine for a while?”

“Indeed,” he confirmed. He gestured to what remained of the meat, and she hesitated, but declined with a shake of her head. “But there are other matters that must be decided soon – how to deal with the

North – that it is not her responsibility or right to determine. Also,” he added, because it was true and he knew it would make Kagome smile, “she will have already taken the opportunity to rearrange my household. If left to her own devices, she will take it upon herself to inspect the soldiers as well. It would not please Hisao.”

Her grin did not disappoint, “And no one wants a grumpy Hisao.”

“Hn.” He agreed, and stood. Kagome excused herself to ‘freshen up’, and Sesshomaru allowed her a modicum of privacy as he consumed the remains of the boar. He kept an ear on her movements as she relieved herself and washed, straightening her clothing and mumbling about ‘hairspray’ and toothpaste. He put out the fire and followed her, noting the obvious signs of her unassisted passage through the vegetation. Disturbed snow, broken twigs, kicked up leaves. He watched for a moment unnoticed as she replaced her tooth brush in her bag and searched for something else.

“There!” She said triumphantly and pulled out a small, flat, rectangular box. She opened it, and he sniffed experimentally, but the scent was nothing he could identify. Clean, cool, sterile, nothing else. She unfolded a tiny note from the box, and read swiftly, as though merely verifying information, before replacing it and popping a tiny pill out of the package. “I have got to figure out pockets if I am going to remember to take these every day,” she muttered.

Sesshomaru was so surprised to see her taking what must have been a medicine from her time that he did not react when she dropped it into her mouth and swallowed. She was not ill, he knew from her scent and his youki, and her injuries had all either already healed or were well past the point of causing her pain. “What is that?”

His honest curiosity nearly caused her to fall into the stream. She yelped, drawing her hands behind her back and turning swiftly to face him. He was at her side in an instant, catching her before she overbalanced and ended up in the water. He had been mildly inquisitive, her things from the future were always remarkable, but her sharp embarrassment and pink cheeks deepened his interest – as did her instinctual reaction to hide the little box.

“Wha-what?” She cleared her throat noisily.

“The pill you took,” he clarified, growing almost suspicious. “Are you ill?”

“No, no, it’s not...I mean,” she blushed harder and tried to slip the box deep into her bag without him noticing. “Well, it’s really kind of personal, Sesshomaru,” she finished primly.

“Are we not personal, Kagome?” At his question, her mouth opened and closed several times, almost comically.

After a few vague gestures and odd noises she finally squeaked out, “It is to keep me from getting pregnant, okay!”

It was not ‘okay’. Not even the slightest amount was it ‘okay’. Blood thundered in his veins and pulsed behind his eyes. Of their own accord, his hands formed fists against his hips. His youki surged around them both and he leaned over her. His instincts were roaring, once again, and underneath of that the feelings she had awoken in him were bruised. *She fears I will lose control*, he snarled in his mind, an-

gry with her. *I have very nearly done so, several times*, he argued with himself, his anger turning inward.

She does not want our pup.

She loves pups – children of any race.

She fears I will not accept a hanyou born of her.

I have given her little reason to believe I would.

She is not ready to be mated.

I have told her I will give her time to be courted – she has instigated intimacy more than once.

He could not believe, would not allow himself to believe that Kagome was refusing to be his mate in every sense, to bring his pups into the world. It occurred to him, giving rise to self-recriminations and a desire to protect her, that it might not be *his* seed she wished to prevent taking root. That thought, and all of the terrible images that followed it, some plausible, some impossible - all reprehensible - had him teetering on the edge of control for the third time in as many days. He forced ice into his veins and steel in his expression, to conceal all that was fighting inside him.

“No other will touch you,” he swore in a deep, frigid voice that promised death to any who dared to defy him.

“What? No kidding, Sesshomaru,” she looked upset at him, brows drawn deeply together. Her scent was peppery with irritation, but there was no hidden shame or remorse, no fear, anxiety, or sadness. “Why the hell would you even say that?” She closed her bag and stood with a huff, heedless of the streaks of mud and grass on her skirt or the wisps of hair that fell in her eyes. “Setting aside that we already had this conversation,” she said tightly, her eyes narrowed and one finger raised pointedly, “your tone needs some serious improvement. And when I say something is personal – you should know that means I don’t want to talk about it, and you should trust me with that!” She turned sharply, prepared to stomp off, he was sure, but one sandal got caught on a clump of dirt and she lost her balance.

Sesshomaru was there, again, this time holding her under her knees and behind her back, close to his chest. He breathed through his nose, walking away from the water and using the action to distract him from her anger and his own. He knew both were most likely unreasonable and unfounded – *certainly hers is* – and he reminded himself that he could not *command* her openness and honesty and expect to be pleased with the results. He had to understand, had to make her understand. Misunderstandings between them could lead to consequences he did not wish to contemplate – chief among them the potential for her to break off their courtship.

“Kagome,” he began in a calm voice, and when she opened her mouth he shifted mokomoko to cover it. Her eyes widened – then narrowed, and he knew the action could tip her ire into serious anger. If he could not find the words to soothe them both she would not easily forgive him for muzzling her – no matter how much she deserved it. “Perhaps you do not intend it, but your explanation is, at best, insulting.” Her body was still stiff in his arms, but she was not struggling to escape. He took another deep breath of magnolias and cherry wood layered in his own musk to reassure his instincts. “Any other youkai, male or female, would punish their mate severely for refusing that act. Daiyoukai in the past have killed a mate for refusing to create an heir.”

Sesshomaru came to a stop below a large tree, its roots layered in soft grass. He lowered himself to the ground, watching her carefully, to make certain that she understood the serious nature of their conversation. She squirmed, and his hold automatically tightened. It took everything he had to keep his body

from using the level of strength he wanted. The desire to subdue her, to force her to fulfill the obligations of a mate was strong. It was not just youkai culture and instinct that drove him, however. He had a sour, wounded sensation settling low in his chest. A doubt, doubt that she wanted him as wholly as he wanted her prodded him sharply. He could hear Inuyasha's words echoing in his memory, "*Ya didn't ask her, didja?*" He had not. Although he had come to his own decision on the benefits of mating her. Come to consider with familiarity, with warmth, with longing the idea of dog-eared pups resting against her round breast. He had not asked her for an opinion on the matter, had not considered that she would have one other than coos of joy and ridiculous sighs and soft laughter at the thought of a child of her own body. Of *them*. There were so many things he wanted, needed from her – and she was not capable of simply understanding, of obeying. It was as frustrating as it was an integral part of her that he would not change. There was no way around it – he would have to speak to her of his mind, of the strange compulsions that he was beginning to think might be his heart.

He would have to speak – at length.

He kept her mouth secured for a few more long minutes while he breathed of her scent and organized his thoughts and overcame his distaste for discussing rather than showing. At least, he told himself that was what he was doing. Despite all his strict adherence to honesty, there was nothing that could have made Sesshomaru admit, even to himself, that he might be trying to avoid hearing a response that he feared:

No.

Not ever.

Not with you.

She fidgeted, her breath hot and close against mokomoko. He growled in response and her eyes widened momentarily. There was no fear in her scent, but concern and a still-strong current of irritation. And trust. He filled his lungs with warm gardenias and relaxed fractionally.

"I desire you as my mate, Kagome." He found it difficult to look at her large blue eyes, the only part of her not currently held prisoner by him, and instead stared into the middle distance while he spoke. "Inu mates are not merely joined by words, they are bound by power and will. For one of my kind, a mated pair is the foundation of pack – of family," he clarified and watched from the corner of his eye as the frown line between her brows eased and she grew thoughtful. "We seek to join with another who can make one more, better, increase power. To mate is to find one that helps to build a pack, a mighty line that will move forward through the ages. Mate to have pups, to increase and pass on power and make a pack stronger." As he spoke, he realized that it was not merely a lesson in inu culture and instinct. He was exploring a truth about himself that he had not considered before, one that she must know as he was beginning to know it. "I traveled the path of conquest, not merely to test and strengthen myself, not for personal power, but to make myself stronger for my pack. To make my lands safer, broader, more plentiful *for my pack*." Sesshomaru would not make the mistakes of his father. He would not leave his pack alone and forced to defend their birthright, their lives. He would be stronger than Inu no Tashio so that his pups would not take up the mantle of Lord, as he had, too young. So that his pups would not be hardened by youth without a father – without a pack, as Inuyasha had been. He looked down on her again, and his voice lost any cool tone that he had managed to conceal his deep feeling with, "This is what it is to be inu. To be *me*."

Chapter 40: Mistakes of the Father

“This is what it is to be inu. To be *me*.”

Kagome heard the wellspring of emotion, laid bare in his voice, and she softened. She couldn't help herself, didn't want to give in and forgive him for being an ass. The kind of ass that held her mouth closed so she couldn't argue. *I'm such a pushover*, she thought, her irritation turning inward, *I can't stay mad at anybody*. And, given a few minutes where Sesshomaru had forced her mind to catch up with her mouth, Kagome could admit that she might not have meant exactly what she said. She probably shouldn't have said it in *that* way. Their current disagreement might be the teensiest bit her fault. She was embarrassed, and that was perfectly normal. It would have been awkward trying to inform a modern-day boyfriend that she had taken precautions – that she was anticipating having sex with him.

That the boyfriend in question was Sesshomaru, and he was most definitely *not* modern, only made things worse. The daiyoukai had an ego so large, she was surprised he could stand up straight under the weight of it. And while he deserved any praise she was willing to give out regarding his face, form, or irresistibility, he didn't need it. And she wasn't going to give him the opportunity to point out how she wanted him. The entire situation would make him *beyond* smug. He would probably also leap to the conclusion that she was agreeing to mating when she agreed to sex. Just because she loved him, just because she was pretty certain she was going to say 'I do', that didn't mean she wanted to go through with it *right now*. It certainly didn't mean she wanted to take a permanent step before she was sure that what she felt was reciprocated. So when he had asked about the pill, she had tried to brush him off, and when backed into a corner she had overreacted a little.

I'm not the only one, she reminded herself, trying to shore up her resolve. Sesshomaru had flipped out, for absolutely no reason. *Well, maybe he had a reason, it just isn't a very good one*. Although, perhaps it was.

Kagome wanted to shake her head in disbelief at how she had managed so many nearly catastrophic miscommunications with him in three days. He had instincts, she was vividly aware of that. They had managed to find a compromise on the jealousy issue. If there was anyone with more experience than her in putting aside hurt feelings and misunderstandings, well...she felt bad for them actually, because it kind of sucked to always have to be the one giving in, letting go, and moving on. Still, he was trying to be reasonable. He just wasn't very good at it. When it came down to the wire, his culture and instincts – things that had been drilled into him since birth or were even coded in his genetics – should take precedence over her embarrassment. *His tact could use work, though*.

He really was trying, however. He had opened up, said more about himself and his feelings that she had ever heard or expected from him. He had said he desired her as his mate. It wasn't a declaration of undying love, by far, but it was enough, it hinted at enough, to make her heart flutter. *Stop it*, she ordered the traitorous organ, *this is serious. Firm rules first, mushy puppy love later*.

Mind made up, when mokomoko slid away from her face she held up one finger, calmly. “I am going to talk now, and you are going to listen. Understand, Sesshomaru?” She looked him in the eyes and did

her best to ignore what she thought might be a possessive sort of heat building behind all that beautiful gold. At his sharp nod, she continued, "We are not mates." His arms tightened around her, almost painfully, and a low growl reverberated in his chest. "Yet," she emphasized. She wanted it, so badly she wanted it. But more than that, she wanted him to want it. Kagome had done the unequal relationship before – and there was nothing more bitter than realizing you loved someone more than they loved you. She knew things were moving quickly between them, but Kagome had experienced enough of life to know what she wanted. Before she made the most important commitment, she needed to know that Sesshomaru was involved just as deeply, as powerfully. He might not ever say it, but she had to be convinced that she had a secure place in his heart before she was ready to risk speaking hers. "You agreed to a courtship, Sesshomaru, to testing this out. That does not mean that you can treat me like this is already a done deal." His grip eased somewhat and his head tilted slightly in consideration. "Not," she added hastily, "that what you said is cool with me even if we do get mated. That is a choice that we make together, Sesshomaru. And when it comes right down to it – it is my body." He blinked, slowly, and she was struck again with how foreign her ideas must seem to him. Her voice softened, "I would like children someday, with my husband, er, mate, but I want it to be a decision. One that we talk over and make certain the time is right. And I really don't want either of us to worry that we became mates because there was a baby on the way. That is not a great foundation for a relationship."

His growl died off when she said she did want children, but he remained silent, as she had requested. Kagome was grateful for that. If she heard his deep voice agreeing, or offering her his patented not-apology-apology of 'Hn' and a change of topic, she would be tempted to drop it. She couldn't - not when there was so much left unsaid. So much that was so vital to their future happiness and a successful relationship.

"I am not having a child right now, Sesshomaru, not if I can help it. If, when," she corrected herself with a gulp and a blush, "we take things further, I do not want to have to worry about protecting a baby while Ryukostokken is still out there. I would have thought you would agree that we don't need to be putting anyone else at risk right now." She tried to temper the reproach in her tone, the disappointment, but it was there and he heard it. His body tensed as if from a physical blow, his eyes sliding away from hers. She had to work to not hold her breath against all the awkwardness that reddened her face and made her want to look away. This was not a conversation most couples had after - and she was being generous - a month of dating. "Does that seem reasonable to you, Sesshomaru?"

She waited, dying to grab his face and force him to look at her, to talk to her. Eventually, before she threw patience out the window, he turned and pressed his forehead against hers. He was so close, she couldn't focus and saw only a halo of burnished gold across her vision. "You are correct." His voice rumbled so low she almost couldn't hear it. "It is a logical choice, but I let other concerns cloud my thinking." He ran his nose along the side of hers, another way of saying sorry without really saying it. She let him have that.

"I am," she had to clear her throat to remove the husky note that threatened to overwhelm her no-nonsense tone, "actually more upset about the other thing." When he didn't respond, she sighed, "'No other shall touch you'. Really, Sesshomaru? How could you think I was even considering someone else? Why would you think that? I am with you, because I want to be with you. It actually," she bit the inside of her cheek to keep up her ire and not let tears even think about forming, "kind of hurts my feelings, that you would jump to the conclusion that I was thinking about sex with someone else. Is that what you think of me?"

"No," his answer was swift and brutally honest. He pulled back to meet her eyes. "I know you to give

your heart wholly, Kagome, and to be honorable. I..." he paused, dipping his head once more to breathe against her neck before pulling away. "I know you would never willingly take another while you have made a commitment to me. I do not wish you to live in fear that what happened to your friend Ko would ever happen to you." She was shocked and swimming with the shadows of fear and shame that had been with her in at least a small part since her escape. He soothed that fear. "I will protect you." He was quietly thoughtful for a moment. "I will help you to protect yourself," he added.

"Oh," she breathed. For a moment, there was nothing else she could say. Nothing she could do but drink in the fierce pledge she saw in his expression. Possessive, protective, respect for her, trust in her. Affection. The affection was obvious but she thought she saw something more as well, something deeper and stronger and overwhelming. "Oh-kay," she managed to say, hoping she wasn't imagining things that she badly wanted.

He squeezed her again and nuzzled the side of her face. He released a slow, hot breath against her neck and then he was standing, taking mokomoko with him and helping her up as well. Her backpack had been pushed off one shoulder during their argument, so he reached out and took it, slinging both straps over his unarmored shoulder. Sesshomaru reached for her hand, and she gave it to him without hesitation. Her brain was still dizzy, spinning in circles without coming to any conclusions. How stupid it seemed, after they had talked. If she had been more mature and not tried to cover her embarrassment over the birth control, they could have discussed it without all the drama. Sesshomaru was overbearing, there was no denying it, but he wasn't trying to force her to do anything she didn't want to. He wasn't judging her harshly for a more modern view of sex and reproduction. He just wanted her to be safe, to feel safe, and to know that she wanted the same things he did from a mate.

There should be a handbook for this stuff, she thought. *What to Expect When You're Expecting a Youkai in Your Bed. Demon Dating for Dummies. Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, Youkai are from Andromeda. The Secret.* Actually, she was pretty sure that last one was a real thing. His palm was warm and smooth against hers, and she laced their fingers together. With his free hand, he tucked a stray hair behind her ear and cupped her cheek, tipping her face up. His claws prickled gently, and she had to repress a pleasant shiver. She looked into his face, calm and collected once more but his eyes still burned with intensity. Kagome offered a small smile.

"Thank you, for talking about it." She pressed her hand over his. "I bet there is going to be a few more of these conversations, before we sort out all of the modern-human/ancient youkai conflicts, and I'd rather do it this way than with screaming, crying, and snarls." *Although letting him assure his instincts over his jealousy issue had been nice too. More than nice.*

"As would I," he agreed. He brushed a light kiss across her lips, which turned into a second, harder kiss. Then a third. They were both breathing heavier than normal when he pulled away. His gaze shifted to somewhere over her shoulder and he paused. If Kagome hadn't known that Sesshomaru didn't feel fear, she would have said he was gathering his courage. "There will be pups," he stated finally. "You do want to have my pups."

Her heart almost broke at the uncertainty that flashed across his face, gone so quickly no one else would have ever seen it. He was fighting so hard against himself, for her. She could bend too and give him what he needed as well. "Yes," she assured him. "Yours." She leaned up as far as she could on tiptoe, and he bent down to accommodate her. "Someday." Her lips brushed against the hard angle of his jaw and she whispered, "I would like some time alone with you first." She interpreted the low, growly vibration that rumbled in his chest to be agreement.

“Inuyasha-sama,” a young fledgling, too young to have to fight in a war, waved from a distance and the hanyou looked up from the sparring he was supervising.

He finished his instruction. “You’re a crane, Bitou,” he pointed out to one of the less competent soldiers, “You’ve got more speed and agility than this moron,” he pointed to the red panda that was partnered with the bird, “use it for fuck’s sake.”

“Yes, Inuyasha-sama.” Both combatants bowed to him, and Inuyasha struggled not to roll his eyes at the stupid gesture. The fledgling had nearly reached him, and he smelled of excitement, worry, and sweat. For a moment, Inuyasha wished that Kagome was with him, or Sango, Rin. Hell, even Shippo smelled better than a camp full of unwashed soldiers who were training hard. He wondered briefly how Sesshomaru could stand to go on campaigns. Then again, most of his army was inu, so they probably tried to keep the stench manageable for the sake of their own noses.

“Keh.” He shook himself and glared at the soldiers. “Get to work.” They bowed to each other and took up a new stance before he had even stepped away. “What?” His bark made the skinny little fledgling crane tremble, and Inuyasha had to forcibly remind himself not to snap and demand answers. Instincts ran deep in birds too, and they weren’t naturally fond of canines. “I ain’t in the mood to chase game, kid.” He tried to channel Miroku’s calm demeanor, and not for the first time in the last three days, wished the monk was with him instead of rounding up the wolves. “Whatdaya need?”

“Uh, there’s a,” the kid gulped, and Inuyasha closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. The fledgling reeked of nerves whenever he was around, which Sango had told him was expected, given what he had probably been through during the Eastern massacre. That and the nature of birds and dogs. That and Inuyasha’s considerable amount of youki, which had been a lot closer to the surface lately. The hanyou took a deep breath, and tried to reign it in. He was bitterly aware that he did not have the control over his aura that Sesshomaru, or even another full youkai, did, but he was trying. On the bright side, everyone knew whenever he was really pissed and stayed the fuck out of his way.

“Let’s go,” he managed in a quieter voice. The little bird hopped beside him, pointing the way back to the medical tent. Not that it was necessary. Even with everyone else packed into the camp, the fresh trail of the fledgling was easy for Inuyasha to find. The medical tent was in considerably better shape than the only other portable structure they had – which was supposed to be for Inuyasha. At least, the crane soldiers had decided that. The hanyou found the idea ridiculous, and he had no intention of sleeping under a ratty canvas that could easily become a deathtrap if they were attacked. He let the few female youkai that were with them use it for bathing and resting. Except for the three ameonas.

He could feel the blush threatening to explode on his face as he walked by the stream. As usual, when the female rain youkai – the only ones of their kind Inuyasha had ever met – were not on duty they were bathing or fishing in the water. Naked. They didn’t seem to mind the stares, and the rest of the troops enjoyed it. But the hanyou found it to be downright awkward. He had also worried that they might give males the wrong impression, but he quickly learned that it was usually the *right* impression. At least, if the sultry looks, heated scents, and beckoning fingers they often directed toward him were any indication – their goals were obvious. When they weren’t interested, they also made that abundantly clear. The ameonas had the ability to temporarily turn into water – with an electric shock that would put even the most eager male out of the mood. It only took a few smoking perverts for

everyone to figure out not to mess with the rain ladies. Great fighters, excellent distractions, hell on Inuyasha's libido.

Not that I'm goin' after that, he re-convicted himself as he continued past their position without responding to the gentle calls for attention. He also snagged the back of the fledgling's shirt and pulled him along too. He had no idea when he took over an army that he would be required to spend so much time pulling youkai out of their own hormones. One of the few officers left from the East had assured him that it was typical of a large group of soldiers. It didn't mean Inuyasha had to like it.

Soldiers backed out of his way, some nodded, a few bowed shallowly as he stomped up to the medical tent. He was nearly there before he could make out any distinct smells beyond the muddled blood, pain, and herbal miasma that generally surrounded the place. He ordered the kid to wait outside and drew the flap apart to enter. One of the monks recruited by Miroku stood inside, wiping blood off his hands. For the life of him, Inuyasha could not remember the human's name. He and several others, none with any strong holy power compared to Miroku, had come with the army to serve as medics and help lay defenses and traps for enemy youkai.

"Captain-san," the man greeted him. Thankfully, he got right to the point. "The crane soldier you sent out before we last broke camp has returned."

"Get out," Inuyasha ordered, his eyes locking on the only occupied futon. Anticipation roiled in his gut. *This is it. That fucker better have taken the bait.*

"I must protest, Captain-san." The monk bowed shallowly, but the scent of disapproval was strong. "This demon barely made it here alive, his injuries are severe. I cannot allow you to wake him until he has a chance to heal the worst of the damage."

"I ain't askin' permission," Inuyasha narrowed his eyes. The anxious shifting of soldiers outside and the paling of the monk's face made him aware that his youki had flared. Again. He clenched his jaw and breathed deeply through his nose. *I need this information, damnit! I'm trying to save lives – your life, you demon-killing, weak-limbed, dead-nosed, paper-scratcher!* In the last few weeks, he had experienced difficulty keeping his aura under control. He was in no danger of turning, Tessaiga saw to that, but he was ready to bite off a few feathers to make himself feel better.

Inuyasha let out the breath, slowly. "I'll keep it short, and I won't let him move around. But I *am* going to talk to him." The monk nodded, smelling relieved when the youki let up but still managing to look judgmental.

The tent flap closed behind the human and Inuyasha made his way over to the soldier, kneeling by his side. He had seen worse wounds – but not many. The crane had been cleaned up and bandaged enough to easily identify the misshapen chest caused by broken ribs, the bloodstains of numerous gouges, cuts, and bites, and the ugly stitching that held youkai skin together until the soldier could replenish his energy supply to begin the healing process. His right side had taken the worst of the damage. His eye was swollen shut and the ear completely torn away. There was a chunk missing from his shoulder; the dent in the bandages was deep enough to make Inuyasha think it went down to the bone. The arm below the bandage was small and bloody, even through the strips of linen. Only one finger and a thumb extended from his hand.

"Daigo," he said quietly. Not sure where he could shake the crane to wake him, or if he could handle

being shaken, Inuyasha just waited, wishing he could prod the soldier gently. As though it happened by thought alone, warm youki swelled inside the hanyou and pushed out. To his surprise, it gently touched upon the crane's unblemished forehead, then retreated. He didn't have time to wonder about it. A large, grey eye opened and blinked at him.

"Inuyasha-sama," he made a short, percussive call. Six weeks prior, Inuyasha would have had no idea what that meant. After spending so much time rounding up stray bird youkai and training with them, he knew it was a sound that asked for attention. Every hair on Inuyasha's body seemed to stand on end, he held his breath. Even his heart seemed to wait for the results. "They took it."

A feral grin broke out on the hanyou's face and he couldn't help the satisfied growl that erupted. The crane didn't seem to mind, but also smiled. "I could hear them, while they were chasing me. They were eager to get it to the North. I-" He coughed, and his one eye widened in sudden pain.

"Don't overdo it," Inuyasha commanded gruffly. "They got it, they'll take it North. Good job." He stood, and looked down at the youkai. It would take a week for the wounds to heal enough for him to fight. It might be years before he had full use of his arm and eye again. He'd be lucky if the ear grew back. The pain that radiated off of the crane was intense, but still, his smile was satisfied. Inuyasha knew that feeling. The, *I've been beaten, but you're gonna get yours*, feeling. The, *you fuckers don't even know what's comin'*, feeling. "Next time," he said quietly. The grey eye focused again. "Try not to let them make a meal of you. Don't know why the idiots want to chew on bird anyhow – too goddamn tough."

The injured youkai smiled, and Inuyasha smiled back – full of fang and unspoken compliment. When he left the tent, he spent several minutes standing still, staring down into the Eel Valley unseeing. Everything had been taken from the East. Those cranes had been doing their duty, protecting their homes and families and the dragons that had destroyed it. *For what, fun?* The thought fanned the embers of fury in his chest. Inuyasha had seen enough violence, enough pain caused for the enjoyment of someone else. Enough death resulting from the boredom of someone strong enough to kill. Enough evil. The crane inside was willing to give everything to play a part in stopping that. Inuyasha could do no less.

"You," he gestured to the fledgling and started walking, not waiting for the kid to catch up in a flurry of feathers and anticipation, "you can write?" At his nod, Inuyasha continued, "Make a list of everyone in camp. Keep it with you at all times. When I tell you, you put a mark next to a name, got it?" The crane nodded eagerly, still smelling of anxiety over being so close to a powerful canine, but also excited to be given responsibility by the leader of their army. "Start with that guy in there." He used his thumb to point back at the tent. "And find me somebody who can make things cold." His eyes narrowed, unknowingly sending a message to everyone that watched him march through the camp: No enemy shall live. "Those dragons are gonna beg us to send them to hell – just for the relief."

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Shippo resisted the urge to stroke his tails – barely. He could tell Hisao was irritated, not that the captain wasn't often irritated, but Kento was calm. Besides, Kimi-sama had told them at supper about the new servant. A tutor, light-duty guard, nanny and playmate all rolled into one. The youkai was going to help watch over the young ones in the pack until Kagome and Sesshomaru returned. Even afterward, Kimi-sama said that they were going to need more supervision, since the adults would be busier dealing with political matters.

The inudaiyoukai had said it like that so as not to frighten the little kids, Shippo knew. He also knew, and had confirmed it with Rin that what was really happening is that they were being given an extra keeper, because the West was preparing for war. It was a little insulting, Shippo thought. He and Rin had followed their parent-figures all over Japan in the quest to destroy Naraku. Shippo himself had helped in more than one battle. Usually he was an escape balloon or a distraction, but still, he knew about fighting and death. He didn't need to be coddled, not like Nankae and Emi.

More importantly, most importantly - and he couldn't believe Kimi-sama hadn't mentioned it – the new youkai was kitsune. Excitement and trepidation warred within the little two-tails. He hadn't spent much time with his own kind since his parents died. A few days at a time over the past year at a kitsune school near Edo was all he had been willing to be away from Kagome. She would have let him stay longer, he knew, but it made her sad. He didn't want that, and he was old enough and honest enough to know that he would have been sad too.

But this...this was big. Important big and maybe the best chance he could ever have to learn new tricks. Normally, Shippo would not have been shy about jumping right up to the newcomer, introducing himself, and begging to know all about how they got their tails and if they would teach him something. He held back though, because Hisao was irritated with the kitsune. Because Emi was frightened and Nankae suspicious. Because Rin had been staying right by his side since Sesshomaru had left to find Kagome. Because Kagome was gone. Someone had taken her, and she was safe now, he knew, with Sesshomaru. But she had been hurt and taken from him *again* and he hadn't seen her yet and *bad things happened all the time even when you thought you were safe and-*

He took a deep breath and furiously drew his youki around him, working to keep his scent concealed like Kimi-sama had shown him. Working to keep his mind clear and process everything he heard and smelled about the new kitsune – just like Inuyasha had been teaching him. Trying to smile in a friendly way and not make any rash judgements until he had gotten to know the servant; Kagome would want that.

“Aina-san will be helping out in the family quarters. Rin-yojosan,” Kento nodded to the adopted daughter of his lord, “Please let Aina-san know what activities you would like to pursue and the schedule Kagome-sama left for your studies. She will go with you everywhere, and she is responsible for your safety.”

“If there is ever an issue with that,” Hisao spoke up, his eyes narrowed on the adult kitsune, “you must tell Eiichi or Eiji right away.”

“I very much doubt there will be any problems,” Kento said with a disapproving frown to Hisao-san.

The kitsune ignored both males and stepped forward, bowing at the waist to Rin and then kneeling into a seiza. “I am very eager to make your acquaintance,” she said, smiling. Her eyes were green and they sparkled with mischief. Youki tripped through the air, dancing over the heavy, solid wall of the captain and the defined structure of the secretary. Shippo could feel a response in him clawing to break free. He wanted to play, so badly. He wanted to get out his top and show off. He wanted to display his two tails and then pop into a second Rin and see which kitsune was the better trickster. He also knew the danger in trusting too easily. That resulted in friends being soaked into human tree fertilizer or an unmother trying to eat your soul. Rin must have sensed it, because she put her hand on his shoulder. He shared a look with her, trying to communicate that he was anxious as well as excited. *Caution, caution*, his mind

warned and his youki wrapped around the friend he hoped would be his sister tightly, for just a moment.

“This One is pleased to have been introduced,” Rin answered formally. For a full minute, everyone seemed surprised that the little girl had responded that way. Of course, it was her right, expected of a daughter of the Saidai Mao, really. But Rin rarely drew attention to her position. “We would prefer to take lessons in the upper ima, at this time.” Shippo’s eyebrows raised. *Smart*, he thought. The ima was a large, open room that could be used for many different things. He had played there some with Rin, because it was empty and rarely used. It was situated between the family quarters and a corridor leading to the main staircase. It had its own little garden, but was not connected to their sleeping rooms. It would be large enough for even kitsune lessons and secluded enough that Sesshomaru would deem it safe. At the same time, it would keep Aina from having any reason to go into more private areas.

The kitsune nodded with a smile, and Shippo felt something ease as the rock brothers appeared to escort them all to the ima. Kimi-sama had hired the youkai, so she couldn’t mean them any harm. The rock brothers would be close by, so the little ones would be safe. She wouldn’t have any opportunity to see Kagome’s books or any strange future stuff, and Rin had been given authority to set lessons and decide if the youkai female should stay or go. Without any concerns that hadn’t been addressed, Shippo finally allowed himself to act as he wanted to.

One red tail popped up over each of his shoulders, “How well can you imitate others?” Eiichi stiffened and Eiji frowned, but Shippo ignored them both, watching the older kitsune smirk.

One tail peeked over her left shoulder. One tail wrapped around her waist. One fanned out against her right leg, another flipped to lay in her lap. “Well,” she said bracing her hands against the floor and leaning forward, “I believe I can hold my own.” A fifth tail shot into the air over her head and pointed towards Hisao-san. He had not moved, but surrounding him were tiny puppies. The regular, non-youkai kind. They were fat, and fuzzy. Adorable brown eyes stared up at the captain. Tiny, fluffy tails wagged. One curious little furball sniffed at a polished boot and lifted its leg.

“Enough!” Hisao growled. Shippo couldn’t stop the delighted laugh from escaping, although Rin managed to cover her mouth. Emi smiled and waved at the little illusory animals, while Nankae let out a tiny growl of his own, clearly ready to challenge the little animals that were surrounding his hero and new father-figure. Aina just smiled her secretive smile. Shippo couldn’t wait until Inuyasha came to visit again. He rubbed his hands together with glee.

Later that afternoon, when Jaken brought dinner to the ima, the rock brothers called Aina outside. Shippo, despite his hunger after hours of playing with foxfire and trying to master a new spell with his acorns, snuck closer to the shoji screens to listen.

“Don’t think this one day earns my trust, fox.” Hisao’s voice was easy to recognize, even if his youki hadn’t been pulsing quietly. “These two soldiers will be watching your every move, as will I.”

“Really, Captain-san?” Shippo’s eyes widened at her purr. He knew that sound well, from his time at kitsune school, and the women who fell all over Miroku – until they saw Sango’s boomerang. He could well imagine big green eyes leaning in far too close for the captain’s comfort. “I’ll be sure to keep that in mind as I prepare for the day.” Shippo blushed bright red, sure that was too intimate for polite conversation. Apparently Hisao agreed. He growled, and his youki bucked. “Now, now,” Aina chuckled, “don’t be a spoilsport. This is all in good fun.”

“Make certain,” Shippo barely overcame the urge to duck his head and bear his neck at the threatening sound Hisao made, “that your fun, does not bring any in this House to harm.”

“Or the Saidai Mao will let his acid seep into my bones,” she sounded amused.

“If these pups are hurt under your care, kitsune, there will be nothing left for my Lord to deal with.” There was another pulse of youki, and a feminine gasp, and then Shippo had to scramble away from the doors so that Jaken and his helpers could leave. The screens slid open, and the rock demons were standing outside as usual. If they were perhaps stiffer or more vigilant, no one commented on it. Shippo was more interested in the flick of a foxtail as it disappeared around the corner and the strange scent still lingering in the hallway. He breathed deeply, trying to commit it to memory so he could describe it to Inuyasha later. Whatever Hisao was angry about, it wasn’t just a servant he didn’t approve of. And Aina smelled far too serious for a kitsune simply out to flirt with a straight-laced dog.

“What’s the matter, Shippo-kun?” Rin said quietly from her spot at the table.

“Grown-ups,” he answered shortly, shaking his head. “They’re so dumb.”

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Ryukostokken stalked through his castle with a satisfied air. Wei had finally found the witch, and she was already laboring to produce what he needed to take back *his* miko. His tongue flickered out in anticipation. Adrenaline surged in his veins. The human would come to him, walk to him without any threats or summons, and it would be the most complete defeat of Sesshomaru. The pup would have to watch her leave his side to come to the dragon. Perhaps Ryukostokken would even allow the pretender to the title of Saidai Mao to live long enough to see the miko fall to her knees before her rightful master. To see her smile as she worked her power as he desired. To see her eagerly pleasure him.

Abruptly, he changed course toward the training grounds. Exercise would be beneficial to leach off some of the expectation humming under his skin. It would also help him assess the troops. Sou and Natsou had given proposed assignment rosters, but he preferred to review individuals’ skills himself. No dragon who could not meet his standards would serve in his army. And those that were the most vicious, with the most thirst for inu blood, they would be his elite. Natsou would leave by nightfall with a quarter of the soldiers to meet with the bastard, Inuyasha. Arashi would lead him in negotiations – the slick-tongued whore’s son was best suited to lying and convincing weak-minded fools to follow the North to their deaths. And if he failed...Natsou had orders regarding that eventuality.

The dragon Lord stepped into cold morning light, filtered through storm clouds and tainted with a bitter wind. Soldiers were already practicing in the field beyond the castle wall. He flipped his black hair over his shoulder and with two powerful bounds leapt over thirty feet of stacked obsidian and landed in the center of the training grounds. The ground under his feet cracked, but did not shatter under the force of his arrival. All motion stopped, and a circle cleared out around him, making space for the Lord. Each dragon bowed, lowering their eyes to the ground and holding that position until he would give them leave to move.

“Shianma,” he called for his great sword, and it took only a few minutes for a servant to arrive with the blade. He did not bother with armor or a blunting sheath for his weapon. None could touch him, none

could make it past his skillful kata. Any who could not parry him, deserved their wounds. He would not aim to kill, but lessons were best learned by pain, and his army would learn all he had to teach them. He would engrave it on their flesh and they would become blood-borne to new heights of greatness. “Come,” he said, and two soldiers immediately straightened and stepped into the ring. They did not taste of fear, but of determination and resignation. This was his army. An ordered wave of death that would sweep through his enemies feeling nothing but satisfaction when their weapons drank deeply, and fulfilled duty if they died on the battlefield. This is how he would reshape Japan into his empire.

As the volunteers began to circle, he considered the witch and her magic. When it was ready, he would recall Arashi – if he was still among the living – and the spies in Sesshomaru’s den would make certain that the miko became his. Then the stain upon dragon blood would be cut down. Arashi would not see the blade of his better, his predecessor, his Lord until it was too late. Ryukostokken had manipulated them all to his benefit. He had arranged the tiles to fall at his command and strike down his enemies, paving the way for his triumph.

He wanted Japan, and he would have it.

He wanted the weak little dog to suffer, and he would.

A dark laugh broke from his lips in a cloud of smoke and heat as Shianma bit into the first soldier, bringing him down. Ryukostokken’s long wait was nearly over. The dragons would return.

Chapter 41: Playing Pretend

Kagome and Sesshomaru had spent another hour simply sitting together in the forest. They spoke of social customs, but the time was also used to hold one another. For the daiyoukai, it was an opportunity to exchange scents and learn better what surprises his intended might have in store for him. For the miko, it was a relaxed, almost normal, time spent with the man she wanted to marry. Their travel arrangements to return to the shiro consisted of another walking date, with the addition, just before supper time, of a youki light orb. It had taken several long explanations and a struggle to translate concepts like physics and aerospace technology, but Kagome had finally figured out that he felt the speed would crush a feeble human body. Once she understood that Sesshomaru's orb broke the speed of sound she did her best to assure him that humans in her time had been flying that fast for years without consequences to their health.

The flight was warm and close and tingly – at least to Kagome's senses. She did have to close her eyes to avoid motion sickness, not from the speed but from the way the curve and coloring of the orb warped the view. She could feel Sesshomaru's tension for the duration of the ten minutes or so of travel, and did her best to assure him there was nothing wrong with her.

"So, is this going to be like, a big thing?"

"To what 'this' do you refer?"

Kagome waved her hand absently, and immediately found it tucked between their bodies. She blanched, remembering what Sesshomaru had said about excessive movement. *Keep your hands and arms inside the vehicle*, she paraphrased to herself. She had no desire to lose any appendages to the blistering surface of his youki or the wind shear around it. "Ah, I meant your return. Everyone was there to meet you last time, is that a regular thing?"

"Hn." He was quiet for a moment, but Kagome was surprised to find that she understood that particular silence, in contrast to so many other versions the daiyoukai expressed, to mean he was considering his response. "Several of my servants and vassals usually greet my arrival. When an honored guest visits, they are shown respect by many more."

"Well, that's a relief." Kagome didn't have to see his face to know he was curious. She twisted her lips, "I'm not exactly dressed for a crowd." She was grateful, not only because her kimono was stained and her hair a mess, but because she wasn't certain she was ready to give up the quiet time with Sesshomaru. Earlier that day, he had said 'when you become the Lady of the West'. He was teasing her at the time, but Kagome felt a new pressure that she did not want to think about. Mating Sesshomaru wasn't just joining his little family: Rin, Kimi – and that was an overwhelming idea on its own - the closest thing he had to friends in Kento and Hisao. It was also joining the West – *ruling* the West. A ripple of nausea made her belly clench in a way that had nothing to do with motion sickness. She forcibly pushed it out of her mind.

"You are beautiful," Sesshomaru stated, as though it were a fact of nature. Kagome couldn't help a little blush and a smile. "Although completely unpresentable." *The Killing Perfection, Ladies and Gentleman, decimating a mood one cold truth at a time.*

"Gee, thanks," she said dryly.

“You will have time to repair yourself,” he continued as though her sarcasm had no effect on him. Which, she was well-aware, it most likely did not. “We will approach under concealment. You may change before we walk through the village up to the shiro.”

Kagome frowned, and risked cracking open an eye to study Sesshomaru’s face. He was not looking at her, but forward with intense concentration. His youki was so solid and strong around them that she could gain no other sense of his mood. “That seems a lot more...casual...than I expected from you. Not that you can’t do subtle,” she assured him after he quirked an eyebrow, “but you don’t really seem like a window-shopping kind of guy, and I thought you were in a rush to get back so we can eat with the kids.”

“This is not a,” he pronounced the phrase carefully, “window-shopping excursion. Although you are welcome to peruse any stalls that are open. We are, indeed, *casually* returning from visiting your new friend Aki. Nothing of import has happened recently, I am merely escorting my miko through the village.”

“Your miko?” She watched the corner of his mouth quirk up and let out an amused huff. There was no point in arguing, especially when a good portion of her enjoyed the possessive claim. She turned the rest of his words over in her mind and responded slowly, “I take it not many people know that I was kidnapped?”

“On the contrary, the news was impossible to contain.”

“Then why...” Her voice drifted off, puzzled. If everyone knew that she had been taken they would surely think it odd that upon her return she decided the first thing she had to do was go shopping.

“Because it had no effect on the West,” he spoke with a surety of command. Because Sesshomaru said it, it would be true. “I suspected a spy within my House prior to your abduction. That your ally Ko has confirmed as much brings a new imperative to our strategy. Whatever we feel privately, we cannot allow outsiders – any that might carry news to our enemies – know that they have caused us even a moment of fear. Even if the West were bleeding its last, even if we faced the certainty of our destruction, those that would strike at us will tremble before our strength of will. Do you understand?”

She did. Kagome had to take a few deep breaths, but she nodded. She understood because she had seen Sesshomaru bleeding in front of his opponents before. Even after he had lost an arm to Inuyasha, he had never seemed less, smaller, weaker. It was perhaps one of the most frightening and trust-inspiring things about him. Despite physical wounds, Sesshomaru was not hurt, not even moved, by the actions of others. He made the loss of a limb seem like a minor irritation. Her civics teacher in high school had stressed the same lesson: perception is power. If that was even half true, the daiyoukai could not afford to let others think he was weakened in any way. If she extrapolated from that, as part of his household, his pack, she could not be seen as weak either. *Nor can the future Lady of the West*, her traitorous brain whispered, sending another nervous spasm through her stomach. If she was weak, she was vulnerable. Her vulnerabilities were Sesshomaru’s and they were as good as an invitation to attack. Kagome was vividly aware that she had a lot of vulnerabilities.

Kagome spent the rest of the short journey trying to meditate, to find a calm, still place inside herself so that no one would see even a hint of the trauma she was still working through. *It was just an irritation*, she told herself. She tried to imagine her own face with Sesshomaru’s cool distance. That didn’t work very well. She thought of her mother and the polite sort of blank smile she used when avoiding a rude

answer.

“How was your sleep, Gen-san?” This was from a distant cousin that had them once to his country house at Inawashiro lake. The room was swelteringly hot, the futon musty, and Kagome had killed at least six ginormous spiders before they even went to bed and then laid awake most of the night for fear of what might crawl across the floor to her.

“I could say nothing but thanks to you for it,” Mama had murmured politely. Not a lie, but the cousin had preened as though he received the highest compliment.

The memory made Kagome smile, and also made her a little sad. She did miss her family, and felt guilty for wanting to spend more time in the feudal era than modern Tokyo. A fleeting pressure from Sesshomaru’s arm at her waist caught her attention.

“I will revert to my cloud now, remain still.”

She did as he asked, and couldn’t help but hold her breath as well. *Please remain seated until the ride has come to a full stop.* The pressure of the orb intensified for an instant, pressing against her skin with almost unbearable heat. Then it dissipated, leaving a pleasant tingling along her cheeks and a sense of anticipation. They descended into a sparsely wooded area at the outer-most edge of the shiro’s defenses. Just beyond the trees were fields that provided food for the village, and forced any attackers to cross open ground before reaching the small huts that dotted the edge of the river. The bridge that stretched over the water to the village proper was made of stone. Kagome could make out two figures sitting under a tree halfway across the field, apparently picnicking. Sesshomaru sent out a slender, controlled burst of youki and the two demons immediately stood and gathered a blanket and basket before heading toward the trees.

“Kento and Aki,” Sesshomaru said before she could ask.

“I take it we spent a pleasant afternoon with them?”

“Hn.”

Kagome laughed lightly and did her best to adjust her hair while they waited for the newly mated couple. She was almost embarrassed on their behalf; as they drew closer she could see their youki wrapping around each other. Joyful caresses were at odds with the calm expression on Kento’s face; Aki was smiling widely, her long rope of hair swinging against her back. Kagome did her best to shrug off a blush. If they were happy and not the least self-conscious, then there was no reason she should feel awkward. “Aki-san,” she called as soon as they were within human hearing distance, “you look lovely today.”

The spider demon grinned even wider, showing off her fangs. It was Sesshomaru’s low whisper, for her ears alone, which forced a new blaze to the miko’s cheeks. “Such a glow from recent mating may be yours as soon as you wish it, Kagome.”

“I was referring to her kimono,” Kagome stuttered. Thankfully, neither of their new companions took notice of the exchange – or were too polite to comment on it.

“Thank you, Kagome-sama. I was practicing a new technique for an obi Sesshomaru-sama commissioned for you. I have it with me if you would care to try it on?” She held up the basket and gestured to the trees. Kagome glanced at Sesshomaru, wondering when he had managed to prepare for such an eventuality. It wasn’t like she *always* ruined her clothes.

“Do not go far,” Sesshomaru rumbled. Both females nodded, and walked only to the closest large bush which would conceal them. They were still less than twenty feet away – well within a single leap from even Kento. Kagome was pleased and surprised to find that Aki had thoughtfully packed a jar of fresh water, soap, and a scrubbing cloth as well as new clothes. With her help, it was quick work to change and resituate her hair into a loose knot. The kimono itself was rather plain, but made of a slippery fabric that was more similar to synthetics from the future than anything Kagome had seen before in the feudal era. The dark blue layered over a soft, warm lighter blue kimono. The obi was a work of art. Red, the color of Sesshomaru’s hexagonal flowers, it was stitched with blossoms in pink, gold, navy, and white. The embroidery was so intricate that Kagome could make out tiny bees with metallic pollen clinging to their legs.

“Oh, Aki,” Kagome murmured, and then impulsively hugged the youkai. She froze for a moment in the embrace, but then gently returned it.

“I am glad you like it, Kagome-sama.”

Sesshomaru’s eyes gleamed when he caught sight of her, inflating a feminine pride in Kagome. He began to walk without comment, but his pace was slow enough to be comfortable for her. Kento carried the basket and blanket for Aki, tucking her hand into his elbow and strolling just behind and to the right of his lord. “It humbles me, Kagome-sama, that you would offer friendship to my mate. Aki-san and I have considered how we might repay this generosity.” Kagome would have interrupted and assured him it wasn’t necessary, but Sesshomaru grasped her hand and laid it on his arm with a serious look. “Aki-san has determined that she would like to present you with a particular wardrobe that might rival even Kimi-sama.”

Kagome opened her mouth again, and this time was silenced by not just a look, but also a squeeze of careful claws. “Yes, Kagome-sama,” Aki smoothly joined in. “I have been thinking long on what might best suit you...”

It took nearly thirty minutes to reach Aki’s house, and not once did the spider or her mate allow Kagome a word in edgewise. The miko swore she knew more about exotic fabrics, hem-stitching, and salt-dyes than she had ever wanted to. However, as they had entered the village the reason for the one-sided discussion became obvious. Demons stopped in the street and stared as they passed. All of them quickly dropped into a bow, or even knelt as Sesshomaru drifted by. Kagome was acutely conscious of the whispers that followed them, but thanks to her human ears and Aki’s constant chatter she could not make out what was said. She was certain if she had been able to, her blush would have been uncontrollable. The spider was left at her home, and they continued on to the shiro, this time with Kento noting the quality of the rice trade and the status of the whitewashing project underway on the outer wall. It was a relief to step inside the castle and leave Kento to his duties.

Many servants had gathered to greet them, but received nothing more than a brief glance from Sesshomaru and a smile from Kagome as they continued up towards the family quarters. Anticipation to see Shippo and the other children made her step quicken, but as they ascended the final staircase, Sesshomaru drew her to his side, lifting her feet from the floor and increasing his pace. His youki

formed a barrier around them, concealing their approach.

“Wha-” There was no need to finish the question, and a short burst of unfamiliar youki erupted from the ima. Fear and anger battled for supremacy as she summoned her reiki. The possibility that anyone desiring to hurt her children had gotten past the rock brothers and the doubtless intense security that Sesshomaru had implemented since her kidnapping was small, but Kagome was not ready to take that chances. They rounded the corner and although Sesshomaru slowed when he saw the twin demons standing at attention and unharmed, Kagome remained apprehensive. Eiji opened the screen silently for them, and the miko felt her mouth fall open in shock.

Shippo and a full-grown kitsune female, her tails swaying and gesturing as she spoke, stood across the room from the other children. Rin held Emi in her lap while the pup dozed lightly. Nankae was nearly bouncing with excitement. “Again, again!” he called.

“This time, Shippo-kohai, remember to gather up the scent as well. Your youki must shape a river of smells, sounds, and sight. Allow them to flow in only one direction.” Blue light, the same shade as his fox fire, began to shimmer in a rough circle around Rin and Nankae. The look of concentration on the little kitsune’s face intensified, and then a barrier snapped into place, forming a dome. It wavered for a moment, and then it winked out – taking the children with them. Kagome could not help but reach out with her powers, and found the children’s auras safe and whole. She could not see them at all; the room looked as though they had never been there.

Her brief surge of power must have cancelled out whatever Sesshomaru was doing to conceal them, or he let his barriers fall of their own accord. The older kitsune stiffened and turned slowly, falling to her knees to bow. Shippo’s head snapped up, and his eyes widened, “Mama!” At his cry the barrier popped and the other children looked up at the commotion.

“Sesshomaru-sama!” Rin practically screamed with joy. “Kagome-sama!”

“Gome!” Nankae shouted. He had her hand clutched in his mere moments after Shippo collided with her legs. “Saidai Mao,” he greeted the lord belatedly. Slower than the demons, Rin still managed to be only a few seconds behind them, carrying a blinking Emi. The human child leaned into her adoptive father’s leg and he bent to take the pup from her arms. One clawed hand squeezed her shoulder gently and then settled on her hair.

“Rin,” he said quietly. Kagome tucked that tender moment away to be fawned over later, and focused instead on the unknown youkai that had been so close to Shippo. She sensed no animosity coming from the fox, but her usual carefree trust was tempered by a new caution.

“This One has not approved of your presence here,” Sesshomaru stated flatly. His tone was enough to give Kagome a shiver, but she agreed. They couldn’t take any chances with a potential spy for Ryukostokken in their midst.

“My Lord,” the kitsune spoke with respect, “please forgive any trespass or impertinence – it was unknowing on my part. The Western Lady wished me to instruct these kits.”

“These *pups*,” Sesshomaru over enunciated the word, obviously including all of the children with it, “do not-” Another flare of youki announced the approach of Kimi and Sesshomaru bit off whatever he had been about to say. Kagome stepped closer to his side, holding the children tighter. The kitsune held

her position while they all waited for the Lady in question to arrive. She did not disappoint with her entrance.

“Kagome-san!” she smiled wickedly, ignoring her much higher ranking son and stepping right into the miko’s space. “This One is delighted to introduce a tutor being trialed for position in this House. Come, meet Aina, and decide if she shall be trustworthy for assisting with the care and protection of the young in this pack – or if she shall be sent below for questioning.”

Kagome choked and tripped as Kimi tried to pull her forward. The Lady received only a low warning growl from Sesshomaru before she ceased trying to drag the miko away from him. *Questioning? As in, to see if she’s a spy? Like interrogation? Or torture?* She hoped Kimi was joking, but she didn’t know the inu Lady well enough to judge. Kagome wasn’t pleased that a stranger had been left alone with the children, but she wasn’t particularly eager to draw a connection between her irritation and some sort of investigation. “I, ah-” she shot a wide eyed glance at Sesshomaru, but his shuttered expression was not helpful. *Holy hell, this is not how I wanted to spend the evening.* It didn’t help her discomfiture that the situation was most likely one that the Lady of the House was expected to sort out. She wasn’t the Lady, not yet, but Kimi was willing to defer on the matter. That was a big deal, Kagome knew. She really, really didn’t want to mess things up.

“Er, let’s talk about that in the morning. Say – a...meeting...after breakfast. To ah,” she struggled to find the right words, “to assess this potential tutor.” A nervous sweat was threatening to break out on her skin, but Sesshomaru’s youki wrapped around her comfortingly and Kimi displayed a pleased little smile.

“Excellent, Kagome-san,” she agreed. “Aina, you are excused for the day. You will appear at This One’s reception tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, Kimi-sama.” The kitsune bowed even lower, her forehead touching the floor, but one fluffy tail twirled and tapped against the tatami mat. Sesshomaru drew them out of the room, his youki still stiffly at attention between his pack and the stranger. Kagome was forced to follow beside him, one hand still trapped in the crook of his elbow where Emi leaned over to press against her shoulder. Nankae dropped her hand and skipped in front of them, while Shippo interlaced his fingers with Kagome’s and began a race to see how many words could fall out of his mouth before they reached their quarters. Rin walked sedately on Sesshomaru’s other side. Kagome was sure the little girl was relishing the attention, as the daiyoukai had let his hand drift to her shoulder and kept it there. Kimi walked behind them, but it did not stop her son from addressing her in a cool tone.

“This One is displeased, Mother.”

“This One is not affected in the slightest, Son.”

Kagome glanced back over her shoulder with wide eyes to catch a wink from the most overwhelmingly powerful youkai she had ever met, aside from Sesshomaru himself.

As far as homecomings went, it could have been worse.

The meal had been enjoyed thoroughly and dishes cleared away. Kimi waited for the little miko to pour tea, but she appeared too distracted to notice. The pups kept returning to her side to nuzzle and hug before retreating again to Rin's room where they had built a fort of futons and blankets. Inside they conspicuously enjoyed the strange sweet treats the miko had offered them from her home. After several futile attempts to gain Sesshomaru's attention so that he might direct his intended in her duties, Kimi gave up with a huff that quickly eased into a smile. It was good for the future-mate-of-her-son to be so attached and protective of these adopted children. It spoke well of her maternal instincts, and what she would be willing to do to protect the heirs of the West.

That brought her attention back to another detail she had been considering. Namely, how long she could expect before the human ripened. It would be preferable to wrap up the vexing business with the dragons first, but the sooner the West had a secured line, the better. It would also be quite satisfactory to see her aloof son moved as only the birth of a pup could do.

"This One understands that humans are fertile nearly all the time. Is that true, Kagome-san?" The rather simple question caused the miko to stare, wide-eyed, and her skin to turn bright red. Kimi was fascinated by the response. They would soon be related, were already pack as Sesshomaru had claimed her. Although she was ridiculously young in comparison to Sesshomaru, Kimi was aware that the miko was older than most humans when they first took a mate. And yet the girl reeked of embarrassment at the discussion of physiological cycles. *Charming*. She would have to make a similar inquiry of the hanyou – he would surely sputter and attempt to flee her presence. *Delightful*.

"Mother." Sesshomaru's voice was quiet and devoid of emotion, but his youki practically shook her with admonishment.

"Actually," the miko took a deep breath and appeared to attempt to suck the blood flushing her cheeks back into her body. She smoothed her hair and reached for the teapot with a hand that only shook slightly. "I want to discuss how it is that a woman – demon – I have never met came to be alone with the children." With each word, her voice firmed and the sharp turnip sent of her humility faded to be replaced with a pepper that made Kimi's nose twitch.

"Oh, her," Kimi waved a hand and accepted a cup of tea, dropping formalities. The miko was not yet Sesshomaru's mate, but it was obvious she would be soon, so there was no need to stand on convention. "She came seeking employment and I thought 'what a perfect little addition to the security around the young ones'." Sesshomaru's aura was thunderous at her flippancy. She enjoyed arguing with him immensely, but she was also pleasantly full from a meal that included a delicious new noodle dish – credited to the miko. And if Sesshomaru let his temper loose, even a little, his intended would no doubt lose her patience, the children would be unhappy, the guards would be on alert. She wasn't in the mood for such nonsense. "Do you really believe, my child, that I did not know every detail of that vixen's life, every hair in her tails, every trick she has even thought of, before she walked into this House?"

Kimi could sense the moment he grudgingly admitted the superiority of her spy network. His youki settled, but, unpredictably, Kagome's reiki rose. She kept an unforeseen amount of control over it, considering how much power was seething just under her skin. Kimi was impressed. She had not realized the human had so much energy available to her. "I don't really care if you tracked her movements like a bloodhound or ran her through Interpol." The pepper sparking in the air increased along with the unintelligible words the miko spoke. "Just because you didn't find her 'Free Candy' van, it does not mean that she has the values, morals, and knowledge that I want Shippo to know. And what

about Rin? For all I know this youkai will treat her poorly, for being human. Nobody does that to my little girl!" Her voice was a furious whisper, and the two demons at the table just stared at her.

Kimi was in the unusual position of being mildly offended that the human felt she would not have made considerations for those very concerns, and being impressed by both her courage to stand up to the Lady of the West as well as her claim on Rin. It was good that the little orphan she had saved from hell would have found another champion. The miko set down a cup of tea in front of Sesshomaru with a click, and then her face jerked up to meet his gaze. "Ah, I mean, your, er, Rin. And Emi and Nankae."

Kimi watched, enthralled, as her aloof son captured the hand of his intended against the delicate porcelain she still held. She could not hear the pleased rumble, but she could feel it as a low undercurrent in the room. "Your first response was correct, Kagome."

The tender moment was broken by Nankae, who bounced right into Kagome's lap, causing her to let out a startled breath and spill several drops of hot tea on herself. Kimi gave a soft growl of warning, to make the little inu more careful with the delicate human woman, but Sesshomaru had spoken first. His quiet rumble caught the pup's attention, "Gently," he commanded. If the pup had been in his true form, he would have laid back his ears and tucked his tail.

"Sorry, 'maru-sama," he mumbled. The submissive response earned him a stroke of youki. "I just wanted to see if Rin-san was right. She said we hafta go to bed, but Shippo-san says 'Gome might let us stay up for a story.'" His eyes turned big and soft, and Kimi hardened her heart reflexively. It had not lasted long, but even Sesshomaru had gone through a phase where he would ask for privileges with large eyes and snuggling youki. It was extremely difficult to resist. The miko did not seem to have any defenses.

"Of course you can have a story, Nankae-kun. Have Rin pick one out while you and Shippo straighten up the futons." The child barked at the joy of victory and ran back to his compatriots. It gave Kimi a feeling of yearning for the days of soft hair and tiny claws against her skin. It occurred to her that she might miss the little female that had been a near constant companion since the miko's abduction. Such thoughts were set aside when a hot blue stare focused on her. "I am sure you were diligent, Kimi-sama, but please try to remember how you might feel if you had found a stranger with Sesshomaru when he was a boy – er, pup." She frowned, and then dismissed the confused terminology with a wave. "I'll speak with that kitsune tomorrow, but even if I do decide to keep her for Shippo, it will be up to Sesshomaru if she teaches Rin and Emi, and only Hisao may select Nankae's tutor. Either way, I am certain Sesshomaru won't throw her in the pokey if she's not acceptable." Her squeeze of Sesshomaru's hand did not go unnoticed before she stood. Then the miko gave Kimi a sharp, if perfectly respectful, bow and glided after the children. The exit would have been exceedingly dramatic if she hadn't pinched her hand in the shoji screens as she slid them shut.

The two daiyoukai sat in silence, savoring their tea and playing a game of waiting. Kimi deigned to break first. "Pokey?"

"She quite obviously referred to the prisons," Sesshomaru answered flatly.

"Ah, well, you can understand my confusion with her dialect. Such a strange turn of phrase she had. What was the name of her village again?"

"You should not have brought in a tutor."

She watched her son over the rim of her cup. He appeared unruffled and calm, far less irritated than he usually was after sharing a meal with her. *I will have to develop new tactics, if he is not going to take the usual bait.*

“She is also a guard, Sesshomaru,” Kimi stated, barely repressing an eye roll. “She is another protector, she can teach young Shippo how to handle the youki that comes with a second tail, her presence will allow the miko time to pursue training, she has extensive experience with humans, and Hisao is off center merely by being in her presence. She is an excellent choice. Do not turn up your nose at perfectly good game just because you didn’t get the kill yourself.”

“Experience with humans does not equate to tolerance, or affection. And Hisao’s *center* is of little concern to me.” He took a final sip of tea and set the cup down precisely. “Also, I always get the kill.”

Kimi laughed. True, deep, happy laughter. It had been years since – or actually it might never have happened before. Sesshomaru had joked with her. His face remained composed, and his youki still and predatory as ever, but his intention and success were undeniable. It was a good thing they had both secured barriers around the family quarters once the meal had been cleared away. Kimi did not doubt any demons that heard her would think her mad, or on the verge of a cheerfully bloody rampage. Perhaps both.

“I see your time with the miko has given you an appreciation for humor. Tell me, how did Bokuseno find your human?”

The sound of the miko’s voice faded and lamps in the children’s rooms were blown out as they spoke of the tree youkai and Ryukostokken’s perfidy. The miko bid them goodnight and retired to the larger room, which Kimi noted smelled of the woman and her son quite strongly. *Sesshomaru is resolute when he has set a goal for himself.* Kagome’s breath and heartbeat evened and slowed as they spoke of the intelligence gathered by Kimi’s spies and the coming Full Moon Council. The shiro was quiet and the restrained pulse of youki from the many guards posted on the castle walls and in the mountain became a rhythmic background sensation to a discussion of treason.

“You are certain of this?” Kimi frowned, not bothering to conceal her genuine disappointment and displeasure in the privacy of Sesshomaru’s company.

“As I can be. There were signs. I even considered, decades ago, that certain values he held might lead him down such a path. Nothing came of it, in time, and so I let it go, thinking he had discarded them.”

“My great-uncle had the gift of mind-speak. He told me once he could even pull thoughts from those in close proximity without their knowledge, if they were related by blood. I always believed he was boasting.” Kimi sighed, allowing her spine to curve into something nearing a slouch. She had lived a long time. She wasn’t old – certainly not – but she was *mature*. She had the experience of years and it seemed the more experienced she became, the less shocked she was by betrayal. It was never a comforting thing, to have your suspicions proved correct. “Kento is your cousin.”

“Yes.” Sesshomaru straightened and stood. He towered over Kimi’s form. Even with her tails pooled around her, at that moment she felt small in comparison to her son. His was the mantle of leadership, of responsibility. Recent error with the miko aside - no matter how it might have pained him personally, he carried that responsibility well.

“Go to your intended,” she instructed softly, also standing. She had taken up rooms closer to the front of the shiro, between the ima and the children’s spaces. “Breathe her in. Tomorrow you will secure her, and the West, from further espionage. I will keep her attention while you are occupied.” At his quirked eyebrow, she smirked. “There is the tutor to interview, and training to begin,” she smoothly opened the screens and spoke over her shoulder as she closed them, “and I believe we will begin planning to announce your courtship at the Full Moon Council.” The paper screens did nothing to halt the oppressive wave of youki her son sent after her. Nor did it prevent him from hearing her quiet chuckle.

Chapter 42: Subversion

“Ah, I don’t think that is necessary, Kimi-sama,” Kagome tried desperately to think of some alternative to what the Lady had proposed over breakfast. *Proposed, more like demanded*. “Thank you, but I, just, no.”

“Oh, Miko,” Kimi smiled. It wasn’t particularly vicious or fang-filled, but it sent a little shiver of dread down Kagome’s spine. “It is necessary. Absolutely necessary. Even if it weren’t something that I simply insist upon for my own delight, and Sesshomaru’s frustration, it *would* take place. It must.”

Kagome lowered a spoonful of soup, forgotten as she latched onto Kimi’s comment. “Frustration?” she echoed. “You don’t think he would want to...” It was dumb. Dumb and stupid and foolish and immature, but the suggestion that Sesshomaru might not be excited about announcing their engagement – an engagement that Kagome herself had been reluctant to make a big deal out of – it stung. *Hypocrite*, she called herself. *Twitterpated hypocrite*. She tried to shake it off, although she couldn’t pull back the words that had escaped with a sad sort of longing that she found humiliating. Men were not supposed to be into the whole engagement party/wedding, big fancy celebration thing. At least, the few guys she knew in her time that had gotten married couldn’t have cared less about the details of announcements, receptions, and invitations. It was probably a constant across males of any species. They didn’t really see a lot of value between the ring and the honeymoon.

“Of course he will want to,” Kimi’s eyes sparkled, and while she didn’t acknowledge it if she sensed any change in Kagome’s emotions, she did tap a perfectly groomed claw against the miko’s wrist. “That is the beauty in it. Has he not told you about the ceremony at all?” Kagome could do nothing but shake her head and try to keep up with the daiyoukai. “There is an exchange of gifts between families – oh, it has been ages since the nobility had a courtship.” Her youki was nearly dancing around her in excitement. “There is a fair bit of competition, of course. Not just to see which family has more wealth and power between the couple, but also gifts are compared to those from past courtships. The head of the family will stand on a raised platform. I’ll have to see about having that kitsune female make it illuminated – my line has always done these things under moonlight. The male’s gift is revealed first, you know how they are, always so eager. But that means that the female can leave the last impression with the crowd.”

“Crowd?” Kagome repeated faintly. Despite her gnawing stomach, the soup had lost its appeal. She held a hand to her forehead, brushing her bangs away from her eyes and wondering if it was possible to faint from dread.

“Of course! This is no low-level wild-youkai union being announced. This is the mating of the Saidai Mao and the Shikon Priestess, the Miko no Mao.” Kimi’s mokomoko shifted with her as she gestured elegantly. “Under other circumstances, we would demand the attendance of every lord, his family, and many youkai from across the sea. The Inu no Tashio’s mother was from Zhongguo,” Kimi confided in a lower tone that implied the information was borderline scandalous, “and her relations would slaver on themselves to present well wishes and gifts to the Saidai Mao.” The daiyoukai straightened her spine and reverted to a cool, unaffected tone, “Unfortunately, given the state of politics at the moment, I would not feel comfortable with the security of such honored guests, so they will be notified afterward.” Kimi did not sound particularly sorry to Kagome. It occurred to Kagome that Kimi might not like her Chinese in-laws. Then again, the human had been nearly overwhelmed by the immediate intimacy, nearing interrogation, which the Lady had inflicted on her – so she might not have been thinking clearly. Since the time she woke up that morning, with a faint kiss from Sesshomaru as he left

their room, she had been treated to a whirlwind of information on politics, torture techniques, and the current topic: mating customs.

“They will all celebrate. Hirimoto will be most obnoxious,” she said that with fondness, “and I have already spoken to Jaken about setting up a rotation, so that the soldiers can all enjoy the feast before or after they are on duty.”

“Feast?”

“Yes, girl. Are there no ceremonies for the joining of two families where you are from?” Dark eyes, the color of cool honey, bored into her and Kagome was suddenly extremely alert.

“There are,” she said carefully, “but human marriages are different. And my family is not nobility.”

“You are educated.” It was a statement, not a question, but Kagome nodded anyhow. “Your people are scholars.”

“I suppose so.” *Papa was a doctor, and Mama has a degree in economics. That’s about as scholarly as it gets, for this time.* “We own a shrine.”

“I hope your father has adequate help to run things for him, so he does not have to close down when they travel here.” There was something about the tilt of her head, the way her pointed chin was set and her eyes narrowed that put Kagome in mind of a hunting dog about to snatch a rabbit from a hole. It was nerve wrecking.

“My father passed away, when I was quite young.”

“Your mother, then.”

“Er, no, she cannot travel here.” Kagome saw Kimi’s eyes narrow further, and a smile twitch at the corner of her lips. *Crap!* “My grandfather is quite elderly,” she sent a small apology his way. Of course, seventy-five was ancient for humans in the feudal ear, but he would still have been offended. “And I have a younger brother who needs looking after.” Souta would take exception to that as well, if he knew. Although he really did need looking after, especially at fifteen. His new girlfriend was a bit more *adventurous* than average.

“Is it so far, that you do not think a youkai could fetch them here and back for such an important event?”

“Yep, oh yeah, way too far. It would be a real inconvenience.” She muttered under her breath, “For everybody.”

“If Sesshomaru cannot spare anyone, I would be willing to go myself.”

The realization that she was the rabbit and Kimi was dangerously close to snapping her jaws closed caused Kagome to blurt out, without thinking, “What sort of gifts were there at your mating?” She closed her mouth so fast after that, she bit her tongue. The coppery taste did not drown out the bile that threatened at the back of her throat. *Way to go, Higurashi. Just dredge up all the painful memories. Nice.* The reaction wasn’t quite what she expected. Kimi seemed to sort of sit back into herself, tipping

her head to the side. Her eyes became unfocused, as if she were seeing something far away.

“My family presented him with a chest, carved from demon wood, and depicting scenes of the great battles of my forebearers. A priceless relic from each of the cardinal lands was inside. It was an overt condemnation of Toga’s line. His father was daiyoukai, but he was no noble. That One rose to power through force and married a wealthy inu from an old mainland family to secure his House. The Iwakura were ruling and mating into each of the Cardinal Houses for millennia before That One was born. My father could not resist pointing it out.” Her lips twisted into something between a wry smile and a frown.

“What did Inu no Tashio give?” Kagome couldn’t help but ask, and she held her breath afterward. It was surprising that Kimi had answered the first incredibly rude question; it would have been better to let things lie with that.

Her face smoothed, and then dark gold eyes swept closed. A long, shaky breath that was audible even to Kagome and quite deliberate, was released before Kimi met her gaze. “A foo dog.” She laughed. At first the sound was overly loud and brittle, but it gradually quieted into a genuine chuckle.

“Aren’t those Chinese temple guardians?” Kagome ventured carefully. Of course, she knew they were. A version of them had been imported to Japan with Buddhism. There were a pair of new, and that only meant less than 200 years old, statues guarding the steps to the Higurashi shrine. And about twenty more buried somewhere in her Grandpa’s store house. Kagome wasn’t sure why a demon would give another demon something to ward off evil spirits.

“It was a joke,” Kimi said softly. Her laughter was replaced with a soft smile. “Although my family did not find it amusing in the least. When I first met Toga, I thought him brash and impulsive and terribly attractive – which of course I covered by telling him that I was completely unimpressed. He took to hanging around outside of the shiro where I lived. He made friends with all of my father’s soldiers, begged treats from the kitchen servants, and quietly drove off every other suitor I had. In a fit of pique one day, I told him I didn’t need a guard dog.”

Kagome was enthralled in the story, finding herself leaning forward over the table and hanging on every word. She couldn’t ignore the mist that threatened the corners of Kimi’s eyes. The Lady flicked a silvery strand of hair over her shoulder and made a huffing sound of dismissal. “Of course, it was made of red coral and came up to my knees – so there was no question that it was suitably valuable. But father nearly demanded the mating be called off because of the insult.”

“How did Toga finally change your mind?”

“Oh, girl, that is a story for another time.” Kimi settled the folds of her kimono, and suddenly she was all business again. “Now if you are unwilling to discuss the details of the ceremony, we can put that off for a short while. There is still the matter of the kitsune, your wardrobe, and proper court etiquette. And, obviously, you will have to memorize Sesshomaru’s lineage.” Kimi gestured to an intricate mural on the wall of her reception room, and Kagome realized that worked into the hundreds of images of demons, primarily inu, were tiny kanji for names and dates. She barely restrained a groan, and reached for her soup again. She hated homework.

It had been a pleasant surprise for Sesshomaru to find that the pup, Emi, was comfortable sleeping with Rin after two stories and multiple nuzzling kisses for Kagome. His addition of a freshly scented piece of clothing from the miko's bag had helped as well. The pup had immediately seized it and rubbed it against her face with abandon. Kagome had called it a security blanket and laughed, but whatever name was used, he had been grateful that he would not have to share his intended their first night back at the shiro. When he left his mother, it was to find the human woman sound asleep on their shared futon. She had washed in the newly repaired bathhouse prior to laying down, and her scent was fresh and thick in the room. He took a few precious moments to prepare himself before lying down with her, pulling her body snug against his. Her contented sigh and the way she willingly wrapped her arms around him warmed his chest and eased him toward sleep. He would have preferred to sate other physical desires as well, but she was resting deeply and her health required adequate rest.

Sesshomaru woke well before dawn and brushed her hair from her face. Her legs had tangled with his during the night; her sleeping yukata had parted leaving the smooth skin of her thighs to rub against his legs. He was extremely conscious of the ache in his groin and the heavy weight of her breasts against his side. Kagome's head only reached the center of his chest; his eyes traced the line of her nose and the pink bow of her lips, swollen from sleep.

Sesshomaru did not feel want for her. No mere desire could adequately explain the depth of the craving in him. Every part of him, his flesh, his youki, the innermost beast that was his true self - a demon in its most natural state, it called out to her. Reached for her. Even without taking advantage of her proximity and the muted fragrance of arousal that undercut the scent of sleep, he was at peace. He lay still for a time, enjoying her with him and anticipating the moment when she would wake.

The approach of a familiar youki reminded him of the sparring match he had arranged with Hisao. He reluctantly eased his miko away from his heat. She frowned and grumbled in her sleep at the loss and a soft smile pulled at his lips. He dressed in near silence and left Kagome with a kiss and a silent promise that he would resolve the threats against them and make time for his intended as well. He enjoyed her presence, but he was certain the satisfaction would be even greater with further intimacy.

Hisao met him at the end of the corridor, near the ima, and fell into step just behind him as they walked to Sesshomaru's personal dojo. A barrier was secured, the demons stripped to the waist, and they began an intricate series of katas to warm their muscles. Sesshomaru waited for the actual sparring before he spoke. "This One has found the spy." Saying the words to one of his oldest friends left a bitter taste in his mouth. He slid across the mats, seeing Hisao's ploy for what it was and knowing the captain would anticipate a leap into the air. Hisao's claws rent empty space and they both turned, circling each other.

"They must be well-placed, to have avoided detection from either Kento-san or myself," Hisao responded. He rushed at his lord and then abruptly flipped upwards, narrowly avoiding Sesshomaru's acid whip.

"Far too close," Sesshomaru agreed. Lightning feathered out from Hisao's hands. Sesshomaru allowed the energy to hit him, crackling against a quick barrier. "You will assist in interrogation and apprehension. Information must be guarded closely to avoid alerting the target." By absorbing the attack, Sesshomaru was well-placed to charge the other inu. Claws raked across tanned skin, drawing shallow lines of blood that would heal momentarily, but could have been made deadly in actual combat. Both males came to a stop, bowing and resetting their positions for another round.

"Who, then?" Glowing blue gauntlets of electricity appeared around Hisao's fists as he dodged and

weaved to avoid another loss.

“This One’s instincts were correct long ago,” Sesshomaru began.

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“No, no, Miko. Tomomi sired my grandsire, Iwakara Yamadera.” Kimi’s chiding was neither gentle nor harsh as they descended to the ground level of the shiro. Kagome’s head was swimming with names, dates, and inappropriate images of fluffy white dogs the size of houses chasing down screaming postmen. “He was very powerful, but his death was a relief to the family.”

“Tomomi?” Kagome asked faintly. She tripped on the last stair and found herself swiftly righted by a swirl of white fur. Kimi’s mokomoko settled back into place as though nothing were amiss and they continued their walk to the gardens.

“No, Miko.” Kimi let out a little sigh of disappointment. Whether it was for Kagome’s poor memory or the servant that was a beat late to slide open the doors, the miko wasn’t sure. “Yamadera. My own sire tore out the old dog’s throat when he refused to allow the mating with my dam.” Kimi leaned in conspiratorially, her voice dropping to a whisper. It seemed entirely unnecessary to Kagome, as the Lady’s youki was swirling around them like a massive hurricane: beautiful from a distance of, say, outer space, but violent on the ground. Kagome was in the eye of the storm, and she wasn’t yet sure she wouldn’t prefer to be out in the wind, if it meant her ‘lessons’ could end for the day. The residents of the castle appeared to be of the same mind if their scarcity was any indication. “Mother was half-kitsune. A terrible scandal, her parents weren’t properly mated even, but had power and resources in excess to keep the fact discreet.”

That explains so much about you, Kagome had a sudden insight, thinking of the quick smirks and pointed barbs she had been treated to all morning. She wasn’t foolish enough to actually give voice to that though.

“And my uncles and aunts were mostly prepared to overlook the matter, given that Yamadera had eaten so many of their siblings that he had deemed weak. In that day, cannibalism of family was considered beyond the pale – although not punishable by trial as it is now.”

“He ate his children?” Kagome blurted, coming to a complete standstill. She really hoped that Kimi was pulling her leg, maybe giving in to a deep-seated but twisted kitsune proclivity for jokes. “And nobody did anything?”

“My dear,” she said calmly, as though she were explaining her grandfather’s penchant for argyle socks, “he was a mass murderer and a sadistic cannibal, but he was a well-bred cannibal. Those sorts of things were taken care of within the pack. And that doesn’t happen anymore.” Kimi waved her hand as if it were inconsequential, but her perfect lips, the color of frozen raspberries, turned down. “Such actions are unnatural to inuyoukai, as well as the animals that bear our likeness. Too many close marriages within the line, I suspect, twisted his mind and instincts from conception.”

“Oh,” Kagome said. Her voice sounded oddly high-pitched. *How do I respond to the fact that my boyfriend’s family practiced inbreeding? What is the equivalent for pure-breed dogs? Hip dysplasia?* She stepped beside Kimi onto a snow dusted bridge. Under a thick layer of ice she could just make out a few colorful flashes of fish. “Yeah, that...happens. At least you didn’t get hemophilia?” At Kimi’s

curious stare, Kagome clarified, her words growing fainter with caution and discomfort, “Thin blood?”

Kimi snorted and even that sounded elegant coming from the Lady. “Thin blood. Ridiculous. That must be some sort of human affliction. Tell me, Miko, do you think the mortal lords suffer from such illness?” Kagome hesitated, excruciatingly aware that her knowledge of powerful people in the feudal era would not jive with what a village miko should know. It probably couldn’t have even been excused if she were a proper hime of the time. Kimi, out of impatience or terrible suspicion, added, “Do not fear to speak of it. Sesshomaru has informed me of your visions.”

“Visions,” Kagome turned the word over for a moment, both grateful to Sesshomaru for coming up with a cover story and put out that he hadn’t let her in on the lie. “I have not seen an indication that those men you say are invited here have any, ah, defects of the mind or blood. But that doesn’t make it the truth.”

“Wisely said, little Miko,” Kimi praised. Her smirk expanded into a smile that showed off dainty fangs. “I will not pry into your unique gift.” Kagome’s sigh of relief got caught in her throat and she stared at Kimi with wide eyes. “...not today.” The inudaiyoukai laughed shortly. “Come, lessons continue, and I believe we must begin with a method to hide some of that human emotion. Your enemies and allies alike cannot be allowed to know your heart so easily.” Slender fingers tipped with deadly claws took Kagome’s hand and tucked it into the crook of her elbow. “Before sparring,” Kagome’s stomach did another flip-flop at the casual announcement and Kimi continued as if she hadn’t noticed the sudden jump in the human’s pulse, “we will practice your mask. Sesshomaru prefers indifference, which tends to make anyone with a spark of personality want to poke him until he responds.”

Kagome laughed and then clapped a hand over her mouth. She had felt that compulsion on more than one occasion.

“I know,” Kimi said dryly, “but it is delightful when he cracks.” She steered them along the edge of the garden, admiring the dormant plants and the frost limning the trees. “You have not had the opportunity to admire it yet, but my own mask of amusement is vastly superior. They tremble before my smile – and soil themselves when I do not grant it.” The Lady bared her teeth in a cross between a grin and a snarl. “We will find what suits you best, of course.”

She patted Kagome’s hand. It was intended as reassurance, the miko was sure. It only inspired dread and a sense of inevitable doom. At that moment, she would have been glad for Inuyasha to stomp in and cause a scene. Jaken’s squawking and complaints about the children would have been welcome. If Sesshomaru had appeared with a stoic stare and demanded she wash mokomoko, she would have jumped at the chance to get away from the adversely helpful, frighteningly commanding, happily vicious daiyoukai at her side. Her eyes glazed over a little, thinking of what had happened the last time she was given the chore of cleaning his fur. A very welcome interruption. Kimi’s cultured voice began instruction on scent, adrenaline, and pheromones. With a hard blush and stumbling feet, Kagome began to hope a savage, rabid youkai would leap into the garden just to break up the conversation.

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“Shall I summon Kento?” Hisao asked as they made their way to the prison cells on a lower level of the shiro. There were not many in the Western Palace. Sesshomaru’s grandfather had spent most of his life defending the West and fighting for the security of his pack which did not allow for the imprisonment

of those deemed enemies or criminals. Inu no Tashio had favored swift justice and strict adherence to ancient code and trials by combat, which rarely necessitated detention. Sesshomaru himself had not made much use of the chambers for longer than a few days at a time. As he saw it, his enemies would die at his hand. Criminals were either malicious, in which case no amount of time considering their actions would reform them, or desperate, in which case they could be molded to loyal subjects that added to the security and economic superiority of the West. Torture was not a tactic to gain reliable information from the prisoner either. It did, however, make an excellent tool for convincing others who feared the same treatment to speak up.

“You should not,” Sesshomaru replied. The two youkai shared a look of understanding. They had discussed the situation at length during their early-morning training exercise. Hisao had agreed with his lord, but he did not enjoy that accord. Sesshomaru could smell the frustration and disappointment on his captain. “Interrogation first.” Hisao nodded, clearly uncomfortable but resigned.

Their time spent in Geiken’s cell was shrouded by a youki barrier. It held back sound, but scent and youki passed through it freely. Before he even stepped out of the room, calmly retracting his dokkasou while Hisao tried to get the smell of fear out of his nose, Sesshomaru was sure that every youkai in the palace was aware that his time with the prisoner had resulted in wild surges of frantic youki, blood, acid, and terror.

“Have the Ringu prepared,” he stated coldly, golden eyes hard and unforgiving. “And summon Kento there. For combat.”

Chapter 43: Violent Tango

“Tomago,” Inuyasha barked. The fledgling was at his elbow in an instant, having taken to the rude nickname as though it were a badge of honor. The ever present roster was tucked under one arm. “Where’re the monks at?”

“They’re still working on the second bend, Captain-sama.” The kid’s head feathers ruffled weirdly and he smelled of excitement and hormones. It didn’t take an inu to track down the reason. The ameonas were going through to their usual washing-up routine, and Inuyasha was so sick of dealing with the fallout he was ready to give them double-shifts so they’d have less time to stir up every male in camp.

“Pull your head out of your pants, Egg. Go find the lieutenant and send him to me, then go get an update from the monks.” He pinned the skinny fledgling with a hard gold stare, “I don’t want to know *where* they are, Tomago, I want to know about *progress*.”

It didn’t take long for the last Eastern officer to arrive with a series of sideslips that sent dust and snow stirring around Inuyasha’s feet. In his true form, the crane was only slightly taller than the hanyou. It didn’t allow for much tactical advantage in combat, but the bird was excellent at reconnaissance.

“Well?” Inuyasha demanded. He walked while they talked, stopping occasionally to check on soldiers repairing armor and weapons or to correct the stance or form of those training. It had been so much easier when it was just him, nobody else to worry about. Most of his life, two hundred years between the death of his mother and being sealed to Goshinboku, he had been alone. It had been tough. More than tough. There were long stretches in the early days where he couldn’t remember anything but gnawing hunger, bone-aching cold, and the taste of his own blood and fear in his mouth. It had made him stronger though. There was no training camp or martial tutors for a dirty half-breed orphan; Inuyasha learned everything he knew about fighting and surviving on the razor-thin edge of death.

After he had met Kagome, after he had recognized the little pack he had cobbled together of humans and youkai for what it was, he wondered what had kept him going before. He had nothing to live for in the old days, couldn’t have imagined ever having anything worth fighting for, worth protecting. It was only the kind of empty, single-minded devotion to be strong enough to live that had fueled him. His time with Kikyou was like a dream: wonderfully strange, light-washed and insubstantial. It ended in the pain and solitude that he had expected all along. And then there was Kagome, and the others followed. Working together, group tactics, had been new to him at the beginning of the quest for the shards; within a month he had adapted far easier than he would have thought possible.

Grudgingly, as he stalked through the camp in the Eel Valley, he admitted that Sesshomaru’s unwelcome and taunting attacks had been excellent exercises for learning to protect, to trust his pack to use their skills to advantage and watch his back. It might have honed his sword skills too. A little. Not that he would ever say so aloud. Not even if the ice prick had his claw in Inuyasha’s gut.

Leading the rag-tag army wasn’t much different. He had to learn each individual’s strengths and weakness, pair or group them to take advantage of complementing techniques, and get them all to feel tied to each other. Uniting against a common goal was an easy way of making allies out of enemies. It had worked for a pervert monk, a guilt-ridden demon slayer, and a grief-stricken kit – and damned if it didn’t work for refugee cranes, hunted wild youkai, and wandering holy men. ‘Course, there was also the added burdens of massive supply shortages, multiplying personality conflicts, a growing and uncomfortable mantle of responsibility, and the *fuckin’ ameonas*.

Inuyasha sniffed, nearly sneezing at the thick pheromones that flooded his nose. He glowered toward the stream and interrupted the lieutenant. “What the hell do I gotta do to get them to knock that shit off?” His words came with more snarl than he intended, most likely due to the female that noticed his attention and blatantly smiled back and ran her hands over her body invitingly. The crane noted his anger and took a physical step away.

“Short of throwing them out or mating them, I am not aware of any non-violent means to curbing the... predilections,” he said the last word delicately, and although Inuyasha hadn’t heard it before, he got the jist just fine, “of female rain youkai.”

“Who said I was only looking for a peaceful – wait, what?” It took a moment, but he finally digested everything the bird said and it filtered through his irritation. Shock temporarily numbed his brain and loosened his tongue, “Mate them *all*?”

“Ameonnas are polyamorous. Usually there are several of them, siblings, in a union with two or three individuals from outside their family.” A smirk twitched at the bird’s mouth. “I believe those sisters would be willing to settle for you alone, if you are not interested in taking another male with you.”

“Oh, fuck *no*,” Inuyasha said in horror. He just knew his face was as red as his haori. He could feel his youki rising too, and it wasn’t a pleasant sensation to be fighting himself for supremacy over his ‘F’ instincts - to fight, flee, or...mate.

“Ah, yes. I have heard that inu are extremely territorial of their mates. Perhaps you could claim the eldest? The other two would probably fall in line if you-”

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up.” Youki flared around the hanyou and the crane fell silent, all traces of humor gone. Inuyasha was breathing heavily, his knuckles white on Tessaiga – not out of a desire to cut down the crane, although the bird would deserve it if he couldn’t get his mind out of the gutter, but to try to reign in his aura.

“I apologize, Inuyasha-sama,” he said formally, bowing and prostrating his own aura low in a respectful sort of submission.

“Sonofa-” Inuyasha bit off the curse. “I ain’t mad at *you*, idiot.” He couldn’t keep on like this. Every time he caught wind of the females, whose scents shouted their interest and readiness, he had to claw down aggression and other things he did not want to examine. He didn’t have time for that shit, and the rest of the army was in similar shape, but less concerned with keeping the drool off their faces. It was not a good way to face an enemy. “Wait here.”

He stomped across the valley, ignoring the soldiers that had stopped whatever they were doing to stare. A wide path cleared before him like magic, and Inuyasha found himself standing before the ameonnas in mere moments. He braced his feet wide and gripped the hilt of his sword tightly. His face was still hot, his own hormones dancing just under his skin to the tune of *please, please, so good, pleeease* but he scowled and reminded himself that any overtures they made, even if they were serious, probably had more to do with the new station that Sesshomaru had thrust upon him than with the hanyou himself.

“Which one of ya’ is oldest?” His clipped words got immediate attention, although not exactly how he had hoped. A dark skinned female, slightly taller than the other two and with red hair that stuck to her

wet flesh and hung down to her thighs stepped within reach.

“Captain-sama,” she breathed. Her voice was smooth and cool like the breeze before a storm. All of the blood threatened to drain right out of the hanyou’s skull. “I am what you want.”

Not a fuckin’ chance, he thought savagely, although there were parts of him that screamed *yes*. “This,” he nodded to encompass them all, “ain’t good. So you got three choices, soldier. You can put on some goddamn clothes and stop throwin’ all that sexy-eyes shit all over camp, or you can pack up your sisters and get the hell outta here.”

“What’s the third choice?” She glided closer to him before he could blink, and Inuyasha was suddenly conscious of the press of warm, wet flesh against the fire rat and a hot breath in his ear. He hadn’t had a woman lean against him like that *ever*, and the closest he had come to it was carrying Kagome. His upper brain function seized on the image of his best friend like a drowning man finding driftwood. If he fucked this up, if the army wasn’t ready and he didn’t do his very best, she would pay the consequences. The bastard Ryukostokken had kidnapped her once, and Inuyasha knew from unfortunate experiences with a whole host of evil-as-hell stalker types that the dragon wouldn’t want to let her go. That Ryukostokken was a warlord with a burning desire to take over Japan just made things more complicated.

Slim, blue-black fingers reached out to stroke his face. With a snarl, Inuyasha seized her wrist in a crushing grip. She cried out, falling to the ground at his feet and reverting to her water form. Later he would wonder how he did it, but at the time it happened like an extension of his will. His youki rose and wrapped around her like a skin, capturing her liquid form and absorbing what should have been an extremely powerful shock. It bothered him no more than static. There was a pained, shrieking sound, and then she was back in her human form.

“Third choice is I *make* you leave.” His voice had gone cold and deep in contrast to the heat he felt behind his eyes. “Submit, Ameonna. Serve in this army, follow my orders, or leave. Either whole or in pieces.” The camp around them was silent as a grave, as if the whole valley was holding its breath. Her eyes were wide and full of fear – the same fear he could smell coursing off of her sisters. The scent was raking against his control, demanding submission or death. The grey of her eyes wavered, and he saw emotion there. Obedience...and something else. Something that still had a passion to it, but was stronger and more solid than anything she had displayed before.

Her head lowered, as close to the ground as she could get with her wrist still shackled in his grip. “As you command, Captain-sama.” Her sisters bowed behind her, kneeling down in the frigid water. Inuyasha let go slowly, surprised that, for once, his temper and a half-baked idea had actually worked. “We will return to the tent to dress and arm ourselves. If it is your will, we will fight for you.”

“It is?” It came out as a question, which Inuyasha quickly covered with a clenched jaw and a nod. The females swept away, bowing repeatedly, and gradually noise returned to the camp.

“I guess I was wrong,” the lieutenant said dryly. He had reclaimed his place at Inuyasha’s elbow and the hanyou could feel the other male’s consideration. “Leave it to a dog to bring the strays to herd. Most impressive, Inuyasha-sama.”

“Keh.” Inuyasha huffed and turned on his heel, trying to regain some semblance of order over himself. At least he had one less thing to worry about. “You were sayin’ the dragons have crossed the straight?”

The crane smoothly began his report from the beginning again, which the hanyou was thankful for. It took him a good ten minutes and several snapping comments at lazy soldiers before he felt he had his youki under control and his mind clear.

It was another ten before his traitorous body fell into line.

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“After you eat, you will meet the training partner I have selected for you. She is a young hanyou, and not particularly powerful, so there is little risk that she might physically hurt you while I assess your abilities.”

“Honestly, Kimi-sama, wouldn’t it be better to have someone else? Sesshomaru or Hisao, maybe?” At the raised eyebrow on the Lady’s face, Kagome rushed out, “Not that you don’t know what you’re doing, it’s just-”

“Just that you do not think I know what I am doing,” Kimi stated flatly. Kagome flinched. She understood she needed some weapons and hand-to-hand combat training, was even grateful that Kimi had taken it upon herself to personally teach her. And it *had* to be better than memorizing which crazy relative had tried to enchant his sword to drink blood or what dog had killed who in glorious battle. It was most certainly better than picking through fabrics and jewels and swiftly finding that her opinion was inconsequential to the planning of the engagement ceremony. It damn straight couldn’t hold a candle to Kimi’s amused and extremely graphic description of various *joining* customs. “If you fear you might purify the little servant, Miko, do not be concerned. We will begin with only physical exercises, not energy.” She smiled slightly, and her enjoyment was obvious in the playful pinch of youki around Kagome’s shoulders.

“Ah, okay then.” Kagome felt like she had been caught up in the wake of a shark. She was just a little fish, and couldn’t get out of the current, but at any moment the shark could lose interest in its goal and turn on her. She wondered if this was how her friends in the future felt when they met a guy’s mom.

On their walk, they had almost completely circled the castle, starting in formal gardens on one secluded side, then making their way through the open courtyard, and into a more natural setting that combined small, purposeful meadows with vegetable gardens and fruit trees. Kagome’s feet were aching, unaccustomed to walking so long in geta, by the time they returned to the courtyard. She would have followed Kimi into the shiro to gratefully sit down were it not for a pulse of youki.

Sesshomaru. Without thought, Kagome pulled her hand from Kimi’s arm and turned toward the source. Soldiers and several servants were gathering near a narrow corridor set into a high wall. She sent out her reiki, questioning, and found the Western Lord on the other side. He was angry. Kagome sucked in a breath. Sesshomaru was in control, as he always was, his power spreading around him with the weight of his authority, but she could sense the icy-dark rage under the surface. Her feet moved forward of their own accord.

“Miko,” Kimi said sharply, but Kagome ignored her. As commanding a presence as the Lady was, Kagome was riveted on the cold burn of Sesshomaru against her power. She was nearly halfway across the courtyard, and becoming more and more concerned by the number of youkai streaming through the corridor towards whatever their Lord was doing that made the fine hairs on the back of her neck stand up, when Kimi appeared at her side. The breeze of her movement ruffled Kagome’s bangs, but it was

the firm clawed grip on her upper arm that got her attention. “Miko,” she said again. Her eyes were dark and her mouth settled in a firm line. “This is not a place for you. You will come inside.”

“I will not.” Kagome watched Kimi’s eyes narrow. All morning she had followed the Lady and agreed politely and demurely because this was Sesshomaru’s mother. Because this was a powerful, noble, youkai that was looking after her best interests. Because she suspected that Kimi, in her own domineering way, was being friendly. But, however much Kagome was changing, however much she was willing to change to fight for the future she wanted, she was still the same. Still Kagome. And she could be just as stubborn as any dog. “I am going to see what has Sesshomaru so riled up, and try to help him if I can.” Blue eyes narrowed and met gold glare for glare. “You are welcome to join me.” She didn’t wait for a response but started off again, even lifting her kimono off the ground so she could take longer strides.

Kimi was by her side again when she reached the corridor, and demons melted out of their way as they passed. Kagome did not have time to feel uncomfortable, or even to take note of the action, as complete shock washed over her when she stepped into open air again.

The corridor led to a yard enclosed by high stone walls on all sides. A ledge, some ten feet off of the ground, ran around the wall and a few demons had found purchase there to watch the interaction below. In the center of a grassy circle bordered by paving stones stood Sesshomaru. He wore his armor and only one sword; although she could not see it clearly from the distance, she could feel the distinct thrum of Bakusaiga. His face was absolutely blank, it was a companion to Hisao, who stood behind and to the side of his Lord. Where Sesshomaru was coldly neutral, Hisao’s features were set in unflinching duty. Kagome could feel the sharp ozone of Sesshomaru’s youki, almost taste the bitterness of his acid. Panic clawed at her belly, trying to climb up her throat. It was wrong, all so wrong, but she didn’t know how or why. She wanted to rush out to him, to grab hold of his arm and shield him with her power from whatever held his gaze. The demons around her were restless, unsure, their own youki spiking and ebbing unpredictably and irritating her reiki. The crowd had continued to grow, fanning out around the edges of the circle, but none actually stepping onto the grassy area.

“If you insist on attending, Miko,” Kimi said quietly, “This One refuses to have a less than optimal vantage.” Layers of silk and fur wrapped around Kagome’s waist and she felt the faint prick of claws against her ribs. Before she could blink she was standing on the narrow stone ledge beside the Western Lady. She could not help her shocked gasp – although it was not from the sudden movement.

Kneeling before Sesshomaru was Kento, stripped to the waist and chin bowed to his chest. The light layer of snow on the ground had soaked through his pants. His feet were bare and tense in a formal seiza. His fists rested on his thighs, and the tension in his shoulders was evident, even to human eyes. Long, dark hair was pulled into a simple leather thong at the base of his neck, revealing the blue stripes on his forehead and down his back.

“This One will not suffer a traitor in the West,” Sesshomaru stated in the monotone voice that was so familiar, but which Kagome had not heard in weeks. In that moment he was every inch the rigid Killing Perfection, the unfeeling daiyoukai, the powerful Saidai Mao.

“This is Ringu,” Kimi’s calm, quiet voice reached her easily. “Youkai accused of breaking the law – of breaking their loyalty to the West or diminishing the Lord’s honor – stand trial here. They confess or they fight.” Kimi’s face had lost any trace of amusement or flippancy. “There will be a death here.”

Kagome's heart ached even as her head spun. That was Kento. Sesshomaru's friend. Her friend. There was a traitor, they knew that; Sesshomaru had suspected and Ko confirmed. But it could not be Kento – she wouldn't believe it. Couldn't believe it. Kagome reached out with a hand, her mouth opening. To say what, she had no idea, only knew that she couldn't just stand by.

“No, Miko,” Kimi spoke directly in her ear, claws gently but firmly restraining Kagome's hand. “That One must do this. It is the responsibility of the Western Lord.”

Her mouth snapped shut and she drew a painfully cold breath through her nose. A winter wind crested the wall and scorched the occupants of the courtyard with heart-stopping chill. Kagome's eyelashes felt frozen with unshed water; the fine hairs in her nose stiffened and her forehead burned from the drop in temperature. There had to be a mistake. Had to be. Her ribs felt too small and her lungs too big. *Please, please, don't let him do this. Don't let him have to do this.*

“You are accused, Kento of the House of the Falling Stars. Do you plead to This One, or would you require proof?” The wind lifted the ends of his silver hair, but Sesshomaru was unmoved. Kagome pressed a fist to her mouth, trying not to scream, trying not to cry out that there had been a mistake. Kento could not have played a part in her kidnapping. Could not have allied with the bastard that threatened Rin's life. Could not have helped the enemy that had sent a plague upon them all.

“I am your most loyal vassal, my Lord. My life is yours.” Kento bowed further, and Kagome wanted to hit him – hit something – for his reticence. *How can he just sit there? How can he take it? Defend yourself!* She screamed at him in her mind. From the corner of her eye she caught sight of Aki, flushed and flustered and vibrating with terrified youki. The spider had not waited for the demons in the corridor to part and let her pass, but instead scaled the stone wall. On hands and knees she crab walked across the surface faster than Kagome could run and landed gracefully at the miko's side, opposite the Western Lady. Pinned between the two females, the strength of their auras nearly overpowered her. Kagome reflexively pushed back with reiki and opened her mouth again, desperate to stop what she could not understand, did not want to understand, could not bear to watch.

“Wai-”

It was Aki that stopped her the second time, with a dark hand over her mouth. “No, Kagome-sama,” her voice was shaking and her iridescent eyes shimmered with unshed tears and barely contained emotion.

“Control yourself, Miko.” Kimi's command was harsh and low. Kagome's eyes narrowed and she chafed against the demand. *Why can no one else see that this is wrong?* She seized Aki's wrist with both her hands, but did not have enough strength to pull it away. She was desperate enough to call her power when Kimi pressed her lips directly against her ear. “Have you no faith in *him*?”

It stung to hear that, but Kagome listened. If she interfered, if she questioned Sesshomaru's actions here, in front of so many of his subjects, it would be seen as an affront to his honor – as a disrespect. More than that, Kagome wanted to have faith in him. She wanted to believe that Sesshomaru would not injure – *kill*, her mind whispered, *execute* – his friend. She wanted to believe that Kento was loyal, that Sesshomaru – and she – had not misplaced their trust in him. A few of the demons standing below her looked up, and their mouths fell open to see the Miko no Mao pale and wide-eyed at the Ringu. None of the three males in the circle paid any attention, although it was doubtful that their inu ears did not hear her aborted cry.

“The enemy has three times used information against the West which should not have been his to know. Once information which This One entrusted to only two others. A second time, knowledge between only you and your Lord. A third time, that which is known only to This Sesshomaru has become known to the enemy. Do you deny this?” Kento remained silent, and Aki shook harder. Hisao’s quiet growl carried on the wind to every ear. “Northern mercenaries raided the Tengu Road, killing physicians and stealing medicine intended for Western villages. This One, Captain Hisao, and you live. All others who knew the route were slaughtered on their journey. Do you deny this?”

Kento said nothing. Kagome had not known about the massacre, but she knew there had to be another explanation. She took a deep breath, trying to will away petrifying doubt.

“Those villages that were first struck down by disease were those where trusted agents had been stationed by This One. You wrote the orders yourself, so no other would know. Do you deny this?”

Sesshomaru’s youki was growing heavier, pressing down almost visibly on Kento. Aki’s hand on Kagome’s arm gripped painfully, claws digging into flesh through thick layers of kimono. The secretary remained silent.

The voice of the daiyoukai dropped lower, deeper, rolling over the crowd like black tide that suffocated and seared. Kento’s fists slipped off of his thighs and slammed against the ground, barely holding him up. “This One has never named that which is most treasured in the West, and yet That One was targeted and taken before all others well known to the enemy.” It took a moment for Kagome to realize the meaning in his statement. *Me. He means me.* Her mouth fell open with shock. Kento was suspected of treason over what had happened to *her*. Sesshomaru’s gold gaze slid her way, meeting her eyes for a moment before returning to Kento. It was only then she felt the wetness blurring her vision and sliding down her cheeks, freezing and chapping the skin. “Do you deny this?”

Finally, finally, Kento lifted his head. He gasped for breath against the pressing weight of youki, “I cannot deny it, my Lord.”

A silent shift went through the crowd. As one being they seemed to lean back, pulling away from the inu that knelt in the circle. In that moment, with six words, Kento lost the West. Aki fell to her knees, dragging Kagome’s arm with her. Kimi was still holding her on the other side, so the spider only tugged her arm painfully, leaving burning trails of blood that blended into the dark red sleeve of her outer kimono. The injury faded into the background for Kagome, who felt her heart breaking. The pain was not for herself, but for Sesshomaru, who had so few that were close to him – and now there was one less. Still, hope struggled to burn in her. She cast her mind out, trying to find another solution, trying to see how this could be anything but what it seemed, trying to remember some detail, some fact that could change the future that was unwinding before her.

“The House of Falling Stars has long had the power of mind-speak, and you may take the thoughts of those related by blood. Do you deny this?”

“I would not, my Lord!” For the first time, Kento spoke with conviction, his voice strong. “I would not trespass in your mind without permission! I *could* not!”

“Jun.” The name flowed past Kagome’s lips without thought, barely above a whisper, but the keen demon ears around her heard. Kimi straightened, Aki stared. Kagome could feel the warm whisper of Sesshomaru’s youki winding around her. Memories flooded through her, unwanted and unbidden. Her

stomach twisted with each one.

The day after she had arrived at the Western Palace, Jun had tried to convince her not to go to Sesshomaru when he did not answer her summons. It was Kento, leading her through the courtyard who explained how he had known she was trying to leave the infirmary, 'the males in our family have alternate means of communication', he had said.

She had visited the healer after the pox was cured. His questions had seemed professional when they discussed the possibility of testing her limits, but she could hear his voice echoing in her ear, and see the bleeding stump and severed wing of the golden dragon in Ryukostokken's castle, 'how large an injury could you heal, Kagome-sama' and 'do you need to feel close to the patient, or could you do the same for a stranger, an enemy even'.

The look on his face when Gakuto had his claws around Paho's throat, his quick advice, 'obey their commands' when she traded her freedom for the young bird's. The way that Emi had screamed, howled, ever louder in Jun's arms. The pup knew then what Kagome was realizing with painful horror. Jun was a liar.

Jun was the traitor.

"Does another speak for the accused?" Sesshomaru returned his gaze to her, and there was something in his eyes and the caress of his youki on her reiki that she recognized. He was asking for her to trust him; he was letting her know he trusted her.

"Kento is not the traitor," she said. Her voice shook, and she fisted her hands in her sleeves to still her trembling. A cold sweat had broken out across her back, dripping down her spine and chilling her to the bone. Every eye in the courtyard turned to her. Kagome swallowed hard. If Sesshomaru listened, if she was right, Jun would be killed. If she did not speak up, Kento would die. An innocent man would die. The weight of the responsibility hung around her neck. Her muscles trembled under the strain of standing straight and holding her head up.

"Offer This One proof."

"You must stand before him, Miko," Kimi whispered in her ear even as she wrapped her arm around the human's waist again. With a graceful leap, she carried Kagome into the circle, to stand in front of Sesshomaru, within arm's reach of the daiyoukai. The Lady stepped back, beside Hisao, waiting.

Her heart was fluttering, her stomach twisting. *Why, why did he do it? Why did he pretend to be my friend? Why would he-* With a sharp inhale, Kagome knew. In vivid detail memories flew by and she knew how the West was betrayed. Why the West was betrayed. Her feet ached. A blister had formed from walking in the new geta and it rubbed painfully under her sock. Her palms were clammy, her mouth dry. She looked straight into Sesshomaru's eyes.

"Jun is the traitor, Sesshomaru-sama."

Gasps and cries of outrage rang through the crowd. Jun had treated so many during the pox, had been held hostage by the enemy and kept the two orphan youkai safe when the Miko no Mao was taken. Kento had all but admitted his guilt by refusing to defend his innocence. Kagome could hear those things; she was certain Sesshomaru heard them all.

“No,” Kento said adamantly. Kagome turned slightly to watch him. She felt a wellspring of pity for the demon, his mushroom colored skin pale in the cold, the three blue stripes on his forehead wrinkled in distaste and confusion. “No he could not. Jun-san is loyal to Sesshomaru-sama, to the West. He has supported the House of the Crescent Moon, he has championed all but-” Kento's mouth snapped shut. His head lifted, and his eyes focused in on one figure in the sea of youkai that surrounded the circle. In the blink of an eye, Jun was left alone in a barren space of dirt and snow. The soldiers and servants around him drew back as though he had a barrier around him. “No, cousin,” Kento said quietly. “It was too much.”

“It was not enough,” Jun answered, a resigned frown on his face. With a roar, Hisao tore past Sesshomaru, leaving a frigid breeze and swirl of snow in his wake. Jun did nothing to fight the captain, not that he would have been able to match him. The movement was too fast for human eyes, but there was a crack and the slap of skin on skin. Jun's body slid into the circle. He struggled to stand, but Hisao was there, claws on the back of the healer's neck and digging into one shoulder. The captain forced him to kneel and face his Lord.

“You were the one who stole thoughts from someone else's mind, Jun,” Kagome said quietly. With each word, her certainty grew, as did the clenching pain in her belly. “You entered your cousin's mind – not Sesshomaru-sama, but Kento - and knew the route those physicians would take. You took the knowledge of the Western agent's locations from Kento without him even realizing.”

“My stupidity is my own,” Kento snarled at his closest family member. “I should have realized that you were poking where you didn't belong! I should have thrown you out of my mind the one time I found you in here without permission,” he tapped his head with a claw, hard enough to draw blood. He paid it no heed. “You claimed you hadn't intended, promised it would not happen again. I *trusted* you cousin,” pain and rage saturated his voice. “Our Lord trusted you, and you dared to steal into the mind of the Saidai Mao?”

“No!” Jun's outrage was difficult to hear, with the odd angle Hisao held his neck at, but the whites of his eyes showed it clearly. “I would not – you were right, could not! Sesshomaru-sama is too strong.” He turned his face with difficulty toward Kagome. The corners of his mouth turned down, not with disgust, but with something that resembled regret. “My Lord's preference needs not be spoken. It was better to end it before he became ensnared.”

“Why?” Kagome had to ask, she could not fathom that. Even after admitting his treason, Jun was nothing but subservient and respectful to Sesshomaru.

“You love Sesshomaru-sama as your Lord,” Kento said quietly, resigned, almost defeated. “You worship him, the West, almost as a religion. You could not bear to think that an enemy, one who denigrated the Saidai Mao and desired to take his place was allowed to live.”

“Yes, yes, you see!” Jun smiled, baring his fangs at his cousin in a strange plea for understanding. “The dragons must die, but Sesshomaru-sama refused to risk Western lives. For the West to be strong, for inu to be the dominate youkai, the North had to be destroyed. There must be a final war!”

“So you helped to orchestrate this.” Disgust dripped from Kento's words, and his mouth twisted as though the thought brought him physical pain. Kagome felt sick. Jun had pushed for a conflict – a crusade where hundreds, perhaps thousands, would die. The balance between good and evil, right and

wrong, light and dark was always keenly felt by the priestess. Jun had tipped the scales, his intentions were not even worthy – for he had only desired the supremacy of his own kind, above all others. Reiki flooded under her skin, outraged at the perfidy Jun had committed against the West, against Sesshomaru.

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Sesshomaru trained his senses on Kagome as she spoke. He had not intended for her to watch the Ringu; he had not expected her to understand the subterfuge he had planned to take place there. He could not deny that her accusations of Jun were well placed. Better than if he had called the healer out himself, better than if Hisao had done so – which is what they had discussed. They both knew Jun was the guilty party, beyond almost any doubt. But it was also true that if the facts were not handled carefully, there would be those that would view Kento with suspicion. Those that would speculate that he might have been in league with his cousin. Sesshomaru's trust was not misplaced in his secretary, and he would not allow it to be called into question.

So, he had accused the loyal inu himself. Had summoned all who lived at the shiro to watch the trial – and the audience included Jun. The youkai present would see the guilty party, would see Kento absolved of any involvement. They would trust him again, as Sesshomaru trusted him. And the traitor would be dealt with.

He had not intended to bring Kagome into the matter, but when she came to the same conclusion he had and spoke those thoughts aloud it pleased him. The miko was a treasure, a credit to the West and to him. His intended was powerful, beautiful, and intelligent. He would have preferred that she not witness the conclusion of the Ringu, did not want her to have to see a youkai she had called friend slain by his hand, but she was strong enough. The light scent of blood on her tugged at his instincts, announcing physical injury as well as the greater emotional turmoil he knew she felt. He would comfort her when it was done, he promised himself.

“So you helped to orchestrate this.” Kento smelled indignant, revolted, and furious, but it was nothing compared to the storm brewing in the daiyoukai.

The treason itself was despicable, but the reason behind it was like a bitter herb in Sesshomaru's mouth. Jun did not see, even as he faced execution, that what he had done was wrong. He believed that in helping Ryukostokken and stirring Sesshomaru to war, he had set in motion the ultimate supremacy of the West. His disregard for the lives that would be lost was intolerable. Even if he, like so many other demons, cared nothing for the humans that had and would die when youkai took up arms against one another, even if he gave no thought to the wild youkai, the cranes of the East, and those who had been killed by pox, the inu that had already died and the vast numbers that would face death on the battlefield should have given him pause. Rage tore at the restraints of Sesshomaru's will. Jun had willingly invited the enemy into his House. Jun had seen the calls for Rin's capture and said nothing. Jun had aided in Kagome's abduction.

A low growl rumbled through the courtyard, and Sesshomaru did not bother to conceal his fury.

“You alone have committed the crimes attributed to another, do you deny this?” As far as he was able, Jun shook his head in the negative, a sad smile on his mouth. “Treason is punishable by death.” Dokkasou dripped from his claws and his acid whip began to form and lengthen at his command. *This betrayal has brought nothing but death, one more will end it*, he thought. Sesshomaru did not enjoy the

action he had to take, but it was necessary. It was just.

“Wait.”

It was her light touch on his sleeve, the fragrance of white flowers and fresh cut wood, as much as her soft voice that stopped him. He could taste the accumulation of her holy power. Sesshomaru clenched his fist rather than risk damaging her clothing with his acid, and turned his eyes to hers. She was not looking at him, but at the traitor. Where he had expected to see pity, had expected to have to explain to the gentle human that Jun had to be punished, that he was a risk to the West, he was surprised. Not pity, but disgust lifted her chin and narrowed her eyes. Sesshomaru considered her, all that he knew of her and how she had been changing, growing, maturing since the day they first met in his father's tomb. He thought on all she was and would become.

“Personal injury to the Miko no Mao resulted from Jun's actions,” he stated, loud enough for everyone in the courtyard to hear. Much more softly, so that only Kagome and Kimi could make out his words, he said, “Speak carefully, Intended, your decision will be the will of the West.” Blue the color of a warm summer sky turned on his face then. He could smell the faint trace of sour niguari melon and angry pepper.

“I need a fang,” she said simply. He barely had time to blink in surprise before Kimi was at his miko's side, a glistening white tooth, still smeared with pink blood at the root, in her outstretched hand. Kagome took it with shocked thanks and hesitated for only a moment before closing both her small hands over the deadly weapon. An inkling of what she intended caused his eyes to widen minutely as reiki glowed from her fingers. “You have brought injury to the West, Jun.” She had dropped the honorific, and her expression was stern when she looked again on the traitor. Sesshomaru took pride in her straight posture and steady voice. “Lives have been lost, innocent lives, because you thought you knew better than your lord.”

“I did not wish for your death, Kagome-sama,” Jun frowned. “But sacrifices needed to be made to strengthen the West. You are kind enough, well-meaning, but you bring weakness with you. Any who saw Sesshomaru with you would have known that-”

Sesshomaru couldn't stop the snarl any more than he could stop from stepping closer to Kagome, pressing his front against her back and looming over her. He wanted to silence the traitor, at that moment, he would have ripped out his throat and enjoyed the sound of blood hitting the ground. Kagome did not make him weak. She made him whole. The savage truth in his thoughts was so perfect that he did not need to examine the instinct behind them.

“If you think Sesshomaru weak, you are more than a traitor, you are a fool,” she scoffed. The agreement in the crowd was audible. Her reiki, blooming between her hands, spread to engulf her body in a pink light. A warm, salty breeze teased along his skin and tantalized his nose. Her voice dropped to a near whisper, low enough that he doubted any outside the grassy circle could hear, “Alive, you are a fool. Dead, you would be a martyr.” Emotion flashed across Jun's face and in his scent so quickly, any lesser youkai would have missed it. Sesshomaru did not. The brilliance of Kagome's actions was clear to him. She would make an example of Jun, one that would not encourage any to follow in his footsteps. Death was too easy, too final for one such as him. “Can you pierce it?” She held her hand out to Sesshomaru, and carefully, so as not to accidentally slice her skin, he drilled one claw through the diamond-hard fang of his mother. Without her asking, he also pulled a hair from his own head and laid it across her palm.

As she spoke, she threaded the silvery strand and knotted the ends into a loop less than two feet around. “You have betrayed the West, betrayed all youkai, when you violated Sesshomaru's trust. Death is too good for you, Jun, but your delusions are too strong to allow you to live freely.” Her reiki glowed brighter, creating a sphere around her that encompassed Sesshomaru. The light intensified between her hands, burning hotter and brighter as she walked forward. “You will be youkai no more – demon in nothing but years.”

Comprehension brought fear to Jun's eyes and he struggled against his captor. With a fist to the healer's temple, Hisao knocked him nearly unconscious. Kagome slipped the glowing necklace over Jun's head and pressed her hot, pink hand to the fang where it fell against his breastbone. “Traitor,” she intoned. The sharp smell of ozone was strong, making several in the crowd gag, and the effect on Jun was instantaneous. He was yanked out of Hisao's grasp into a kowtow at Kagome's feet. His face tilted to the side, his cheek pressed against the snow. Half of the courtyard watched and whispered as the two lines on his forehead disappeared. His fangs shrank back into his mouth; silver eyes darkened to light brown and claws blunted into human nails. Sesshomaru was impressed. His miko had subjugated the inu and more than that, subjugated his youki so completely that it was dormant, not unlike a hanyou during their human time.

Her power is great, he thought, and well used. Sesshomaru settled his hand on her shoulder in praise. In his mind, it was not enough, but before he could add to the punishment, she spoke again. “For the rest of your days, you will serve in the East and you will do no harm. Any youkai or human that has need of you, you will aid them as best you can. This kotodama will obey the command of any of the House of the Crescent Moon, or those of the Sunset Shrine at Edo.” She did not slouch, but Sesshomaru could feel the weariness flooding her body. It had taken a great deal of power, worked with an exacting skill that he had not witnessed from the relatively untrained miko before.

Before her voice could give out, he squeezed her gently, pulling on her shoulder until she leaned into his chest. Her body fit snugly against his. Just below the edge of his armor, he could feel the beat of her heart in tempo with his own. “As This Sesshomaru commands, you are no longer of the House of the Falling Stars. Leave this place, Jun. The West rejects you.”

The traitor, struggling against the slowly loosening pull of the necklace, cried out in shock and shame. His pleas for mercy, for death, his excuses and explanations were not answered by the crowd. At Hisao's direction, youkai surged forward and seized Jun, carrying him out of the courtyard to cast him away. Gradually, the crowd followed, with many deep bows before their Lord and his miko. With each passing minute he could feel Kagome growing heavier against him. He pushed his youki into her to keep her warm and awake until the last demon had departed.

Kento and Aki bowed and offered repeated thanks. “Go now,” Sesshomaru said calmly. “There is work to be done tomorrow.” He shared a look with his secretary - his friend, he reminded himself – and was strangely comforted by the understanding he found there. Kimi gave him a regal nod and a twitching smile before calling to the captain to escort her inside. Alone, Sesshomaru gave in to his need and wrapped both arms around Kagome, pressing his nose against her hair and breathing her in.

Powerful, beautiful, intelligent, just. The deepest, purest part of himself added, as he pressed his lips to her head and gathered his cloud to carry them inside, *Mine.*

Chapter 44: Results Based Approach

After the trial, Sesshomaru took Kagome to their private room, where he could tend to her injury. The scent of blood was thicker than he had expected, given the relatively small amount that stained the sleeve of her kimono. “I will care for your wound,” he said quietly.

Deep within himself, he was aware of the warmth that had been growing in him since she first healed Rin. Watching her stand before his people, watching her with Jun’s life, with the security and justice of the West in her hands had been an experience unlike any other. Rather than shaking him, rather than causing him hesitation or concern to trust another with everything that he was – his honor – he had found an affirmation in the act. She was more than worthy, more than trustworthy, of the role he wanted for her. Sesshomaru pulled in air through his nose and held it in his lungs before slowly letting it out through his mouth. Kagome was, with every moment that she breathed, more than he had expected. Perhaps more than he deserved. Sesshomaru removed his armor and sword, leaving them near the door. He gently pulled her down to the tatami mat and loosened her obi while she spoke.

“I feel so terribly for Kento, to have to go through all of that, only to find out it was someone he trusted, that he was betrayed personally, and now I suppose he’ll have to deal with the gossip.” Her mouth was turned down, her brow furrowed with sorrow; sour melon and camphor dusted the natural smell of her.

“There will be no gossip,” he stated to reassure her. Sesshomaru wondered if Jun’s duplicity was too recent for her to speak of, that she focused on how Kento would be affected instead. It was her nature, to worry more for others than for herself. Sesshomaru had realized that long ago, and was still putting plans into place to account for it. She would not look after herself, so he would do so. He folded her obi precisely and laid it to the side before carefully slipping her spider-weave outer kimono over her shoulders. The coppery-sweetness in the air increased and he breathed deeply. Aki’s claws had caused the damage, and Sesshomaru understood the female had not intended his miko harm, but he would be sure to have Kento remind his mate to be more careful. A friendship with Kagome required a delicate touch.

“Really?” He glanced up long enough to see the arch of her eyebrows and the expressive bow of her mouth. Amused disbelief colored her tone, “Did you command it to be so? Sesshomaru, people will talk. Whether they do it where you can hear them or not doesn’t change the fact.”

The narrow ties of her second kimono came loose easily. “They will not,” he corrected her, “because I have settled the matter. Kento is not, nor has he ever been a traitor. All who live in the castle have seen this, seen my trust in him, today. It is done.” At his light touch, thin, pale blue pashmina made a soft pile around her wrists and in her lap, leaving Kagome in only her white silk yukata; the slightly darker outline of her modern under clothing was visible through the sheer material. It brought out the heat that seemed ever present low in his belly – blending with the warm expansive feeling in his chest. *She is perfect - for me*, he thought, perhaps clearly and for the first time with an understanding of what that state meant to him. He had spent his entire life seeking perfection, and found it not in battle or political triumph, but in a slip of a woman that wielded the power to make him feel fear or exaltation.

“It is done,” she intoned in a ridiculous attempt to parody his voice. Blue eyes rolled and she smiled at him. The beat of his heart grew deeper, almost painful but not quite. “If I didn’t know you so well, I would think you were crazy for believing that. But it wouldn’t surprise me if you could make it happen. On the outside chance you’re wrong, I’d like to do something for him and Aki – to make up for having

to go through that drama.”

Sesshomaru paused for the briefest of moments with his claws under the collar of her clothing. “You have already done more for them than any other. They are mated, and Aki pupped. Kento is indebted to you twice over.”

“Pupped, really?” Her eyes were shining and she radiated happiness. He let it coat his nose and mouth and savored the taste of her excitement. It made him eager for the day that he would be able to smell their own pup growing in her, mixing with her spicy sweetness. *Now is not the time*, he reminded himself. *Soon*. It was a reassurance as well as a promise. Once they had discussed it, he had agreed with Kagome regarding the timing of starting their litter; in truth, he was impressed with the medical knowledge of future humans, and their foresight to prevent pregnancy when circumstances were not ideal. The instinct to procreate was strong in most youkai. For inu, it could become a near obsession with a newly mated pair if they could not control themselves. Aki and Kento were such an example. Although Sesshomaru would welcome Kento’s addition to the West, and one that his vassal and friend had desired for many centuries, there was no denying that Aki and their offspring would be in danger until the North had been defeated. “How can you tell?”

“The scent of new life, of the change as a female turns her body’s focus inward to nurture.” Sesshomaru was careful to allow only the smooth surface of his claws to touch her skin as he pulled the yukata from her. The temperature in the room was comfortable, but still he sent a few more threads of his power to drift around her and seep inside her. Indirect light was soft on the pale milk of her skin. His mouth felt wet and eager as he traced the line of her collarbone to a rounded shoulder. His eyes dipped, following the strap of her undergarment to the material that cupped her. Recent experiences made recognizing his faint jealousy easy – envy for the thin lace the color of abalone shell that pressed against her nipples. Sesshomaru was aware that he would be stuck by the same obsession for a mate as his secretary had been. *I am already ensnared*, he thought. There was no bitterness in that, only acceptance and a desire to revel in it.

“With so many youkai around, Aki didn’t even get the fun of an announcement then.”

Kagome sounded mildly irritated. He glanced at her face and a protruding lower lip confirmed it. Sesshomaru would have nipped at the plump morsel, but the wound on her shoulder was bare and the scent of her blood called to him. Only two of Aki’s claws had punctured the skin, the rest left pink scratches. He bent his head to breathe in the copper, frowning at how much more scent there was than actual blood. “Few are able to notice the subtleties so soon. Kento will know, of course,” he tried to soothe her mind even as his tongue stretched out. Of their own accord, his eyes fell shut as the red liquid touched his tongue. It was Kagome, yes. It was copper and flowers and wood in his nose; sweet citrus and smoky cinnamon on his tongue. Water, iron, and the savory flavor of blood.

It was also the feel of her flesh against his mouth. Slick liquid on his tongue, smooth skin against his lips. She was not as warm as him, and seemed to draw the heat from his body where they touched.

It was the need it stirred in him. To take, to mark, to mate, but also to protect, to cherish, and to hold. To give her his strength, to give her anything and everything she needed – what she didn’t even know she needed – what she wanted so that she would always smell that way. Be that way. Happy. With him.

Sesshomaru finished, slowly, and then laved at her wound. If she had asked, he would have said he was ensuring her health. It was true, but it was also true that he continued to taste her even as his saliva

began to seal the injury and the overwhelming sensation of *her* began to recede. He became aware that she was speaking, had been for some time but he had not been listening.

“-olfactory sense tied to youki? Does that mean then that only very powerful canines would know? What about Kimi or Hisao? Inuyasha has a good nose, what-” Although he still did not like to hear her speak of his brother, certainly not when she was admiring the hanyou’s skills, it was not as irritating as it had once been. Whether it was the knowledge that she had offered him intimacies that his brother had never received, or her half-clothed proximity, or some combination of the two he was not sure.

“They are all more than capable of scenting a pup at this stage, but they may not know Aki’s scent well enough to recognize the change for what it is.” He was not interested in speaking of others any longer. Sesshomaru had been pleased with the results of the Ringu, with Kagome’s decision, but the thought of a traitor still chafed at him. Although maintaining order and civility in his court dictated that his instincts be subjugated to logic and rule, it did not prevent his desire to fight. However, with Kagome settled between his legs and her bare skin available, he found his instincts pleasantly turned to other imperatives. “My senses are much stronger, but more tuned to distinguishing the changes in those closest to me.” He ran his nose along the slope of her neck to press under her ear and was gratified by the spike of passion in the air. Sesshomaru carefully pitched his voice to a tone that had proven to make her more receptive, “Even now I can smell you, Kagome, and I-”

“What...” she cleared her throat, embarrassed, but also excited, “What do I smell like?” He could not help himself, not that he wanted to, and growled against her skin. She shivered, only adding to his desire. He told her, not everything, but the most prominent parts of her scent that allowed him to know her. He whispered in her ear and licked at the rounded, human shell of it and spoke of his instincts.

“Your tears urge me to shelter you, to destroy the cause of your sadness. Your blood drives me to protect, to heal, to avenge,” he breathed deeply again, recognizing from a far-off memory the reason for her thickening scent, “even to-” He would have finished with, *lay you bare and give you my seed and scent so all others will know you are mine. To make life within you.* She cut him off with a question.

“What?” She said faintly. He pulled back just enough to watch her face. Her blue eyes looked everywhere but at him, and she seemed distracted. And not in the way he wanted her to be.

Sesshomaru thought he knew the reason. “Do not worry. Only a very few others will scent your cycle before it is fully upon you, and then you may remain in our quarters. It is as most canine youkai females do.”

“Cycle?” Her eyes widened, and then, “Others? Oh, hell, that wasn’t what worried me – although it does now.” Sesshomaru could feel the frown between his brows as her anxiety increased visibly. He did not see any issue. It was a sign of her ability to bare young, and inuyoukai were familiar with such bleeding. Females secluded themselves for a week at a time twice a year to avoid the discomfort of unfamiliar youki and urges that were difficult for younger males to repress. He vaguely recalled a discussion centuries ago when his own father had explained to him what such scents heralded and how to restrain the instinct that whispered to him that a female was not properly claimed and pupped. He felt certain he could control himself around his intended, and no other adult males would be allowed near her. It was only for a few days a year, he did not see a reason for her distress. “Jeez, here I was worried I hadn’t brought enough tampons with me,” her face was bright red and her eyes squeezed shut, “and now I find out that you can smell it. I won’t even start until tomorrow. Oh, hell. Just kill me now.”

Sesshomaru ignored the words he didn't recognize and carefully tried to determine what she found disagreeable. "You are displeased."

"Displeased?" She snorted, "Mortified. I'll already feel achy and cranky. You *know*, and apparently everyone else will find me smelly too, and-"

"You believe it displeases me," he said slowly, comprehension beginning to dawn. Her nod was emphatic, and Sesshomaru smiled. "Blood is not necessarily unpleasant to inu, Kagome." He turned her chin up with the tips of his claws and waited for her eyes to blink open. "Underneath this form I am a creature of instinct. The scent of my enemy's defeat. That is satisfying." He leaned forward to brush her cheek with his lips. "The taste of a kill after a challenging hunt. That is good." The drag of his skin on hers as he sought her mouth left a wake of his musk on her. "The sign that you are unfilled, your body waiting for me. That is provocative. Enticing." The speed of her breath increased in warm puffs into his open mouth. Satsuma oranges and cinnamon wound around his head, making him nearly dizzy with need. Blood – not quite on the air, but so close – called to him. "Luscious."

He swallowed her gasp and swept his tongue into her mouth. She was his; with every word and deed, every moment they were together, she became more his mate. His Lady. His everything. *As I will be hers*, he promised himself. The idea would have been distasteful a mere month ago, unthinkable a year ago. In centuries past, he would have summoned his dokkasou had anyone suggested he would pledge himself wholly to another. With Kagome, it was right and necessary.

The inside of her mouth was hot and delicious. He mapped the smooth walls of her cheeks and the blunt surface of her teeth. After a moment, she responded, reaching out with her own tongue to taste him with abandon. Her first lick brought a low growl out of him. Sesshomaru felt he should have become accustomed to his need for her, but instead he found a new dimension in his desire each time he was with her. It was no longer merely possession, not just physical connection and the desire to claim her emotions for himself. He could not name it, that deep-seated thing that yearned for her and had rooted itself at the center of his being. For the moment, he accepted it without examination.

"Sesshomaru," she panted, breaking away from his mouth to suck in much needed air. Her cheeks were flushed pink, the lovely color trailed down the arch of her neck to dust her chest.

"I am inu, Ka-go-me," he told her, abandoning his hold on her arm to drag his palm down her bare back. When he met the crumpled pile of her kimono he delved lower to find the scalloped edge of her undergarment. The tactile sensation of lace pulled tight across the cleft of her body sent blood pounding through his veins. His voice had dropped even lower and he unconsciously mirrored her lidded gaze as he dipped back to her mouth, "there is no part of you that displeases me." The words were not enough, not nearly enough, to describe how she was to him. How he wanted her to be part of him – for him to be part of her. He nipped at her mouth and sucked lightly on the abused flesh, careful not to bruise her. "The taste of you here," he said, licking her lip and teasing again with his fangs, "pleases me."

He pressed his forehead against her throat and she collapsed backward over his arm with a moan. "The scent of you, here," he ran his tongue across the place where her pulse fluttered, "pleases me." With his free hand he found her ankles, tucked to the side of her. He pulled her legs out straight and leaned down to place a series of moist kisses along the lace on her breast. His hand skimmed up her leg to the bend of her knee, sweeping her kimono apart. The material fell to the floor, and he relished the sight of

her, flushed and bare. He tucked her knee into the joint between his thumb and first finger, cupping the round column of her leg and sliding higher. “The feel of you, here,” his hand reached the crease between her leg and hip, “and here.” His claws traced the edge of lace over her heat until he found the damp center. “Here,” he whispered against her skin. He gave a slow, predatory lick to the hollow of her throat and copied the motion with his knuckles across her opening, drawing a gasp from her mouth and a rush of liquid between her legs. Her fingers clutched at his shoulders. “You please me.” He knew that only he was close enough, intimate enough, with Kagome to notice how her scent had changed and what it portended. Already, his instinct was to cover her with his scent and shield her from other males until her cycle was done. He could not imagine how much more difficult it would become to restrain himself if she ripened before they were mated.

“Sesshomaru,” she said with a tremulous laugh in her voice, “flattery will get you everywhere.” He looked up to see her watching him with a smile. The blue of her eyes had darkened with desire, but she also smelled of happiness and trust. The children were all in the ima taking lessons, and his servants and vassals knew better than to interrupt him, but Sesshomaru still snapped a barrier into place. His mother was still in residence, and she delighted in provoking a response from him.

He laid his intended down on the mat, smoothing her softest kimono beneath her to cushion her skin. “True words are not flattery, Kagome. But if you find it agreeable, I will speak more truths.” She laughed lightly and opened her mouth to, he did not doubt, argue. Sesshomaru did not wish to debate at the moment; no matter how enjoyable he found antagonizing her, there were other things he wished to hear from her lips. Paramount of all his name and compliments to his person and skill. He silenced her with what he had intended to be a quick press of his mouth, but which quickly evolved into a deep, heated exchange. He could feel the heat from her pink cheeks, but her embarrassment did not stop her from dragging her palm from his shoulder to the back of his neck. She put her weight into pulling him down, and he allowed her to succeed, interested to see how far she would go if allowed to take the lead.

His miko did not disappoint – quite the opposite. She bit his lip, fairly hard for a human, but not enough to do more than rile his instincts and force him to tense his muscles rather than subject her to more brutally erotic treatment. He could not help but bare his teeth with a low growl to let her know to tread carefully. She responded by licking one fang and moaning against his mouth. In an instant, Sesshomaru hovered over her, barely restraining from grinding against her. Her legs had fallen open as they kissed, and he found himself pressed against her core. The liquid heat of her seeped through his kimono and urged him to take their liaison further, faster. He held his body back, but his youki delved into her as the rest of him ached to do.

Her response was instantaneous. His power touched her skin and her back arched, her mouth falling away from his. As youki pressed under her skin, she made a small, mewling whine that his blood reacted to. His heart beat painfully and swelled in concert with another part of him that was shamefully eager for her. Her head tipped back, displaying the bare arch of her neck to him; reiki poured from her. It tickled his senses and brushed against his skin, leaving the warm taste of salty sunshine in its wake. Sesshomaru had to struggle to recall what form of seduction he had been plying her with, as she had no need for such games. Kagome needed only to be present, and he was seduced.

“It is true...” He took a deep breath to savor her scent and almost forgot what he had been saying. “True that your smell pleases me.” Sesshomaru bent to brush his nose under her chin; her breath puffed against the crescent on his forehead and he closed his eyes in pleasure, resisting the urge to hold her more tightly to him. His claws twitched between her shoulder blades and he was reminded of how easily he could pierce her skin. The daiyokai was familiar with the power he wielded over others;

nearly all were laughably weak in comparison, their physical forms capable of damage with little effort on his part. It was a sobering reality to have to remind himself that Kagome, for all her immense power, could be too easily damaged. That she also knew of her vulnerability and still trusted him without question softened his instincts even as it hardened his desire.

He stroked her again with his knuckles, drawing another strangled sound of need from her. He wanted to hear more from her. He wanted her to make that sound and speak his name while he entered her. He wanted the cries of her release to echo in his ears. "It is true that your voice pleases me." He kissed and licked his way down her throat. His fangs throbbed with the need to bite, but he knew he would not be able to maintain control if he took her flesh between his teeth. This was an act of control. An act nearing worship. With each touch and word he wanted her to know what she had become to him – would be to him for all time.

"Perhaps-" she gasped, interrupting herself when he swirled the tip of his tongue over the edge of her collarbone. Her swallow was audible, and he smiled against her skin even as he continued lower, finding the edge of her pearly lace and the ripe globe underneath. "I should talk more." Her chest heaved as her breathing increased, her attempt at humor lost. He made a circle on the lace with his lips, avoiding the tight pink center that was begging for him. "Is that possible, for me to talk-oh!" He took her nipple into his mouth; the wet lace made a gentle abrasion between his tongue and her skin. He sucked gently and she moaned. His claws tensed again on her back. Her scent increased. Cinnamon was thick in the air, flavored with salt and sweet flowers. "More?" Her voice was thready and high pitched. He pressed the hardened bud against the roof of his mouth and pulled gently. "Sessho-mar-u!" Both her hands dove into his hair. Her blunt nails scraped along his scalp, sending tingles of pleasure down his spine and trying to pressure him into moving even closer. "More, please, Sessho-" He pulled back, easily ignoring the pitiful attempt to hold him in place. With his tongue, he held her peak in his mouth until the last moment, drawing her breast away from her body before letting her go. "Maru!" The bounce of her flesh, the desire she put into his broken name, and the expression on her face nearly shattered his reserve.

Sesshomaru could not have prevented himself from taking her other breast in his mouth if he had wanted to. And he did not want to. The flavor of her, even through the lace, brought his taste buds alive. Saliva eagerly pooled in his mouth and wet the fabric so that she twitched and let out a little moan when a tug of his teeth dragged it across her nipple. He laved at her, kneading his wet knuckles against her heat in time to the strokes of his tongue. He repeated the pull and release; the second time she could not manage his name, but only a strangled sound, "Sessss-!"

His own breathing was heavy, and he forced himself to fill his lungs deeply, evenly, as he kissed his way down her stomach. He swirled his tongue into the depression of her belly and stroked across to the curve of her waist. When his lips found the ridge of her hip, she giggled, then moaned. "Don't, Sess-Sesshomaru, that tickles." He raised his head to stare at her, only to find her eyes heavy-lidded and dark with desire. Her lips were red and swollen, but parted in a smile. He removed his hand from between her legs and watched her as he licked the knuckles on his first two fingers. The taste of her was light and sweet, salty and musky and had him ravenous for more. It was the expression on her face as she watched that pulled a low growl from him: her eyes widened and her tongue darted out to wet her lips before straight white teeth bit into the tender skin.

He knew she could feel the vibration of his growl, because her head fell back and he was nearly drenched in the scent of her desire. "It is true that your taste pleases me." He wasn't certain she would be able to understand him, his voice had fallen so low, but it did not matter any longer. He pressed his

nose against her belly, easily finding the coppery scent of what was to come and the heavy overtone of passion on magnolias and cherry wood. He slid lower, the width of his shoulders forcing her legs wider. He kept his eyes on her face as he turned his mouth to the silky skin of her inner thigh. He licked, tasting salt, faint soap, and Kagome. The texture of her on his tongue was perfect and his body throbbed in time to the pulse of the vein in her leg. He grazed his teeth along her – not biting, but as close as he felt he could allow himself. He ran his claws lightly over her hip bone, drawing another startled laugh from her. While she was distracted, he smoothed his palm down her back to rest against the full swells of her bottom. He squeezed and tipped and displayed a feast for himself. Kagome gasped and her fingers tightened again in his hair, but he ignored her. When his lips connected with the wet lace it was like his first taste of cool water after a hard run, the first bite of food after a long fast. He lapped at her, his tongue flattening and widening to cover as much as possible and catch every drop of moisture. With a long, slow stroke he made his way to the bundle of nerves that was swollen in anticipation. Even through the obscuring material, he could easily see the dark shadow of her hair and the plump pink berry that begged for his mouth.

“More than pleasing,” he rumbled. He pressed an open-mouthed kiss on her mound and spoke directly into her, letting the rumble of his voice transfer to her most sensitive places. She shivered and moaned, legs trembling on either side of him. “Your taste is perfection.” He sealed his lips over her and applied suction, drawing his tongue up her bud and flicking across it. His chin grew wet and her fingers and legs tangled in his hair. The sharp tug against his scalp was barely registered past the sound of her pleasure in his ears and the musk of her honey. He was throbbing, aching, his body full and tight and primed for release. He denied himself, instead focusing on the hitch in her breath as he brought her closer to her end. He released his mouth, feeling the throb of blood surging into her tissue and the corresponding gush of liquid seeping through the lace. He both detested and loved the little sodden garment. It separated her flesh from him, but the nearly non-existent barrier also heightened her experience.

He licked her again and the fine weave of the fabric felt almost abrasive under his tongue. Kagome responded, her shoulders bowing off the floor and her strangled gasp ended abruptly with a high-pitched cry when he closed his lips around her again. He spoke in his native language, the growls and low sounds earning another burst of lusty-scent and sweet liquid. *I will taste you each day, for eternity, and it will still not be enough.* She whispered his name when he fastened on to the bundle of flesh that would finish her. *Give yourself to me, mate.* He pulled her berry against his teeth, hard, and licked her. She screamed, and he nearly found his own release at the sound.

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Kagome wasn't sure how long she lay on the floor, but when she opened her eyes her muscles were still quivering and faint green and red dots swam in her vision from squeezing her eyes so tightly shut. Sesshomaru lay next to her, propped on one elbow, his face close and studying her with a predatory gleam. She smiled at him, there was no way she could not have. Her entire body felt amazing: relaxed, comfortably sore, warm, and...wet. Slowly, the fuzz of orgasm began to wear off of her brain. Although the heat from Sesshomaru's body was more than enough to keep her comfortable, she was aware of a rather large damp spot under her butt that was growing cool. That brought her attention to the shine of moisture on the daiyoukai's chin. With one slow blink and two seconds of thought she realized what had caused that. She was mortified, and also unbearably pleased.

“You, ah, have...” Kagome tried to gesture, rather than actually say *I came all over your face*. The dance of silver hair across her bare skin sent a shiver through her, and she realized she had tangled her

fingers quite hopelessly. “Oh, sorry?” Sesshomaru quirked an eyebrow, obviously not concerned. Kagome was beginning to feel like she should do something more, after all, he had applied himself extremely diligently to, well, *her*, and all she had done was scream *oh, yes, Sesshomaru, yes* and make knots in his hair. She figured he would no doubt rethink their relationship if she couldn’t be a better participant.

Those thoughts flew out of her mind when Sesshomaru squeezed her gently. He had one hand underneath her, cupping one cheek, and the other wrapped around her ribs, just under her breast. The sensation of strong hands and deadly claws stirred the embers that still burned low inside her. She watched Sesshomaru’s nostrils flare delicately and could not decide if she should feel fascinated or mortified. Then his tongue darted out, quickly, and ran over his chin. Her mouth fell open. His skin still glistened wetly, but he had obviously licked up any moisture she had caused. *Why is that hot? Sweet mother of pearl.* Her thoughts must have actually fallen out of her stupid, traitorous mouth, because Sesshomaru flashed a wicked grin at her. It was over before she could blink, but his lips were still tilted in prideful amusement.

“I do not doubt you will become accustomed to such a sight, Ka-go-me. You must, as I intend to indulge in your particular taste often.” The hand below her shifted and his thumb brushed across her panties, pushing the wet lace into her a fraction. It was almost abrasive. That, combined with the heat of his finger and her already sensitive tissue, sent lightning jolting through her.

“Ah!” Her hips bucked involuntarily, causing his claws to dig shallowly into her bottom and his thumb to rub just below her clit. She was just short of another orgasm, reeling from the sharp acceleration of her body from content and lethargic to *more!now!* in less than ten seconds. Her muscles tensed and she almost missed the flash of a wrinkle between his eyes.

“Perhaps, we might first untangle you,” he suggested dryly. Kagome felt her cheeks blush as he helped her to sit up. He was still fully clothed, while she was almost completely naked and a little sticky.

“It didn’t seem to bother you, before,” she muttered. With his help, she began to unwind silky hair from her fingers. It was completely unfair that as soon as he pulled on a loose end the strands relaxed and unspooled, cascading back to lie as if they had just been styled.

“Indeed,” he responded, humor evident in his tone. She wanted to take offense, she really did, but it was impossible after such expert oral sex. At least, Kagome assumed it was expert from the way his tongue made her forget her own name. Having never experienced anyone but Sesshomaru, she was just guessing. Her girlfriends in the future complained that it was like pulling teeth to get their boyfriends to head south, but Sesshomaru did so with alacrity. He certainly seemed to enjoy it, if the frequency was any indication. She was just beginning to consider that it would be only equitable if she were to reciprocate when he continued, “Your ferocity is not entirely unexpected, but still enormously stimulating.” He pressed closer, and she was immediately aware how *enormously stimulating* he found her. The bulge that pressed against her hip was sufficient to make her rethink reciprocating. As eager as she was to investigate Sesshomaru’s body in a non-clinical way, eager did not equate experienced. What he had in his hakama seemed to call for experience. Maybe some training. *Is there a certification course for blow jobs*, she thought wildly, even as her belly began to grow hot again with need and her mouth watered.

His eyes darkened as he freed the last strand of hair. “What are you thinking, my miko?”

“I, ah...” Kagome’s lips felt dry and her lungs tight with nerves. She wanted Sesshomaru, loved him. Hell, she was going to mate him unless something catastrophic made her change her mind. She didn’t understand why she was so anxious. “Don’t you have work to do?” she blurted, and immediately wanted to cover her face with her hands. *Smooth, Higurashi, really smooth.*

Sesshomaru tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable. “There is always work to be done, although there is nothing currently needing my immediate attention.”

Except me, her mind screamed, her libido practically jumping up and down and waving. “So, would you, ah, have time for a...bath?” That wasn’t what she wanted to say. It really, really wasn’t. However, her courage failed her at the last second. He nodded slowly, and Kagome tried to convince herself that a bath would be good. She had done that with him before, and she probably needed one desperately. And he would be naked, and...her mind derailed for a moment. Thoughts of naked Sesshomaru battled with the sheer size of the hard length against her hip and won. *How difficult can it be to seduce a daiyoukai?* “Anything I can help you with?”

Kagome closed her eyes and groaned under a hot blush. *Smooth.*

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Ko sat quietly at the edge of the encampment, ostensibly waiting for her lord to finish his review of the troops and the order he was devising with his lieutenant. The small whirlwinds that formed around her looked like nothing but unsettled youki – which was not unusual for anyone around the Northern Lord. Her power blew away the layer of snow that covered the ground under a large tree. The vegetation in the area was primarily coniferous, but with slow, steady application Ko finally found a ground creeping vine, buried under a layer of pine needles. The leaves were waxy, thick, and a risky, brief glance before she clouded her vision again revealed such a pale green as to be almost white. It would do nicely.

She pulled a leaf free, turning it in her hands as she listened. The nearest soldier was more than twenty feet away, he was quietly asking his companions if they thought the lord would be staying long. Further away was the group that had been training, their weapons silent and their weight surreptitiously shifting from foot to foot. Toward the center of camp was Ryukostokken. He stood with his back to her, she could tell from the way his voice projected, and asked questions of the lieutenant who had been tasked with scouting attack routes for the main army. It was near dusk, and her timing was as good as it was going to get. She picked a bead of lapis from a fold in her obi and crushed it in her hands. With a bit of snow added to make a paste, she smeared it onto the leaf. Her whirlwinds picked up the blue bit of art and it floated gently away, close to the ground at first, then rising swiftly once it had entered a thick stand of trees.

Ko scrubbed her hands as best she could with snow and then stood, tipping a branch heavy with the cold stuff onto the ground where she had been sitting. She pulled on her gloves and walked quietly into an open area to wait for the Dragon Lord to summon her. She had done all she could for the time being. If Kagome lived, she would receive the message and know that her allies were in danger. Perhaps the miko could send a warning to the hanyou Inuyasha, perhaps not. Of bigger concern to the wind youkai was how to deal with the newest development at the Northern shiro. Ryukostokken was plotting quietly, and that never boded well. While calm and collected, the dragon could rival the most devious strategists of history. There was also rumor that one of the witches had been summoned to the castle. Ko had not heard her arrive, but Wei had been spending an unusual amount of time in series of rooms far from his regular haunting area. The Lord wanted Kagome, and he was not one to give up when

denied. Ko whispered a blessing for the miko; it would be better for Kagome to die than for Ryukostokken to gain power over her. Ko knew from experience.

Chapter 45: Realization and Actualization

“They approach,” the lieutenant announced before his feathers had finished settling.

Inuyasha rolled his head from side-to-side, cracking his neck. His stomach was twisted in a bitter knot, but he kept a scowl on his face. It was ridiculous to feel anxious. The worst that could happen was the dragons could attack – but then Inuyasha would get to kill something, which was a hell of a lot better than standing around, trying to look like he was available to be manipulated into attacking Sesshomaru. That thought made him snort with amusement. As if he ever needed a reason to attack the ice prick. Most of the time just smelling him was enough to make Inuyasha want to punch something.

Preferably his half-brother’s face.

However, while Sesshomaru was an arrogant asshole, he was still pack. And a decent lord. And he had never tried to take Kagome. *Keh, not ‘cept when she wanted it.* That brought a whole host of other things to mind that had Inuyasha desperately trying to clear his head before he either blushed or gagged. He finally locked eyes on the last of the monks, hurrying to the back of the valley and the medical tent where they would be out of sight during the negotiation. If things didn’t go well, the worst that could happen was every youkai and human that had followed him would be slaughtered and then the North would march unchecked right through Edo and up to Sesshomaru’s door.

Ain’t gonna happen.

Inuyasha straightened his shoulders and crossed his arms. “Niji,” he barked. The oldest of the ameonas bowed from her place at his left. “Get into position – and try not to be too obvious.”

“We are as spirits of discretion, Captain-sama,” she murmured with a faint smile. Her sisters behind her, all dressed - *thank the heavens, Buddha, and every damn kami* - giggled and bowed before gliding off behind Niji.

“It is not too late to simply attack them, Inuyasha-sama,” the crane murmured. “Ryukostokken is not with them, we could wipe out a sizeable portion of his army, and leave him open to another attack.”

Inuyasha grunted. “It is too late. And even if we could take them without losing most of the soldiers, which you know would be next to impossible on this ground, this ain’t about one battle.” Inuyasha whistled sharply to catch the attention of the hatchling who was making his way through the sparse groups on the training field. “You want blood,” he said bluntly, watching the crane out of the corner of his eye. The lieutenant’s jaw clenched, but he nodded and stayed quiet. “You won’t find it here. And if you can’t keep that blade sheathed, you best go back to the med tent with the monks.” Inuyasha raised his voice, not shouting, but loud enough that the youkai close by would hear and repeat what he said to their comrades. “This ain’t about revenge, or blood thirst, or atonement. This ain’t our battle to win. It’s ours to *lose*, ‘cause we are in this to win the *war*. We’re gonna stand here, and we are going to take whatever shit they want to feed us. We’ll drop a knee if we have to, whatever it takes. We’re gonna be Ryukostokken’s lapdogs, and when he’s done kicking us in the ribs – then we’re gonna bite off his fuckin’ head.”

Arashi walked quietly behind Natsou, listening equally to the captain as he discussed negotiation tactics – most of which were unwise – with his lieutenant, and to the men marching behind him. Their conversations were more far more interesting, although shorter and quieter to avoid Natsou's wrath. The spy regularly fell back from his position, ranging along beside the ranks to eavesdrop. Most of them spoke of revenge, of glory in battle. A select few, quieter and perhaps wiser than their peers, said nothing, but their hardened glances and clenched jaws were signs of their thoughts. Arashi memorized their faces and their unspoken feelings regarding the suggestions that Natsou should forgo negotiation and slaughter the Eastern refugees.

By the time the captain became aware of the surveillance that had been placed on them, Arashi had been tracking two cranes and some sort of half-breed that was neither wind nor beast for more than an hour. He gave the young dog credit, his soldiers were skilled and the precautions taken with defensive traps were well hidden; Arashi very much doubted any of the other dragons had noticed. The tang of holy power was so faint and covered with youki, that the spy missed it on the first three lines of security and had to circle back to confirm his suspicions. *The miko is not the only human Inuyasha has made an ally of*, Arashi thought with respect.

"Eyes are on us," Natsou snarled, nodding to the crane that circled far overhead. "Take aim," he ordered.

"You have a most unusual way of opening discussions, Natsou-san," Arashi remarked quietly. Only centuries of schooling his expressions and actions kept him from slapping the fool on the back of the head. "Has killing scouts earned you trust in previous negotiations?"

"Shut your maw, half-breed," Natsou sneered, "Or I will rip it apart."

Arashi nodded and bowed in a show of subservience, but his comments had achieved their intent. Natsou directed his best archer to keep an eye on the crane and his bow ready, but no order to fire was given. The final half-hour of marching was tense and silent. The spy noted two more protective barriers that were carefully prepared to be inert and nearly invisible until activated. The dog-hanyou grew in his estimation. When they rounded the last bend in the Eel Valley, his eyebrows rose a fraction, revealing his surprise – and admiration. The sight before them was no rag-tag group of refugees, frightened, injured, and banded together out of a lack of other options. It was an army. Not a full company by Northern standards, or those of the West, it was still impressive. And it equaled Natsou's followers almost one to one. Arashi was quickly running through alternatives and potential versions of his original plan which would take the size and training of Inuyasha's soldiers into consideration. Natsou did not seem concerned. *The fool.*

"Break here," he commanded. "Block the exit, set a guard – hostile territory." Arashi considered privately that, were he in charge, he would have done the same. Although not as obviously and aggressively as the captain. Not that it mattered; Arashi was the furthest thing from commanding the soldiers. He found a spot in the shade of a pine tree to offer some concealment and perched on a boulder that afforded a better view. A wide mixture of youkai – crane, bear, even a tanuki – had obviously been training before they were alerted to the approach of the dragons. Soldiers stood in regimented rows facing the entrance to the valley, weapons ready, but not drawn. There were no tents that he could see, although around the next bend in the valley he could make out a few campfires and bedrolls ready for use. Inuyasha had chosen an excellent position to defend, if that was his intention and Arashi was certain it was. The question was, *why? Why prepare to defend, and against what or who? Why request the assistance of any half-wild youkai with a grudge against his brother?* Arashi had twisted the truth when

he explained things to Ryukostokken. The spy was well aware that, although not friendly, the two siblings were certainly not at each other's throats. They had been allies against Naraku, and the ward of the West often stayed for days at a time in the village of Edo – under Inuyasha's protection. All information he had left out of his report to Ryukostokken because it had been deemed counterproductive at the time. It could be a trap, an ambush to divide and reduce the Northern Army. It didn't seem to correspond with what Arashi had gleaned of the hanyou's battle tactics, but it was more believable than the alternatives:

Inuyasha intends to surround Natsou and massacre his soldiers, as part of some plan of Sesshomaru's.

Inuyasha's survival instincts were greatly exaggerated, and he intends to ally with the North and attempt to kill his brother.

Inuyasha is practicing deception.

The last option was perhaps the most unlikely, given everything that the spy had learned in recent weeks. However, it was what he would do in the same situation. That gave Arashi pause. Inuyasha was not the crazed, blood-thirsty, luck-blessed moron that Ryukostokken had convinced himself he faced. If he was, he would never have allied with Sesshomaru against Naraku. He would never have allowed the miko to purify the Shikon. He would never have been able to bring together so many youkai with no allegiance in one place and make a respectable army of them. No hanyou that survived on his own to adulthood - and Inuyasha was very close if he hadn't yet come of age - was foolhardy or a slave to his instincts. Arashi was well aware of the discipline and cunning required to persist with the blood of two species in his veins. The challenge was even greater when half of that blood came from a powerful daiyoukai lord.

An ambush was a tactic that most would consider. Ryukostokken had used the scheme many times to great effect. It favored planning and numbers – both of which Inuyasha had in abundance in this scenario. The Saidai Mao was certainly capable of developing and executing any strategy that the Dragon Lord could come up with. *But would he*, Arashi asked himself. It had been many years ago, but Arashi had once watched the Lord of the West in battle. It was a personal combat, against a tiger from the mainland, and necessity for concealment had kept Arashi at a distance. However, the inuyoukai was not one for games or subversion. He stood open and still, waiting until the last possible moment to engage. Never once did he present himself as less than he was or reveal allies or tricks that would sway the outcome. If Sesshomaru had any flaw, in Arashi's estimation, it was pride. That daiyoukai would never consent to feigning weakness to trap his enemies.

There was a fourth possibility, of course, that Inuyasha was attempting the ambush on his own reconnaissance. The idea was discarded almost as soon as Arashi considered it, not because he believed the dog-hanyou incapable, Inuyasha was nothing if not a wily survivor, but because the youkai in question appeared at that moment in the camp. The distinctive red of his clothing and white of his hair stood out among the blues and greys of primarily crane demons. Purposeful strides took him past the edge of the line of warriors to stand, feet spread and arms crossed, not one hundred yards from Natsuo's troops. Well within accurate distance of ranged weapons, whether the action was a cunning bravado or over-inflated ego had yet to be determined. There the dog waited. Arashi had expected brash comments and taunts to spur an attack, but none came and the inu-hanyou rose even higher in his esteem. *At this rate, I will actually like the pup before we are through*, Arashi thought with some humor.

“Half-breed,” Natsou shouted. Arashi suppressed a sigh; the captain was forever finding new ways to disappoint. He lightly jumped down from his perch to take up a new stance, close enough to advise the de facto leader of the dragons without the dog obviously hearing, but far enough away to avoid becoming an injured party if Natsou’s negotiations fell through. “I wish for the death of the weakling, Sesshomaru!”

His declaration was met with absolute silence. Arashi had to give credit where it was due, if Inuyasha was thinking anything beyond irritation, no one present would know it. “Unlike myself,” he said quietly, aware the Captain could hear him, as could anyone else with extremely strong youki and preternatural ears, “most born under such circumstances are not well-disposed to having it pointed out.”

Natsou ignored him and took a step forward, his hand on the pommel of his sword. “Half-breed, do you seek the destruction of the West – or have you lost your balls?” The crude taunt was actually more ill-conceived than Arashi had expected. Usually Natsou had the sense to at least temper his mouth when he was acting on behalf of his lord. It was a testament to how badly he wanted the negotiations to fail, so that he could kill a hanyou and meet up with the rest of the army. Natsou wanted the glory of invasion and the taste of blood, and he would ruin many, many plans if he continued as he had begun. Generally, Arashi preferred to remain in the shadows. He was a spy by profession and an outcast by birth. However, his shogi game had certain key moves left to be played, and he could not allow one over-eager youkai to upset this operation.

“Inuyasha of Edo,” he called out. One white ear flicked his way, and a hard gold gaze turned to him, but the dog did not move. His scowl might have become even deeper. Arashi took a deep breath, “The Lord of the North has sent Captain Natsou to treat with you for the terms of your stay on his lands. Will you speak with him?”

Natsou hissed and Inuyasha grunted. “Keh.” He made a show of looking behind him, then at the ridge of the valley. Arashi did not need to follow his eyes to know that several youkai loyal to the inu-hanyou were placed strategically above them. For each one he saw, he was sure there was one other he did not. “Don’t look like his lands. Looks more like my lands.”

“You challenge the North!” Natsou roared. He drew his sword, and the soldiers behind him shifted, gripping their weapons tighter. Strangely, Inuyasha didn’t bother with a blade. He cracked his knuckles and bared his teeth.

“You came to me, fucker,” he sneered. “I ain’t challenged shit – yet.” Natsou lifted his sword, and Arashi tensed, prepared to jump away from a full-out battle. “I got bigger fish to fry than you pissants – and I wouldn’t chew on you if I was starving. I’ve had dragon.” For the first time in centuries, Arashi had to suppress a grin. Inuyasha might be the most reckless youkai he had ever met – reminding his enemy who had killed Ryukotsusei, the former Northern Lord. It was a terrible negotiation tactic, but it resulted in the realization of the fondest daydream of many of the dragon soldiers. Natsou let out a chilling scream, acrid smoke wafting from his mouth, and waved back his warriors. He drew his two-handed sword and charged. Inuyasha met him, faster than Arashi would have guessed the dog could move, and caught the blade with one hand. Blood dripped down his palm, but the weapon did not cut clean through. The surprise on the arrogant captain’s face was exquisite. “I’ve had dragon,” Inuyasha repeated with a snarl, “tastes like tough shit.” He slammed his fist into Natsou’s face and the captain careened backward. He did not fall, but he lost his sword to his opponent. It had been surprise, as well as strength, that allowed Inuyasha that small victory. Natsou would be more cautious, and Inuyasha

would have to display considerably more skill, if they were to engage in combat again, but the point had been made.

Inuyasha tossed the blade, sticky and dripping, at the captain's feet. "You want to challenge me, let's go. You want to talk about how you can get the hell outta my way while I cut off that fuckin' prick's other arm – let's talk."

That set the tone for negotiations. They were conducted standing, midway between the Northern soldiers and Inuyasha's army. The dog summoned a trembling little crane he called 'Egg' to his side to take notes, prompting Natsou to demand Arashi's presence. The tactic had set the spy on edge. It would have made more sense from Inuyasha's standpoint to speak to the leader of the dragon contingent alone – he certainly didn't need a half-grown bird at his side. He wondered at the reasoning, not willing to fool himself into thinking that Inuyasha didn't have one.

Natsou, however, was not used to doing much thinking about his enemies' motives, and the negotiations were no exception. Despite his rather humiliating defeat at the hands of an unarmed hanyou, he still managed to insult Inuyasha every third time he opened his mouth. Surprisingly – again Arashi found himself thinking that the inu-hanyou was unexpected – while Inuyasha was just as derisive and condescending in response, he did not take the bait and act violently. And if Arashi hadn't known any better, he would have believed that Inuyasha wanted nothing more in the world than to destroy the West and Sesshomaru with it. It all fit in quite well with the spy's plans, but it grated on his nerves that he didn't know *why*. That, added to Natsou's constant missteps, had him considering ways to delay the process and allow him time to think.

"And what would your master want for this support?" Inuyasha snorted, "Not that I need it."

"You'll be fortunate to escape your first battle with your life, half-breed," Natsou sneered. "But if my lord decides you are worth his generosity, he would only ask for one small thing. There is a miko in the West." Arashi gave Inuyasha points for not immediately reacting. "Ryukostokken-sama wants her whole and unsullied." Then he had to take away those points just as quickly.

"No." Gold eyes were narrowed, at what had begun as a scowl transformed into something much more feral and dangerous.

"Don't tell me you lust after the little whore too? Are all dogs so eager to pant after weak humans, or is it just your line?" Youki, wild and savage, swelled from the young hanyou. Natsou responded on instinct, his own aura rumbling. The pressure between the two quickly became uncomfortable for Arashi and pushed the hatchling back a step. Something had to be done or the rest of the day would be spent cleaning up the mess.

"If you do not want her body, then it is only her life that you object to giving away." Arashi hated to give away knowledge without direct benefit, but the situation had to be salvaged. "That matter can be negotiated. If you can concede that her other attributes are not your concern, then, *in time*, we can come to agreement." Fuzzy white ears twitched, but told the spy nothing of Inuyasha's thoughts.

"Fine," he snapped his teeth at Natsou, earning a hiss, and straightened. "That dumb wench will probably let a lord do whatever he wants with her body," a twist of revulsion crossed the hanyou's features, and Arashi was perplexed and fascinated by the expression, and the one of unholy satisfaction that fol-

lowed, “if he can avoid her fuckin’ burn. But I ain’t agreeing the dragons get to take her out of the West without my say-so.”

Natsou’s tongue flickered out, and Arashi knew he was testing the dog’s scent for lies. Nothing came of it but a set jaw and frown of distaste from the captain. Arashi was left wondering exactly what part of the implication in Inuyasha’s words was true, and what was vague suggestion. Natsou gave a sharp nod.

“Excellent,” Arashi said quietly. He glanced at the sky, there was perhaps only an hour of good light left in the day. He felt the tension of every strained minute spent listening to the two youkai taunt, argue, and threaten. Not for the first time, he considered, with longing, the assignments that were as simple as bribing an official or two, waiting motionless for a week in a frozen tree, and assassinating a band of samurai. He had known when he first set up his shogi board decades ago that there would be unpleasant aspects – it was politics, after all – but he had not imagined that the fate of Japan would rest on a hanyou too young to be expected to play and a dragon too blinded by ego to see the pieces. “May I suggest we break to eat, and resume these discussions in the morning?”

Both parties agreed, although Inuyasha added that if the dragons came any further into the valley, or tried to summon reinforcements, he would not hesitate to attack. Natsou suggested he would welcome the attack, as he had not dined on crane youkai in several weeks. The barbed insults continued for another quarter hour before both males departed, leaving Arashi standing in the open, pinching the bridge of his nose and very aware of the vulnerability of his back.

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Sesshomaru blinked awake in the pre-dawn quiet of his room and breathed deeply. Soon he would need to extract himself from the tangle of Kagome’s arms and legs. Soon he would be required to bathe, dress, and leave the family quarters to begin the business of the West. *Soon, but not yet.* He ran his claws gently through the thick mass of black waves that flowed across his shoulder and onto the futon. He found a knot, which was unsurprising given the activities his miko had engaged in before they slept. The memory brought a satisfied smile to his face as he smoothed her hair.

“Don’t you have work to do?” Kagome had blurted. Her face was so expressive, he did not need the tang of turnips in his nose to recognize her wince as embarrassment. Although her emotion was obvious, the reason for it was not.

“There is always work to be done, although there is nothing currently needing my immediate attention.” Sesshomaru felt an amused irritation. Kagome was a paradox: willing, wanton, powerful but also clumsy and often awkward in her own skin. And his miko still smelled of her completion, and even more recently than that of excitement and want, but she also seemed to have trouble admitting to such. *How many times will I need to taste her before she loses such modesty?* Sesshomaru vowed privately that he would commit himself to seeking the answer. He desired her, desired his own completion, but he had no intention of pushing Kagome toward such acts if she was not ready. Their mating ceremony would be soon enough; during his centuries he had gone far longer than two months without release. Always as his own choice, and never, thankfully, with so much ready temptation, but he did not doubt his ability to succeed.

“So, would you, ah, have time for a...bath?” He nodded, slowly. He needed to bathe, as did she, and once his hair was completely free of her fingers he considered that she might be prevailed upon to

groom it for him. It would be torture, to allow her such an intimacy that was reserved for a mate without burying himself in her afterward, but it was a suitable task to make up for the damage she had caused to his person. He had no doubt that she would also find it enjoyable. Human females, if Rin and Kagome were any indication, were quite enamored of his hair. “Anything I can help you with?” She winced again and for a moment he was still thinking of locating a comb.

Then her scent reached him. She was embarrassed still, but the notes of passion had increased substantially. Excitement, trust, anxiety. *Kagome attempts seduction.* The experience was so unlike anything he had ever had before, or expected from her, that he was speechless for a moment. His body, unlike his mind, had no hesitation about the appropriate response. What had been uncomfortable fullness and heat amplified so that the strain of his member against his hakama put the demon-made fabric under serious stress. His gaze drifted from her flushed cheeks and the glimpse of white teeth biting into swollen flesh, down her neck and chest to her lace-covered breasts. The fabric was still damp from his tongue and the peaks red and tight. The soft skin of her stomach was marred by a faint bruise in the shape of his mouth, which he did not remember making. It pleased him even while he reminded himself to be gentler. She held her legs awkwardly drawn up, trying to maintain some decorum but seemingly unwilling to disturb the wet fabric over her sensitive flesh which was no doubt uncomfortable. He held his eyes there for a heartbeat, breathing her in and determining the quickest way to remove his fundoshi without strangling his cock or overwhelming his virginal priestess.

He became aware that his silence had resulted in a spike in her concern. “Most definitely,” he answered to assure her. He looked into her eyes, marveling at the blue color. “A mate – an intended mate,” he corrected himself quickly rather than get into a pointless argument with her that might distract her from her present goal – whatever that might be, “should groom the other. I will assist you.” Sesshomaru allowed a rare, wide smile that revealed his fangs. It had the intended result as Kagome’s eyes widened and her scent thickened. “And I expect you to be equally...*through.*”

The results had been far better than Sesshomaru had allowed himself to imagine. While he lit a fire in his newly constructed bathhouse to heat the water, Kagome had stripped off her undergarments and donned a thin yukata that left little to the imagination. She insisted on helping him remove his clothes. It was a glorious suffering. Her small, cool hands fumbled with every tie and fold of his kimono. Every inch of him, except the place that was throbbing for her, was caressed multiple times before she even bared his skin. Despite his frustrated need, he could not help the chuckle that escaped when she finally figured out his fundoshi. The wrapping fell away and he was gratified by her gasp and focused stare. She had stuttered, blushed, looked away and ordered him to sit. He did so, but enjoyed stretching out his legs to trap her between them so that she would have to press against him and lean over his shoulder to dip the rinse bowl into the bath.

She had blushed, the rosy color extending down to the collar of her yukata, but her scent assured him that she was not intimidated or overwhelmed by the intimacy. He was certain he had never been so thoroughly cleansed before a bath. She poured the slightly chilly water over his feet and calves, then thighs, working her way up his body properly. He found himself holding his breath, preparing to have his ardor forcibly cooled, but she skipped his groin to rise his chest and shoulders. The scentless soap that he preferred was stacked in paper-wrapped cakes on a shelf, but she first seized a bottle from her time and poured a sweet-smelling liquid into his hair. She spoke while she worked, although Sesshomaru was certain he had missed most of the nuance – details about products designed for hair and skin, and someone called Tsubaki. It was a glorious few minutes while she worked a lather up and scratched lightly at his scalp. She smoothed his hair all the way to the ends, tugging pleasantly and pressing her breasts against the side of his face and neck as she worked. He was disappointed when she

finally rinsed, only to learn that she would repeat the process with something thicker which she promised would make his hair soft.

He did not disabuse her of the notion that he needed such treatment, but enjoyed her ministrations thoroughly. When she finished, she pulled his wet hair into a braid, much to his surprise, and then began to wash his body. He leaned back against the wall of the bathhouse, giving her ample opportunity to take as much advantage of him as she dared. He watched her with heavy-lidded eyes, waiting to see how far his modest-yet-brazen miko would go. She lathered a bar of soap and began with his feet. Sesshomaru had never realized that his toes and ankles were so sensitive, but he felt every squeeze of her palms and brush of her fingers as though she were touching the straining member that stood demanding her attention.

Again, once she had rinsed the soap from his legs she skipped up to his shoulders and repeated the process on his arms and chest. By the time she poured water across his flat stomach, the fire had done its work and the liquid was perfectly heated. He moved as if to stand, prepared to return the favor in equal measure, but her fingers pressed lightly against his forearm. It was her quiet voice that held him in place, however.

“I haven't finished yet.” The words were spoken evenly, but there was a thread of heat in her tone that caught his attention. Her scent had been building while she talked and worked, and the steam in the small room amplified it until he was swimming in magnolias and cherry wood, heavily spiced. It was made that much better to his senses that his own scent layered over hers where he had touched, kissed, and pressed his weight against her.

She had reached up for another scoop of water, and her yukata gaped open. He was so focused on the view of round flesh and pink skin that he nearly missed her deliberate pour of water into her open palm and then onto his cock. It was hot – but no hotter than his flesh and he appreciated that she had obviously thought to test it with her hand first. She dipped another bowl of water and set it to the side as she took up the soap. While she worked it into a lather in her hands, her gaze found his.

Sesshomaru had found it difficult to breathe. The passion written on her face was obvious and deeply felt, but it was the sweet fragrance of carnations and gardenia that shook him to his core. She trusted him, felt deeply for him, in addition to lusting for his body. By the time she set the soap aside and reached for him, his muscles were tense with anticipation, his member bobbing lightly with eagerness. His chest was tight, not just with expectation, but with emotion for the woman before him.

She had knelt, between his thighs, and even seated on the low stool the head of his cock reached nearly to her chin. Her hands shook slightly as she reached for him, and at the first touch Sesshomaru had to close his eyes and will himself not to release. Her hands circled him, slippery with soap and far cooler than his skin. Her finger and thumb could not meet around him, so instead she utilized her entire palm to stroke his shaft. She pulled down gently, smoothing back his foreskin and exposing the entire head to the steamy air. Through slitted eyes, all he could keep open, he watched her lean closer. To inspect or to do something else entirely, he had no idea. Her slick hands turned in a corkscrew motion as she inched closer to the tip. Finally her thumb found the narrow tendon that connected the back of his head to the shaft. She caressed it, her face so close that her breath puffed against his skin.

He had spoken, more guttural sound than actual words, what he was trying to say he did not know. Her hands stilled in response and she looked up at him, biting her lip. “Is this okay?”

Okay. Oh-kay. Sesshomaru had heard her use the word before, knew what it meant. In that moment he wished to find the human who would invent such drivel and rip their tongue from their mouths. It was not *okay*. Kagome should never say as much about anything that happened with her skin on his. “No,” he snarled. It came out rougher than intended and she frowned, looked down, and pulled one hand away. He trapped the other against himself, trying to keep his claws gentle but refusing to allow her to stop, wishing he was better at expressing what she needed to hear – what he wanted her to know. “Perfect,” he managed to get out between clenched teeth. He moved her hand under his and relaxed against the wall – as much as he could with every fiber of his being screaming at him to pick Kagome up and part her with his cock. She had initiated this intimacy, he would force himself to let her continue as long as she desired. Even if it killed him.

“Oh, oh...good.” That seemed to break the silence that had fallen over her, and she began to speak again. Her voice was huskier than usual, and low, as though she expected someone might overhear. And through it all her hand kept moving. “I have been wanting to touch you, wanting to...do this to you. You are so beautiful, Sesshomaru. It makes me ache...” Her thumb found the sensitive base of his head again, and this time stroked under and around the lip, drawing heavy breaths from him. His hand fell away from hers and found the low wooden table behind him that held towels. He gripped the edge, could feel his claws biting into the hard, dark lumber.

It was when her second hand tentatively caressed his sac that he first bit his lip. He must have made another sound, because she glanced up at him, worried again. He could feel a drop of blood running down his chin as he pried open his jaw to speak. “Perfect,” he said again. It was all he could manage, but there was really no other way to describe the dual sensation of her palm and fingers, slightly calloused from her bow, gripping and pumping his shaft while she cupped his balls and gently *rolled*. He sucked in a sharp breath and his hand reached out of its own accord to stroke her hair away from her face. He tucked it behind one ear so he could watch her, cheeks flushed, lips parted, eyes focused only on him. “...would it be like?” she continued, blushing but focused. “When you touch me, I want to know.”

Kagome's hands left him and he almost grabbed her hair to force her back. He had to fist his hand on his thigh and breathe deeply to regain control. She poured the bowl of water over him slowly, and where the water had cooled while she touched him, his skin seemed to have become inflamed. He closed his eyes and let out a low growl, unable to concentrate on her words while his instincts were trying to claw their way out – demanding that he take her, teach her, show her, dominate her.

“...be alright?” He nodded once, not certain what she had said, only certain that he would let her do whatever she wanted for as long as he was able. He had to breathe. He had to pull in the Kagome scented air around him, air thick with his own desire, and let-

With a snarl and the sound of breaking wood his eyes snapped open. Kagome was staring at him, blue eyes wide and pink lips stretched over the tip of his cock. Her mouth was warm and wet, her lips soft and pliant. They both remained frozen, until he felt the flat of her tongue swipe across his weeping hole.

“*You kill me, mate,*” he growled in his own language. He knew she didn't understand the words, but it did not seem to matter. Her eyes darkened, her lids grew heavy, and her hand wrapped around his shaft again. Sesshomaru abandoned the broken splinters of the shelf, ignoring the towels and sawdust that littered the floor, and instead dug his other hand into the stone base of the bath. Sparks flew from his claws, but he was nearly oblivious as his intended took him in her mouth again and again. Her fingers

tugging and stroking, her tongue and lips caressing and sucking. When she cupped his sac again he gave in and thrust his free hand into her hair, tipping her head so that he could watch her taste him.

He had found his release that way, his first with Kagome, between her lips. She had hesitated before swallowing the first mouthful, the rest coated her neck and collarbones. When he was finished, he leaned over her where she knelt on the floor and kissed her. She still tasted of him, salty and musky, but of herself as well. The combination was enough to make him ready again, and he had to will his desire down. Instead he had washed her and brought her to completion again with his hands and mouth. He showed her, with his body and the reactions he pulled from hers, how much he cherished her.

Afterward, they had bathed together and talked of her lessons with his mother and the importance of martial training. He informed her of the duties expected of her, as his intended, during the Full Moon Council. She agreed to most of them with only a few arguments and bartering. She made demands of her own, most of which would be simple and pleasing to fulfil. He had not brought up Jun, and was surprised when she did, but not at all surprised by the depth of emotion she showed him. Hurt, anger, pity for the youkai that truly believed he was acting in the best interests of his lord. She expressed second thoughts as well, revealing that she had only learned the kotodama spell recently, in an effort to make a new necklace for Inuyasha with a less humiliating trigger. She worried that she had taken Jun's punishment too far – worried that she had not gone far enough. Sesshomaru had held her, reassured her, and when they were finished she went to eat with the children and reluctantly seek out Kimi. He removed himself to his private study to work. At the back of his mind, for the rest of the afternoon and evening, there was a sense of peace within him that he had never felt before. All of the reasons that he had used to justify bringing Kagome to the West, keeping her, pursuing her, courting her – they were still true. But it was also true that she was more than those things, more than the sum of her strengths and faults. She was a complement to him, a piece of himself that he had not realized was missing.

Sesshomaru pressed his lips against Kagome's hair as the screens to the garden lightened with the first hints of dawn. She mumbled in her sleep – his name, which brought on a wave of heat and contentment – and burrowed into the dent he left in the futon when he stood. Mocomoko clung to her until he forced it to obey him; it was not unnoticed by him, nor distasteful, that the extension of his youki and instincts desired to stay with her. He consciously ran his fingers through her hair one last time and kissed her again before he left to begin his day. Sesshomaru did not have a name for the new feeling that Kagome had inspired in him, but it was strong and deep. Sometime in the moments between watching her mete out justice and allowing her freedoms with his person that he had never granted another, that feeling had been planted, rooted, and grown to become the foundation of his being. It filled him in a way that his quest for perfection and supremacy never had. He allowed a small smirk at the irony, as he made his way to the study where Kento was no doubt waiting to start the day. When he had turned his attention to the thing he had considered least likely to bring him greatness – that is when he became complete.

ooo

“Hirimoto-san,” Kimi smiled sweetly and gestured for her old friend to join her. The bear demon waved his small party to a halt and approached her, and she considered how the years had changed him. Rich chestnut hair cascaded just past his shoulders. Brown eyes sparkled with amusement. Wide bands of pale gold around his eyes and across his temples contrasted with the darkness of his skin. He was older, certainly; the breadth of his shoulders and strength in his chest were undiminished, but there was a hint of fat around his belly. Although that may have just been the season.

“Lady,” he greeted her. His voice was just as deep and amused as she remembered. “Please do not tell This One that such a beautiful flower travelled alone all this way.”

Kimi’s smile widened and she invited him to sit with a nod of her head. He claimed a cushion near her own. The location for her reception had been carefully chosen: far enough from the Western shiro and any villages to avoid attention, but near enough that she had easily flown there during the night. Her two most trusted servants had arrived on foot the day before, leading pack animals laden with everything needed for a hime’s picnic. A brilliant white canopy shielded her from the few stray flakes of snow that occasionally fell. Thick, imported carpet insulated her from the cold ground and supported plush cushions and an exquisitely carved table that held fresh, hot tea and plates of delicacies. Privacy for discussing matters of state was difficult to find, but there was no reason it had to be uncomfortable.

“A great ally and long friend has entered the West, Hirimoto-san. It is This One’s pleasure to offer greetings and welcome. Please, be refreshed after the journey.” Kimi lifted one elegant hand, and her servants stepped forward to offer trays of tea, sekihan, and sweet karintou to the southern party. The bear lord washed his fingers in the bowl of water near the table and dried them before selecting a ball of sekihan from the table.

“What celebration nears? Surely not the arrival of the South?” He eyed her over the sticky, red rice before popping the morsel in his mouth.

Kimi judged that her servants and Hirimoto’s party were out of earshot. “May formalities be considered exercised?” She raised an eyebrow and he smiled around his food, nodding. It was one of the many reasons she had always liked the bear, after his penchant for speaking his mind, he smoothly followed a change of course and adapted to new circumstances easily – unlike some dogs she knew. “The sekihan is my discreet way of incurring your congratulations.”

“Congratulations,” he immediately responded with real sincerity. Then he grinned, and his good humor was infectious. Kimi had to struggle to maintain a demur smile rather than ruin the air of mystery she was trying to establish. “Obviously, you are most deserving of my best wishes, simply by virtue of gracing me with your presence and hospitality.” She really did enjoy the bear. “However, if there is something more specific-” his eyes narrowed and he lost all indications of a good mood, “You have not taken a new mate, have you?”

“No.” Kimi was so startled by the unexpected question, the sheer ridiculousness of it, she took a moment to reorganize her thoughts. “But we are celebrating the joining of two houses. Sesshomaru-”

“Is far too old and too stodgy for my little Mitsu,” he interrupted. Kimi glanced at the female in question. She stood next to her brother, practically hiding behind his broad back. The cub was only midway into her second century, gawky, thin, and shy. *Sesshomaru would scare that little thing to death*, she thought, then remembered the collection of other young that her son had accumulated. *Perhaps not*. She shook her head and chuckled.

“I am afraid that will not be possible, despite your obvious desire to join our houses.” She had intended him to laugh at her joke, but Hirimoto did not and it irritated her. The bear had always been a source of enjoyable diversion. Her entire day would be ruined if he had decided to turn serious on her. If she had wanted to take every word literally and find only the most dour outcome in situations, she could have stayed home with her son. “Sesshomaru,” she began again, and then paused, arching an eyebrow to invite Hirimoto to interrupt again – if he dared. He did not. “Sesshomaru will announce his intended at

the Full Moon Council. Her father is no longer living, so I wished to ask you to escort her to the dais during the ceremony.” Kimi would have preferred to draw out the announcement further, for full effect, but Hirimoto had already spoiled it. She huffed silently. They had become great friends after his mate had died. Before Toga found his human mistress the three had spent many pleasant hours together. Although she had not seen him, or any other daiyoukai, since she retreated to her sky palace, she had hoped that their friendship would remain intact.

“Finally found a bitch to meet his high standards?” Hirimoto laughed, easing his posture and relaxing into something like the attitude she had expected. “Where did he capture this paragon? And how have you managed to keep her from seppuku at the thought of the mating?”

“Sesshomaru is considered quite attractive by most females,” Kimi allowed the conversation to drift. It was *nice* to speak with peers.

“Of that I have no doubt,” he laughed again. “Mitsu and her clutch of high-pitched handmaids have been swooning over him since he last appeared in the South more than two decades ago to discuss trade routes with me.”

“Mitsu who is too young for him?” Kimi asked pointedly.

“Yes,” he glowered, then shook his head. “Children are forever wanting things that are not good for them, and rejecting what we know they need. Is that not correct?” She nodded in complete understanding. “Given a few more centuries I might have considered the possibility,” he admitted, “if you and Toga hadn’t raised the coldest heart this side of death.”

“Not so cold anymore,” Kimi noted. She poured him a cup of tea and collected another perfectly round sekihan on a decorative serving leaf.

“Really?” Hirimoto said with interest. His fingers brushed hers as he took the food, and the heat made Kimi shiver. She flicked mokomoko over her shoulders to ward off what must have been a chill breeze.

“This mating must take place, old friend.” She stared at him, trying to impress upon him the gravity of the situation. “We need that one on our side if we are to win the war...and what will come after. And,” she broke away from his gaze to pick up her tea, “she provokes Sesshomaru. Which I approve of entirely.”

Hirimoto said nothing for several long minutes, enjoying his tea and watching his cubs rest their legs and talk with Kimi’s servants and the small contingent of guards that had accompanied him. “You have not named her. Do I know this powerful family that Iwakura Kimi desires to bind to her own?”

“Higurashi Kagome is her name, but you would know her not by her family, but her deeds.” Kimi turned back to him and watched his face carefully. “You have heard of the Miko no Mao?”

Hirimoto nodded slowly, giving nothing away. “Word of the plague reached us, although we were not cursed with the disease itself. Sesshomaru sent messengers some time ago to let me know it was no longer a threat. They gossiped with my soldiers, eager to describe the beautiful physician that cured the West. The stories make her out to be a powerful spirit of healing or the earthly embodiment of some goddess.”

“Nothing so mundane for my son, Hirimoto.” Kimi took another long sip, before calmly stating, “She is a priestess. A human female.” The sputtering and spray of tea across the table was gratifying. “Although your people may know her by another title. The Shikon Miko.” There was several long minutes of coughing, and both Kimi and Hirimoto had to wave away worried youkai retainers. “Are you concerned for the diluting of my line with human blood?”

“No.” He breathed deeply and carefully set down his cup. “Honestly, Kimi-san, your line could use some diluting.”

Kimi laughed. Great, silvery peals of laughter that echoed in the clearing and startled game. Hirimoto was smiling at her with a soft look, and her servants gazed in her direction with something closer to terror. She could not help herself. Only a daiyoukai, a *friend*, as old and trusted as the Southern Lord would have stated the truth so frankly. She had to brush moisture from the corners of her eyes when she finally regained her composure. “Oh, you must tell that to the miko. She said something very similar – although she was considerably more polite about it.”

“You believe that we will need reiki on our side to defeat Ryukostokken? Has he gained so much power?”

“It is not the strength of his steel or the bite of his jaws, nor the size of his army that dictates the threat. It is his conviction.” Kimi folded her hands in her lap and breathed carefully to keep her youki subdued. There were few things that could make her forget herself, few things that would cause her to lose control and potentially injure less powerful daiyoukai such as Hirimoto in the process. The thought of what Ryukostokken would do to the West, to Japan, was one. “He began that plague, Hirimoto. My spies have confirmed that he infected his own people first, and it disfigured and disabled those who did not die so that he could build an army immune to the disease before spreading it to the rest of us. We have allowed him to live bitter and blackened for too long. It must end now, by any means necessary.”

Kimi breathed in his familiar scent, and did not relax until she detected the changing note of his agreement. “War is more important, of course,” Hirimoto said conversationally, “but I can’t help but pity the poor girl. Fighting alongside her natural enemies must be difficult enough, suffering Sesshomaru as a mate seems beyond cruel. Not even he could hate her if she aids his army, but that won’t mean he can find any kindness for her. I suppose her saving grace will be her short life; she won’t have to spend more than a few decades suffering though his apathy.”

“Oh, I believe Sesshomaru has found more than kindness for her.” Kimi poured more tea for each of them and bit back another smile, keeping her voice light, “We can only hope that the little miko can walk after the enormous strain of his affection.” Hirimoto very nearly spit out his tea again. Pleased to have caught him unaware, she changed the subject. “Tell me, did you bring the healer as requested? And have you taken an opportunity to review the names I sent you?”

Once Hirimoto managed to stifle his laughter, they spent another pleasant hour discussing politics and family – although the two were not mutually exclusive. He informed her that he had already prepared the larger portion of his army to make its way to the border, in anticipation of Sesshomaru’s call to arms. When they were finished, she returned by air to the shiro, while her servants joined the southern party on their longer route. Kimi found herself smiling the entire way.

Chapter 46: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Kagome could feel sweat running down her back and making her underwear stick to her butt. Her bangs were hanging in her eyes and her arm was stinging from a blow delivered by her sparring partner via a wooden practice stick. The kitchen servant, an inu girl that looked no more than fourteen, had apologized profusely after the hit and fallen to the floor to beg forgiveness, tail literally tucked between her legs. The only reason Kagome hadn't made a bigger deal out of how badly it hurt was the look of fear on the poor girl's face. It had been a lucky strike – the inu was even less experienced with weapons than Kagome herself, and if the miko had been focused it would never have happened.

"No worries," she said again, smiling despite the throb in her shoulder. "Let's at least do one more, if you're not tired. I think I finally got the hang of this." Kagome was painfully aware that the girl would have had to be next door to death before she would refuse to practice with the Miko no Mao. The pressure for the servant had to be intense, as the Western Lady sat on a specially prepared cushion on one side of the dojo, watching and critiquing. It certainly made Kagome edgy, and didn't help that she felt a little crabby and tired, too.

The girl attacked, using her full speed. She was faster than any human, but not so much as to be a blur to Kagome's eyes. The miko jumped up, rather than trying to roll under the hit, and barely cleared the stick. She stumbled on her landing, but it worked to her advantage. She had to drop her own stick to regain her balance and the servant tripped on it and went sprawling. *Talk about the blind leading the blind*, Kagome thought wryly. The miko wondered if Kimi found them aggravating to watch, waving their weapons with less skill than children and stumbling over invisible wrinkles in the tatami mats.

"That will be enough," Kimi called out.

The relief both females felt was palatable as they bowed to each other. The inu even managed to crack a small smile. Kagome laughed out loud. "Thank you, Sabanto-san. Let the cook know I said you should have the rest of the afternoon off." The inu's mouth dropped open and she sputtered, "Consider it and a long soak in the springs a reward for going so easy on me. Have a nice day!" There were a silly number of bows and thanks as the younger girl backed out of the dojo and softly shut the screens behind her. Alone with Kimi, Kagome immediately flopped onto her back on the floor.

"The pup would have washed before returning to her duties. There was no need for the additional privilege," Kimi commented.

"She deserved it," Kagome mumbled. "I'm sorry this wasn't as productive as you were expecting, Kimi-sama. I'm afraid I'm just not athletic. Or graceful. Or coordinated." Kagome covered her eyes with one arm and considered taking a nap right there on the mats if Kimi would let her.

"Indeed," Kimi sounded like she was repressing laughter. Kagome frowned, but it quickly turned into a self-deprecating smile. She really was hopeless. "Perhaps you are not capable of combat directly with a youkai. This only means that we must change our course of action. I will give it consideration, and we will try a new approach tomorrow. In the meantime, we have a few hours before we must be prepared to receive guests. You will show me your reiki now."

"What?" Kagome rolled onto her stomach and stared at the Lady. "Er, right here? Shouldn't we go down to the archery range?"

“You have displayed your abilities in many ways other than arrows, have you not?” Kimi was ostensibly referring to the kotodama, the only use of reiki she had witnessed from Kagome. But the miko had become aware during the few days she had spent in the Lady’s company that Kimi knew a lot more about her and the Shikon than Kagome felt comfortable with.

“Well, yeah, but I don’t think-” Kagome’s worries were interrupted by Hisao’s smooth voice behind her.

“Please, allow me, Kagome-sama.” He walked around to stand in front of her. His nose twitched and he frowned briefly, but his expression quickly cleared again.

“Ah, allow what now?” she asked, confused. If the teenage servant had been able to clip her arm, she wasn’t particularly excited about the prospect of training with Hisao. From all of the accounts she had heard, he was considered to be second only to Sesshomaru in skill.

“Thank you, Hisao-san,” Kimi replied before turning her attention to Kagome. “Use your power and move him, Miko.”

Kagome was physically tired, but she hadn’t done much with her reiki in days. She knew it was fully recovered, or near enough so that such a training exercise wouldn’t matter. However, she was nervous about her ability and it still felt strange to attack a friend with it. In addition, she had hardly ever made a direct attack with her power and had only in the past year been able to summon it with reliability to do something other than imbue an arrow. She glanced at Kimi, but the Lady was cool and faintly amused as always. Kagome had the feeling that they would sit there all day if the daiyoukai didn’t get what she wanted. The miko sighed and stood up with a grunt, pushing her wet hair off her face.

“Okay, I’ll try to be careful, but I’m not very good at this, Hisao. You have to tell me if it starts to hurt even a little.” He nodded, his face calm, and Kagome took in a deep breath. Slowly, she pulled out her power and it responded readily. When a sufficient amount was gathered in her hands, she formed a sphere that winked a little as it moved. Then she threw it. A shower of pink sparks cascaded to the floor, but Hisao remained unmoved. A youki barrier, steely grey in color, shimmered for a moment against her fading power and then became invisible again. The captain grinned.

“I thought miko were dangerous?” His taunt made her smile as well.

“Okay, you asked for it!” Happiness radiated from Kagome as she rapidly summoned more power, forming smaller balls of reiki. The spheres were easier to make than they had ever been before, perhaps because after healing Sesshomaru she was more confident in how much power was available to her. She had never attempted to use them as a weapon, only as an exercise in control, but Kagome didn’t have experience with anything else. She tossed them his direction – one, two, three at a time – but he deflected them all. With a laugh, she called more, these she made in various sizes from golf balls to one as large as a volleyball and sent them whizzing his way all at once. Hisao grunted with effort, but he twisted in the air, performing a neat summersault that seemed to defy gravity, and deflected each orb. Kagome was having too much fun to worry about Kimi’s judgement, or to be concerned about her sweaty clothes or fact that in an actual combat situation, her opponent would not give her so much time and space to attack.

“I might need some water...if we keep this up for a few more hours.” Hisao smirked.

“Ooo – now you’re going to get it!” Kagome shot a few more spheres, laughing and turning as Hisao circled her, but she couldn’t get anything past his shield. The problem was, she needed something faster, something more like an arrow, but she had never made any weapon other than a bow with pure energy before, and never when she wasn’t in a life or death situation. She didn’t want to actually hurt Hisao. It occurred to her though, that she had made her reiki do other things, things that Shippo had told her youki could do. Things like ruffling Sesshomaru’s fur and comforting her kit. *Things that could be distracting.* She spread her hands out wide, letting power flow down her arms to her fingertips. To her delight, pink ribbons hung down to the ground, coiling there and waiting. Kagome could feel the sweat dripping down her temples, but she swung her arms up overhead and spun, trying to imitate a rhythmic gymnast. From the corner of her eye, she could see Hisao standing stock still, eyes wide and staring. She bent at the waist and curled her arms around herself, letting the pink settle a bit before opening her hands wide again in a wave of purity that made the air above her sparkle. Hisao’s hands dropped to his sides.

Kagome struck. She imagined drawing two water pistols and blasting her reiki out under pressure. The holy energy actually made a *splat* sound as it hit the captain, and she managed three before he threw up his shield again – cursing and patting at the faint smoke rising from his kimono. Kagome held up her index fingers and blew across the tops before shoving them down next to her hips as if into holsters. She grinned.

“That’ll teach you to rustle cattle in my town,” she said in what even she admitted was the worst American accent ever. Thankfully, America didn’t exist yet, so no one would call her on it.

“What,” Sesshomaru’s deadly quiet voice had her glancing over her shoulder in surprise, “is going on here?” He stood half-in, half-out of the dojo doorway, his eyes moving between Hisao’s smoking clothes and Kagome’s sweat drenched ones.

“Showdown?” Kagome squeaked with a blush at the same time Kimi said,

“Training. Hisao-san has agreed to partner Kagome-san, to prevent lesser youkai from being injured.”

“Hn.”

Kagome wasn’t sure what to make of his narrow gaze. Kimi sounded somewhat pleased, and she had managed to hit Hisao, but Sesshomaru looked ready to blow a gasket. Or, as close to that as he ever got, which meant that the gold of his eyes was a degree or two colder than usual and his jaw was clenched tight enough to turn coal into diamonds. Belatedly, she realized she still had her hands formed like six-shooters, which wouldn’t be invented for a few hundred years.

“Ah, thanks for the target practice, Hisao.” She offered him a smile, “Do you want to try again?” The captain’s focus shifted behind her, and Kagome’s irritation was roused. She hadn’t been excited about the training sessions in the first place, and then when she did manage to have a little fun and do something kind of awesome – Sesshomaru did his impression of a wet blanket. Why he wasn’t in his office, she didn’t know.

“Guests will arrive soon,” the Lord in question said coolly.

The effect on Hisao was immediate. He bowed to Kimi and then to Kagome and said, “Unfortunately, I must return to my duties, Kimi-sama, Kagome-sama.” And then in a swirl of youki-infused speed he

was gone. Kagome pouted. Her little trick wouldn't have worked a second time, but it had been nice to feel like she wasn't a complete failure at the whole combat thing.

The faint rustle of silk signaled Kimi's preparation to depart as well. "As you seem to have things well in hand here, Sesshomaru," Kagome was certain she did not imagine the laughter in the Lady's voice, "I will change for the reception. Do see that your miko has adequate time to prepare before Hirimoto arrives."

"I thought-" Kagome began, but Kimi glided through the screens and closed them softly without acknowledging the miko. She narrowed her eyes. While Kimi hadn't given her a second glance, Kagome was certain she had seen a wink thrown Sesshomaru's way. Kimi would have only done that if she was teasing her son, if it would make Sesshomaru uncomfortable. That implied that Sesshomaru was behaving unusually. "What are you doing here?" she asked, her suspicions aroused.

Sesshomaru ignored the question. "Why are you not in our rooms?" He stepped towards her, the movement predatory, and Kagome had to turn slowly to continue to face him as he circled.

"I heard you," she blushed, but continued, more concerned with his strange attitude than her own embarrassment, "about the blood...and smell. But Kimi wanted to train this afternoon, and she said it was barely noticeable." Kagome smiled triumphantly as she remembered something he had said that supported her decision, "Kimi's nose is just as good as yours, and if it doesn't bother her, I shouldn't have to worry about anyone else."

"My mother is not male," he said evenly. Kagome hesitated, mouth open, trying to figure out how that made any difference. "My captain is."

"You mean-" Kagome recalled how Hisao had sniffed rather obviously when he first arrived. She blushed, but straightened her spine. "Well, it didn't seem to bother him either."

"I am aware." Kagome blinked, surprised that Sesshomaru capitulated so easily. His nostrils flared and his mouth opened slightly. Kagome knew he was smelling her, and despite his extremely enjoyable assurances the day before, she was uncomfortably mindful of her own sweat. "Why is that, my miko?" He tilted his head and his eyes nearly closed, studying her. "Your scent is...muted, since this morning."

It took a moment to process, but when she did Kagome's face burned. "I, ah," she cleared her throat. "Sesshomaru, this is one of those things that is personal – and please trust me when I tell you it has zero effect on you or us," she wagged her index finger back and forth between them, "together. But I am not discussing it with you. Not now. Maybe not ever if I can avoid it." She muttered the last sentence and swore to herself that if she *never* had to explain feminine hygiene products to Sesshomaru it would be too soon. He was quiet for a long moment, and Kagome worried that he would push for an answer and they would have to repeat the whole cultural differences conversation. She didn't think her hormones were out of control, but she was honest enough to admit that her temper was closer to the surface some days of the month than others. She really *didn't* want to argue.

"Your reiki was unexpected this afternoon," he said instead. Kagome relaxed, not realizing how stiff she had become. She could have kissed him for letting the subject drop. He stepped closer, "It gave concern." Sesshomaru had been worried about her. She smiled and reached out to take his hand. *He definitely deserves a kiss.* "I have told you that you must allow me to supervise your power, so that you

do not hurt yourself.” *Or maybe not.* Kagome tried to drop his hand, but he wound his fingers through hers and pulled her closer.

“I’m feeling much better, thank you Sesshomaru,” she said, a bit more sarcastically than she had intended. “Besides, you try telling your mother no.”

“Hn.” His face dipped down to hers and Kagome’s heart picked up speed in anticipation. She still wasn’t happy with him, but her insides were beginning to melt regardless. *To hell with him, I deserve a kiss.* “She can be...adamant.” His lips hovered over hers; his breath felt cool against her overheated skin.

He had wrapped his free arm around her waist and through the light fabric of her tunic his claws pricked against her back. She licked her lips in anticipation. “Adamant,” Kagome repeated dazedly.

“It means-”

The moment was broken. Kagome’s eyes snapped into focus and she frowned. “I know what it-” Her irritated reply was cut off when his mouth pressed against hers. There was something about him that was capable of flipping a switch inside her, from irritated to besotted to irritated again. *And, damn he makes me hot.* His lips moved slowly on hers, not pressing for entrance, but lightly brushing once, twice. Then his tongue darted out to lick at her. Kagome moaned, gripping his shoulder and standing on her tiptoes to gain more pressure, but he pulled back. Her eyes opened, frustration making her huff. “What?”

“So eager,” he said, his lips quirking up at the corner.

Kagome’s blush returned but she still managed to retort, “And you’re not?”

“Indeed.” The hand on her back tightened suddenly, bringing her body into full contact with his. Kagome was extremely conscious of how eager he was. Her mouth went dry as she recalled exactly how certain parts of her daiyoukai looked when he was eager. Sesshomaru’s nostrils flared again. His lids drifted down over golden eyes until only a narrow slit remained. “If you continue such thoughts, we will not have adequate time to repair ourselves.”

“We have time,” she whispered, pulling herself up to brush her lips under his jaw. The way it made his neck tense and his voice deepen was thrilling.

“Never enough,” he growled. He kissed her again, this time harder. His tongue forced her lips open, and she returned his passion readily. Too quickly, he pulled back again. Only the clench of his fist at her back and his faster than normal breathing kept her from complaining. He was just as unhappy with the timing of their guests as she was. Kagome sighed, resigned. She hadn’t been thinking about the logistics in any case. It would be a few days before she was ready to fully enjoy access to a naked inu youkai again.

“Are you sure you need to greet them?” She suggested, knowing it wasn’t possible and smiling to let him know she knew.

“Yes. As I am certain that you would wish to be present, even if it was not required.”

“Required?” Kagome frowned. “Why do I have to be there? I thought there was going to be tea and that formal reception thing later.”

“Yes.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead and gave her a gentle push towards her fallen practice weapon. “But we must still greet a Cardinal Lord upon arrival. As my intended, you will be at my side.”

“Fine.” Kagome made a face and groaned a little as she picked up the stick and put it back on the weapons rack. He followed her across the room. “But this won’t be an all-nighter like when Kouga came, right? I am pretty tired.”

“No.” He smiled, a real, soft smile that sent a flutter through her heart and had Kagome leaning against the wall just staring at him. “You will not have to stay long. Although I believe you will be awake quite late in any case.”

Kagome offered him a sultry smirk, sure she knew where he was leading, “Any why is that?”

“Your human friend, the slayer, approaches.”

“Sango is coming here?” Kagome was shocked, her friends were supposed to be helping Inuyasha in the East, but it quickly wore off in favor of happiness. “When? How do you know?”

“The border patrol spotted her neko. I had alerted my soldiers to watch for your friends and keep them safe if they entered the West. Her escort should-”

Kagome didn’t let him finish, but threw her arms around his neck and jumped. His eyes widened slightly, but he caught her with ease, one hand under her bottom and the other around her back. “Thank you!” She gave him a smacking kiss. *Sango is coming!* “Thank you Sesshomaru, you are the best!” She hadn’t realized until that moment how much she missed her friends, Sango in particular. Kimi was... easier to get along with than she had imagined. And Sesshomaru was, well, she loved him, but he was not a fantastic conversationalist. Even if he was, she couldn’t talk about him *to him*. Despite her earlier reservations about how Sango would view her relationship, things had progressed to a point where she was ready to discuss it. With his offer of courting, it had also moved into a realm of respectability for the era.

Sango was coming, and Sesshomaru had been thoughtful enough to make certain the slayer was protected and welcomed in the West. Kagome gave him a full body hug, squeezing with her arms and legs tight enough that a human would have gasped. Her daiyoukai merely rubbed circles on her back and endured. With one more quick kiss she asked, “When will she get here?”

“As I was saying,” one silver eyebrow lifted in amusement, “her escort should bring her through the gates shortly. The slayer shall be provided with a room while we bathe and-”

Kagome interrupted him again with a wave, “I’ll just wait for Sango. Oh, I can’t wait to show her the springs! Shippo will be excited to see her again too, and-” Kagome kept talking while she loosened her grip. After a few moments, Sesshomaru let go and allowed her to slide down to the floor. He walked beside her in silence to the courtyard where they would meet her friend. If he seemed more subdued than usual - or, more accurately, as subdued as he had been before they had grown close - it was easy to ignore in her excitement. It only occurred to her much, much later that Sesshomaru was pouting because she chosen to bathe with Sango rather than him.

Shippo could barely contain his excitement. He could sense the stir of youki and the smell of curiosity and some anxiety as Sango made her way through the lower bailey. It wasn't every day that a demon slayer was invited into the Western Palace, he was sure, and Kento had personally gone down to the gate to walk with her back to the courtyard. Part of his glee stemmed from a desire to show off his tail, and his new tricks; part came from missing Sango and Kirara. However, it was Kagome's happiness that was rubbing off on him more than anything. His mother-figure was practically vibrating with enthusiasm. The citrus smell was enough to almost overshadow the salt of her sweat and the clove-musk of Sesshomaru that covered her. Not that either of those smells were bad, it was just that she really, really wanted to see Sango.

It was a little startling when he switched his attention to the daiyoukai. It wasn't at all strange that Sesshomaru had escorted Kagome to the courtyard and waited there with her until a servant fetched Shippo; it did seem a little strange that he stayed, even though Eiji trailed behind her and there were quite a few workers and soldiers in the area. The kit discreetly sniffed, but Sesshomaru was as controlled with his scent and youki as he had ever been. The daiyoukai was marking his territory, including Shippo and especially Kagome, with his power, but past that revealed nothing about his thoughts. Compared to the human, he had all the emotion of a stone wall.

Weird, Shippo thought. Two soldiers carrying a heavy trunk slowed as they walked past, glancing at Kagome, and Sesshomaru's youki immediately thickened, urging them to move on. Shippo shook his head, *adults are dumb and weird*. Kagome smelled very faintly of blood, just like every month. And just like every month stupid youkai kept sniffing around her. Sesshomaru was just as irritated by it as Inuyasha had been, but at least the daiyoukai wasn't as loud. It would have been a lot easier if the dogs had ever just told her what the deal was and asked her not to be so...so...*Kagome* when she was bleeding. In fact, if she smelled a little more like Sesshomaru – like Sesshomaru's mate – probably no other demons would even look twice at her. At least, not where Sesshomaru could see them. It was obvious to anyone with a nose that Kagome loved the lord. If they couldn't tell by looking at her face when she looked at him, they should know from the constant scent of sweet carnations that had become a part of her. She had never smelled like that so long or strongly before - even when she thought she loved Inuyasha. *If he would just ask, she would tell him, and then everything would be fine – but no, they have to do things the hard way*. And if Sesshomaru was irritated by Kagome's blood, Shippo wasn't looking forward to the following week – at all. Human women didn't smell as strongly as demons, but it was enough to always put Inuyasha in a bad mood and leave Kouga drooling all over the miko.

Shippo rolled his eyes at their stupidity, vowing not to let adulthood turn him into an idiot. It was all but forgotten though, when Sango strolled through the gate. The slayer's eyes lit up when she caught sight of Kagome, but she bit her lip rather than calling out like Shippo expected. He figured she was probably feeling a little awkward with Sesshomaru and a bunch of strange youkai near. Kagome had no problem with it.

"Sango-chan!" She waved happily, and her voice approached something close to a painful pitch. Shippo was quick to follow when Kagome raced across the courtyard to her friend; Sesshomaru walked at a more sedate pace. She only tripped once, and she was close enough to Kento that he caught her before she hit the ground. Shippo had to roll his eyes again – Kento took one sniff of the miko and let go so quickly she nearly fell anyhow. Thankfully, Sango grabbed her up in a fierce hug. "I missed you!"

“I missed you too!”

The women smelled salty and happy, which made Shippo happy, but he also really wanted to show off his tails. Plus, all the crying was putting Kento’s and Sesshomaru’s youki on edge. “Check out my tail,” he announced loudly. Sango released Kagome and admired it appropriately, demanding to hear the story over dinner of whatever trick had resulted in the new growth. Kirara, in her small form, jumped down from Sango’s shoulder to twine around his legs in congratulations. Sango belatedly bowed and presented Sesshomaru with a scroll from Inuyasha, which she said she could add to if he had any questions. Kagome wanted to show Sango the hot springs, and they both kinda needed a bath, so Shippo offered to take Kirara with him. Secretly, he was pleased. It would be fun to show off his new friends to the little neko. The women talked non-stop all the way inside, where Sesshomaru summoned a servant to take Sango’s travel bundle. He would have gone straight upstairs, but the daiy-okai’s claw on his collar stopped him.

“Yes, Sesshomaru-sama?” He swallowed and hugged Kirara tighter, trying not to look intimidated by the serious stare that was leveled at him. His mind unhelpfully flashed at least a dozen images of things he had done in the past week that neither Kagome nor the lord would approve of.

“You will not speak of the slayer’s condition,” Sesshomaru commanded. Shippo almost sagged in relief, although Kento looked surprised.

“No kidding,” he began, then blushed under the scrutiny and quickly made his tone more respectful. “I-I mean, of course not, Sesshomaru-sama. Humans don’t like it when you make a big deal about their smell.” He took a deep breath, gathered his courage, and continued, “But ya know, sometimes you have to. Right?” He waited a beat, but Sesshomaru didn’t seem like he was going to even admit he knew what Shippo was speaking of, much less do anything about it. “Besides that, girls hate it if you spoil their secrets.” He hadn’t really been referring to anything in particular, but his little nose fairly itched with the interest Sesshomaru turned his way. “Ah, gotta go!” He said brightly, bowing and backing toward the stairs with the neko in his arms. “Lessons, right?” And then he was off.

Shippo didn’t relax until he was back in the ima and the little kids were busy with Kirara and the sensei. Rin leaned in close, pretending to show him her latest assignment. “Did something happen with Sango-san?” She asked worriedly.

“Sango’s great. It’s Sesshomaru and Kagome. She’s-” Shippo bit his tongue and blushed, reminding himself of his own advice. Rin didn’t need to know the details, but she would agree with the solution. “They both want to, so I just wish he would mate her already.” Rin’s squeal of happiness hurt his ears and drew the attention of every youkai in the room – and some a good deal further away. *Sheesh.*

ooo

Kagome sighed with happiness as she relaxed back against the edge of the hot springs. She was clean, and smelled nice again, and Sango was with her. For an hour or so she was determined to leave responsibility and the threat of war out of her mind and focus on something else. She wanted to know everything. “How have you been? Tell me all about the people in the camp.”

“Can that guard with the spiked hair hear us?”

“No. He’s too far down the path. So did you see Kaede on your way here?” Kagome had so many questions.

“I am pregnant.”

“Has Inuyas...ha...ah... What?” Kagome sat up straight, comprehension slowly dawning, and stared at her friend. Sango looked like she was about to be sick. Her long hair hung wet and straight into the water and was a sharp contrast to her pale skin. Kagome had been too pleased to greet her friend before, but now she noticed the purple skin under her eyes and the ragged edge to her lower lip where she had been chewing on it. Sango was not happy.

The slayer blew out a long breath and repeated, “I’m pregnant.”

“But you aren’t excited about it,” Kagome said slowly. She knew Miroku wanted children. Every woman in a hundred mile radius of Edo knew the monk wanted children. But she had never talked about it with Sango, not specifically. Until recently, Kagome hadn’t given pregnancy much of a thought past health class. She was still young for that in her time, and there hadn’t been anyone in the feudal era to make those sort of thoughts a priority. As far as Sango was concerned, she supposed she had always assumed the slayer wanted children. She was raised in a time where it was expected, where women were valued for it. And she married *Miroku*, for heaven’s sake. Kagome felt terrible. Knowing whether or not her best friend wanted children was vitally important – and the kind of thing a considerate person would know.

Sango shook her head.

“Do you want kids?” Kagome wasn’t sure what she would have said if the answer was no, but she would have done her best to figure it out. She would have supported Sango with whatever she needed.

What she wasn’t expecting was for her dear friend, her dear *pregnant* friend, who had only cried twice in all the time that they had known each other, to burst into tears and wail, “Yes!” Kagome spent the next five minutes holding a sobbing Sango and listening to a jumble of words and phrases that included, ‘debauched lecher’, ‘miscarriage’, ‘beautiful man’, and, insensibly, ‘turnip stew’. She rubbed her friend’s back and made soothing noises until the crying subsided into occasional hiccups.

“Sorry,” Sango mumbled, scrubbing her face with spring water. Her cinnamon colored eyes were surrounded by pink and she looked even more tired than before.

“Sango,” Kagome said seriously, “there is absolutely nothing to be sorry for. Now,” she adopted a brisk tone, “you want this baby?” Sango nodded, a look of longing so fierce on her face that Kagome’s heart clenched. “Then we will do everything we can to make sure she will be perfect.”

“She?” Sango gave her a watery smile and Kagome returned it brightly.

“It would be karmic justice for Miroku.” They both laughed.

“So,” Sango began much later, after they had washed their hair and spoken of a few ways that Kagome might be able to make the pregnancy easier, or at least, give them more information about it. “Sesshomaru seems very attentive toward you.”

Kagome could feel her face heating, but she also couldn't contain her silly grin. "Oh, Sango, you have no idea."

ooo

When Kagome and the slayer arrived in his study, Sesshomaru was mollified to find the scent of both women to be calm and happy. The unfortunate combination of Kagome's trace of copper with the other human's pregnancy stirred his instincts, but he easily repressed them with a promise to himself that he would coat his intended in his scent before any other males approached her. His need to protect was stronger with the other human present, and Sesshomaru quickly realized that it was not only due to her condition, but also the way Kagome treated the woman. Like pack.

He stifled a sigh. A few years ago he had been alone, and at the time had believed the situation preferable. Then there was Rin. For a youkai, the years between Rin finding him in the forest and Kagome coming to the West were short. He had changed many of his thoughts during that brief time. Then, in the blink of an eye, Kagome was followed by Shippo, Inuyasha, the pups, and his mother. Now it seemed, by virtue of having let one human into his pack, he had been joined by a motely conglomeration of others. The slayer and her mate, and whatever young they would conceive, would hardly be noticeable in the cacophony that his life was evolving into.

At least the slayer was an acceptable warrior. It remained to be seen if the monk's utility outweighed his lechery.

Kagome led Sango to a cushion across from Hisao and Kento, and would have sat beside her if Sesshomaru had not pointedly caught her eye and glanced at the place that had already been prepared. His intended blushed, and for a moment he thought she would sit where she pleased simply to be contrary, but she moved to kneel beside him and began to pour tea. Kimi arrived just as Kagome would have handed out the first cup. Sesshomaru had thought the seating arrangements might cause an issue, but the Lady did not bat an eye before folding into a proper seiza next to the slayer. For her part, Sango's eyes widened dramatically when his mother arrived, but her mouth remained firmly closed and her hands neatly folded while a powerful and unknown youkai settled within a foot of her. *Perhaps having the slayer in residence will be good for Kagome.*

Kagome flaunted the rules of propriety and presented the first cup of tea to Kimi instead of Sesshomaru. Hisao cleared his throat, Kento determinedly studied his papers, and Sango shared a smile and a wink with his intended.

Perhaps not.

He did not comment, more because he knew she was trying to get him to say something than because he didn't want to. And it was impossible not to sense Kimi's amusement. Although, any actual irritation he might have felt was overshadowed by the enjoyment Kagome seemed to take in the harmless act. None but his pack and closest advisors had seen the slight, and they understood her strange humor. He doubted she would have acted thus if others were present, so there was no reason to reprimand her. Although, after Kagome served him, and the others in the room, she found that the teapot had disappeared from his desk before she could serve herself. He ignored her narrow gaze and pointed looks to her own dry cup while he sipped his most excellent tea. Her faint scent of pepper was well worth the steamy heat where mokomoko hid the teapot.

“This One has read the report from Inuyasha. You are welcome in the West, Slayer. You shall defend the miko while you are in residence.” Kagome’s head snapped up, brow furrowed, and it was obvious she wanted to say something, but she looked to the slayer for guidance.

“Thank you, Sesshomaru-sama,” the woman said quietly. “However, I feel that I must inform you that I am with child.”

Women were surely strange, unpredictable creatures in the daiyoukai’s eyes. Youkai females were closely guarded as the time for birth drew near and their size became cumbersome, but they were generally more deadly to their enemies while they were breeding. “Does the condition effect your ability to lift your weapon?”

“Not at this time, no,” she answered, clearly startled. “Eventually...”

“Hn.” Sesshomaru ended the discussion. He intended to eliminate the threat to the West expeditiously, so it would not be an issue. The slayer’s face gave away little, but her scent was pleased. “You will speak your thoughts on Inuyasha’s plan.” He sipped his tea while Sango slowly warmed to the topic. Hisao listened intently, Kento took notes. When the slayer reached the culmination of the plan, with a great deal more detail than Inuyasha had put into his missive, Kagome frowned. Sesshomaru was impressed she didn’t yell.

“Idiot.” Rather than irritated, his miko was genuinely upset. The powdered mace of fear, not for herself, but for his half-brother, was dry in his nose. “Does he really think Ryukostokken will believe that? Inuyasha isn’t that good of an actor, and as soon as he says something offensive, the-he-” She swallowed hard on the words that were spilling out of her mouth. Sesshomaru reached for her hand under the table, squeezing it where it lay on her lap. He did not understand why Kagome was so loyal to the hanyou, he was not overly enamored of the idea, but he knew it pained her to think of his half-brother in danger. He could also see that she was remembering her time at the dragon’s mercy. He could not change that experience for her, regardless of his desire to do so, but it was his responsibility to help her move past it.

“Calm yourself.” It was all he felt he could say in front of so many others, and still he scented the slayer’s embarrassment, but he held his miko’s gaze and stroked her hand with his claws until her breathing slowed. His instinct to prevent her discomfort was strong. The blue of her eyes was still surrounded by white, her lips pale, but her heart was steady and her scent even – if not completely clear – when Kimi spoke.

“The whelp will not go himself. He is far too prideful to lower himself to negotiate with a hanyou.” She tapped one claw against the porcelain of her cup thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Kento murmured, shuffling through his notes, “hm, two captains, Natsou and Sou. If he takes Inuyasha-san’s bait, then one of them will certainly be sent to enter discussions.”

“Same if he sees through this lie.” Hisao set down his cup with a clink, and frowned. “One of those two and a gang of dragons would make a decent assassination squad.” Kagome sucked in a breath, and Sesshomaru unfurled his youki in reprimand to his captain. His anger over the ill-conceived statement was only tempered by Hisao’s immediate chagrin. “Don’t worry, Kagome-sama. Neither Sesshomaru-sama nor myself are heading North any time soon – so Inuyasha-san won’t meet any opponents he can’t deal with.” Kagome smiled shakily, and Sesshomaru pulled her palm to rest on his knee, then

covered it with his hand. Youki curled around her wrist and comforted her. It was not all he wished, but it was the most he would offer. In public, at least, his intended had to learn to contain her fear. The small, trusted audience before them would be make an excellent practice arena prior to the Council meetings.

“This One wastes no concern on mere captains of the North,” Kimi said. Sesshomaru focused intently on her tone – devoid of the usual amusement or wordplay she was well-known for. Privately, he agreed with her assessment. Even if Inuyasha was attacked outright, considering the number of Eastern soldiers and wild youkai fighting with him, no small force would be able to overcome the hanyou. Unless Ryukostokken had sent at least a third of his army to the negotiations, Inuyasha would be adequately prepared to defend the ground he had chosen. The probability that the dragon lord had split his forces more evenly was small; Ryukostokken was filth that did not deserve to live, much less rule, but he was not a poor strategist. “There is another,” she continued, “that could be problematic. This One will explore the possibility.”

Sesshomaru gave her a slight nod. There were few secrets that were not known to his mother’s spy network. Fewer still that they could not find out, given incentive. If Ryukostokken had another powerful youkai that could thwart Inuyasha, Kimi would know soon enough.

“You appear confident of the plan, Sango-san,” Kento remarked blandly.

The slayer replied with an equally cool tone, “I am confident of Inuyasha, Kento-san.”

Sesshomaru had always found Inuyasha’s group irritating and brash during the hunt for Naraku. It was not until near the end that he had learned to appreciate their individual skills and cohesive group tactics. Sesshomaru admitted that his half-brother, despite his abhorrent manners, was an excellent judge of allies.

“Is he...” Kagome trailed off, biting her lip and trying to find the right words. “Inuyasha is very... truthful...about his feelings towards enemies.” Her attempt to protect the hanyou’s reputation was amusing. “Do you really think he can pull this off, Sango-chan?”

The slayer set down her tea cup quietly, and composed herself before answering. “I do. Inuyasha has matured tremendously in the time we have known him, Kagome-chan. And in these last few weeks...I think that the responsibility has pushed him into what you always believed he could be.” The two human women shared a look, and Kagome relaxed, her scent mellowing until there was only an underlying hint of concern. Sesshomaru found himself wanting to ask what Kagome believed the hanyou capable of. He could smell the curiosity of the other demons in the room. It came to him, however, without the need to voice the question. *A leader*. Sesshomaru felt something settle in himself. He had not known that he had any concern for the future of his younger sibling, but the knowledge that he would follow in their father’s footsteps and forge a path to victory was right and natural. Sesshomaru felt pride in Inuyasha.

It made his regrown arm tingle with discomfort.

“The West must prepare to take advantage of this act,” he directed the conversation so that he would not have to dwell on any feelings toward his half-brother.

“I will see to it, my lord,” Hisao bowed his head shallowly.

They spoke for a while longer, regarding the reconfiguration of several squads of soldiers. The slayer offered insight that Hisao appreciated. It was not long, however, before the woman began to smell of fatigue. Kimi and Kagome, he knew, also needed to prepare to receive Hirimoto, so he excused them – although not before producing the teapot and pushing his empty cup closer to Kagome. She took the hint, pouring for him and smiling sweetly. But she also smelled of irritation and something close to deception. Just before he could take the cup from her hands, she pulled it back and sipped from it with a pink blush, running her lips along the entire edge. No one else saw the action, and Sesshomaru found that it was several minutes after she left before he could focus on the present. Hisao and Kento were discussing supply routes, but he was tantalized by the taste of his intended mate each time he sipped his tea.

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The arrival of the Southern Lord was both more and less than Kagome expected. More, because elegant kimono had been laid out for herself, Rin, and Shippo. Aki helped her dress in three successively thick and dark layers of blue material that were softer than cashmere and almost as light as silk. The hem and trailing edge of the long sleeves had been embroidered with a forest scene in greens and browns. Tiny golden and silver animals darted through the intricate vegetation and miniscule birds flitted through the treetops that gradually thinned towards her waist. A contrasting lavender obi had been left unadorned. It was the comb, however, that left her speechless. Rin had been bursting with excitement when she announced that it was a gift from Sesshomaru, and Aki had admired it as she secured it in Kagome's elegant twist of hair. The metal had been worked by a master, and although it contained no jewels, it was a work of art on its own. Two gold trees, their roots making the tines, interlocked their branches. Magnolia blossoms, almost too small for her human sight to make out, had been punched into the leafy surface. The casual wealth and craftsmanship shocked her as much as the obvious thought warmed her heart. *He said I smell of magnolias.*

Rin was outfitted in new clothing as well, although the color of her kimono was undiscernible under the bright flowers that adorned it from hem to neck. Discrete ivory sticks swept her hair off of her nape and made her look quite grown up. Shippo preened almost as much as his friend, showing Kagome his new kimono and pants. The cloth was a blue-green at first glance, but when her eyes moved away, it seemed to disappear. Not that Shippo appeared naked, nothing so commonplace for a creation of Aki's. Rather, the cloth seemed to catch and bend the light until the little kit disappeared altogether if she wasn't looking directly at him. His large hair bow was absent, replaced instead with a simple leather strip that tamed his fuzzy hair into a sleek, high tail. All in all, the finery and the idea of the pack gathering to greet the guest seemed more elaborate to Kagome than she had expected, given that there was to be another, more formal reception after the remaining attendees of the Council arrived.

Kimi personally fetched her and the older children and led them to the broad platform in front of the shiro to wait - outside. The cold weather was not intolerable through her warm garments, but servants had still lit braziers in the courtyard. Their light provided an excellent view of the gate through which their guests approached. It was their arrival that seemed incongruent with the reception. Rather than soaring in on clouds of youki or bounding over the wall in their true forms, the party from the South appeared rather mundanely. They walked.

There were several pack animals, carrying luggage and lead by a two servants, and a secretary or high-born attendant of some sort. Four soldiers, no more, followed the group. Although the soldiers were quite obviously demons, their size made it apparent – one even had fur on his face, the daiyoukai at the

front could have been mistaken for human royalty except for his markings. The male walked in front, taller even than Sesshomaru and twice as broad. His hair was short; it was pulled into a tail that only reached his shoulders. His face was mostly jaw and eyebrow, his mouth wide and hinting at a smile that revealed fangs. His skin was darkly tanned, and contrasted – not beautifully, but strikingly – with a gold band that stretched across the bridge of his nose, bracketed his eyes, and bled into his hair leaving a pale honey streak at each temple.

As he approached, he blinked for a long moment, intimating a nod and spoke, “This One accepts the hospitality of the West.” Then he winked, Kagome was fairly certain, at Kimi. The Lord of the South had interrupted Sesshomaru’s greeting before he could even begin.

Sesshomaru replied dryly, “This One offers such.”

She couldn’t help it, Kagome giggled, and then promptly tried to stifle it, managing only to snort. A hot blush erupted on her cheeks, and Sesshomaru’s clawed hand was quickly at the small of her back. Whether to reprimand or pat her if she started to choke, she wasn’t sure. Rin tucked her small hand into Kagome’s and squeezed in reassurance. Two younger youkai, the male somewhere near Inuyasha’s age, looked up, startled. Their coloring and the richness of their clothing announced their relationship to the lord.

“Hirimoto Oda, of the South,” Sesshomaru began, and Kagome wondered if he was about to make a speech. It would easily be the strangest thing she had ever seen, if that were the case. “Come.” That was the end of the formal reception, and an oration befitting the daiyoukai’s personality. Sesshomaru swept into the shiro, propelling Kagome with him. The children and Kimi followed closely. Somewhere behind her, she could hear laughter that followed them to a reception room. Kagome decided that she liked the Southern Lord.

That feeling was firmly entrenched during the meal. The formal diction fell away once the servants had laid out the food and retreated behind closed doors, for which Kagome was grateful. Hirimoto and his children were pleasant and cheerful and not at all what she had come to expect from powerful youkai – aside from Sesshomaru and his mother. Makoto, the son, smiled a great deal and surreptitiously made funny faces at the younger children, much to the little kitsune’s delight. Mitsu, the daughter, was painfully shy, but the little beauty was soon whispering and smiling with Rin as they ate.

The lord was a contemporary of Kimi’s; it became apparent as she teased and lured him into a game of baiting and taunting Sesshomaru. Despite being of a slightly lower status than the Saidai Mao, Hirimoto had no qualms about treating the inu like a disappointingly serious nephew.

“It has been too long, Sesshomaru-san, since you have visited the South.” The bear youkai pointed rather rudely with his chopsticks and sent a wicked grin Kagome’s way. “Although I can see why you have been absent these last few decades, with such occupation in your own territory.” Kagome desperately wanted to point out that she wasn’t nearly old enough to have been distracting Sesshomaru for twenty years.

“Hn.” Sesshomaru’s youki remained under tight control as he took measured bites of his food. His eyes, however, glinted dangerously when Hirimoto leaned closer to her.

“I did not think I would ever see the day when a female would take That One into consideration.”

“My son has many admirable qualities, Hirimoto. The females have always admired his face,” Kimi said.

“His form,” Hirimoto shot back at her.

“His power.” Kimi’s argument was about Sesshomaru, and presumably in his defense, but Kagome could tell that her words were intended to irritate her son as much as they were to spar with the bear.

“His wealth.”

Kagome glanced at Sesshomaru, whose jaw was rigid with tension. She had to give him credit for ignoring his elders, although they did not seem to be willing to give up until they got a reaction out of him. “His charm,” Kimi’s voice was full of laughter and her eyes twinkled.

“Surely not,” Hirimoto sat back, as though perplexed, and looked the Saidai Mao over quite thoroughly.

“Ask the female herself,” Kimi suggested. “I doubt my son will satisfy your curiosity.”

Hirimoto leaned over, within twelve inches of Kagome’s skin. She was not frightened or uncomfortable, not for herself. Sesshomaru was at the end of the table and she was very conscious of his propriety over her scent and personal space – and the bear seemed to know that and enjoy pushing Sesshomaru’s buttons. “Tell me, does a female of your accomplishments not find life in the Western court rather cold?” The double entendre was not lost on Kagome, nor on the inu that was courting her, if the tight fist on his knee was any indication.

The miko could not help but join in the good natured teasing, albeit on the side of her choosing. “Oh no, Hirimoto-sama, I assure you I do not find *heat* an issue.” She continued sweetly, “Perhaps you are uncomfortable here? I understand the warm weather in the South breeds thinner blood. Shall I have a blanket brought for you?” There was shocked silence at the adult end of the table for a long moment, during which Kagome’s stomach dropped low and she wondered if she had overstepped. Again.

Kimi’s laughter broke the tension nicely. “Thin blood? Finally, something that detracts from your laudable form, Hirimoto. Yes, do let us know if you require anything for your delicate health.”

Hirimoto’s gaze turned to find Kimi across the table and his smile softened. “Your concern is most gratifying, Lady.”

Kagome leaned back with a strange sense of unreality, staring at the two daiyoukai. She might have fallen off of her cushion if Sesshomaru had not reached out to stabilize her. He righted her and pulled her seat closer to the corner of the table, and himself, all in one smooth motion. Her knee rubbed against his thigh under the table and his hand found purchase there, rubbing firm circles through the layers of kimono. Kagome found it difficult to breathe for a few moments, but her sudden silence was not commented upon. *Thank heavens.* Makoto chose that instant to lean over his bowl of meat and focus on Sesshomaru.

“Father has allowed me to train as his secretary, Sesshomaru-sama. I was wondering if I might beg some of Kento-san’s time tomorrow, before the Council begins. I wish to ask for his guidance.”

“That would be acceptable,” Sesshomaru allowed.

“You are rather young for such a position at an auspicious gathering, Makoto-kun,” Kimi noted. “Your sire must think highly of your skills.” Kagome tried not to smile as the boy blushed and murmured thanks.

Hirimoto boasted, “He has his mother’s quick mind, that is certain-”

“Fate does grant small favors,” Kimi noted into her cup.

Hirimoto grinned and continued, good-naturedly, “He spent most of the journey questioning our physician on all aspects of medicine. If I am not careful, he will be swayed into studying sciences instead of politics.”

“Mitsu is your heir, after all,” Kimi rejoined, “surely the boy should take up what interests him.”

“My heir yes, but Makoto should be prepared to support his sister.” The children had fallen silent, and Kagome noticed the wide eyes and uneasy expression on the female bear’s face. Her own mother had always been open-minded regarding what occupation her children would choose – easily referenced by Kagome’s current situation. But the miko remembered well the uncomfortable conversations in her youth where her grandfather would brag to visiting monks and priests that she would take over the shrine one day. It might have been the life she would have chosen, if she had not travelled through the well, but it was still unsettling to have someone else speak as though your future was predetermined. Kagome didn’t imagine that it felt any different in the feudal era. If anything, it would be even more suffocating if Mitsu was certain she had no other option.

Kagome took pity and interrupted Hirimoto’s recitation of his daughter’s accomplishments. “You mentioned a physician?”

“Oh.” Hirimoto paused, “Yes, Sesshomaru-san requested that I bring him. My Isha is widely renowned for his deft touch with youki. He has been experimenting with healing energy for decades.”

Kagome felt her mouth drop open in surprise and she turned to her daiyoukai. Sesshomaru did not smile – that would have been too strange in front of others, even in such a casual setting – but the corners of his eyes crinkled and his tone took on a softness that he reserved for her and Rin. “You believe the issue to be wide-spread. You will need assistance.”

“Sesshomaru...” Kagome didn’t know what else to say. He had been so upset after she had healed Aki and Kento, she assumed he would flat-out deny any attempts she made to allow other youkai couples to have children. Not that she would have let him stop her, if she could help. Still, it was thoughtful of him – not just for her sake, but for his people, for the future of demons in Japan. She smiled and let her hand slip under the table to clasp around his fingers.

“What issue is this? You were too vague with your request, Sesshomaru-san.” Hirimoto’s question drew Sesshomaru’s gaze from her.

The daiyoukai looked to the children, and Kagome followed suit. Rin and Mitsu looked sleepy. Shippo was fighting his exhaustion, trying to stay awake by stuffing another rice ball in his mouth. Even Makoto had grown quieter, his bowl and chopsticks pushed away. A subdued flicker of Sesshomaru’s

youki had a servant sliding open the screen and bowing, waiting for instruction. "Escort Those Ones to their quarters. Eiji and Eiichi shall take Those of This House." He nodded and the servant rose and waited politely for Mitsu and Makoto. Others quickly entered and removed the dishes, replacing them with a fresh pot of tea and cups. The rock brothers appeared soon after, they must have been waiting close by, and each simply picked up Rin and Shippo and bowed to the lords before closing the shoji behind them.

Sesshomaru's barrier snapped into place. "Reproduction has become difficult among youkai," he began slowly. Kagome sat forward and began to pour, this time offering the first cup to the highest ranking among them. His youki curled around her wrist with wry thanks, and she smiled at the gesture, despite the serious topic.

She almost dropped the second cup of tea in Kimi's lap when Hirimoto replied, "At your age, and with such a female, Sesshomaru-san, I do not believe you should find it overly demanding." Kagome's eyes widened. Her arms were outstretched across the table toward Kimi, a hot cup of tea in her hands. The liquid sloshed dangerously close to the rim. Face flaming, she lifted her eyes to Sesshomaru. His nostrils flared and his lips thinned. Kagome recalled that once, shortly after he had lost his arm, Inuyasha had insulted Sesshomaru's masculinity with similar, although less subtle, phrasing - thankfully he had not brought any specific women into the conversation. The hanyou was left unconscious for almost two days.

"Be serious," Kimi snapped, for once discarding her amused disposition. Hirimoto lost all vestiges of humor as well. "He speaks of our race. We are dwindling, Hirimoto."

It was long hours of conversation later, mostly full of Hirimoto's questions and Kimi's explanations before they came to Kagome's part in a potential solution. Sesshomaru saved her from having to try and censure her words, and instead explained in concise, clipped tones how her reiki worked. Hirimoto quickly realized why his physician had been requested.

"You believe you can teach my Isha to perform such healing?"

"I do not know," Kagome answered slowly, as honestly as she could. The warm weight of Sesshomaru's hand on her knee was a welcome reassurance. "Youki and reiki are not the same, but they have similar properties." She nodded resolutely, "I will do everything I can."

"Within reason," Sesshomaru reminded her softly. Kagome squeezed his hand, but didn't bother confirming or denying his restriction.

"Well, that's settled then." Hirimoto straightened his back and grinned at them all. "Perhaps when you are finished I might end up with a few more cubs as well."

"Hn." Kimi huffed. Kagome had to hide her mouth in her sleeve to keep from laughing.

Chapter 47: First Impressions

Arashi was aware he had been followed. He had been counting on it since the moment he realized there were spies in the Northern camp. Water demons of some sort, he guessed, although their youki was dispersed and the scent of such creatures was always difficult to grasp. The telltale sign of their presence was the atmosphere among the men. Some of the older soldiers recognized pheromones for what they were, and tried to nonchalantly search out the females that must have been providing the scents. It had been a long time for most of the males in the Northern Army. For those that preferred a willing partner, it had been a very long time. The warm scent of ready female was enough to cause battle hardened warriors to take their eyes off of assigned watch and stare into the trees. It did not take long for Arashi to recognize the tactic for what it was. Distraction.

He left the camp quietly long after the moon had risen, without any other dragon taking note of his absence. He found the stream out of hearing range of the others and stood in the shadow of a tree on its banks for nearly half an hour before the ameonna appeared. She coalesced from the water itself and stood dripping in the freezing air, heedless of the cold. They stared at each other for another ten minutes before a brief rustle heralded the arrival of the hanyou he had been waiting for.

Inuyasha dropped down from the top of the cliff to land almost silently, without a hint of the powerful youki Arashi had tasted during the first round of negotiations. The young dog lived up to his reputation.

“Start talkin’, or start fightin’,” he growled lowly.

The planned smile came easier than expected. “There is no need to put on that face, Inuyasha-san. I am already quite assured of your intelligence.”

Unexpectedly, the younger hanyou blushed. He scowled quickly to cover the reaction, “This is the only face I got, dragon. You’re the one who wanted to negotiate, *in time*, so go on then.” Despite his low-class speech, Inuyasha’s eyes narrowed with consideration. He was, as Arashi had stated, far shrewder than his demeanor suggested. The dog had not only heard his insinuation regarding the miko, but also interpreted that he wanted to discuss it in private. *If Sesshomaru has not earned your loyalty, it would be worth almost any price*, the spy concluded privately.

“You have made amends with your brother, over the miko, Kagome.” It was the most honest and blunt statement Arashi had made in decades. The words felt odd in his mouth.

“Half-brother,” the dog snarled, “and whatdaya know about her?”

Arashi noted that he had not denied the statement, nor had he attacked. *Perhaps this situation is not so hopeless*. “I had the pleasure of meeting her, some time ago, as she was taken North.” Youki flashed in the small clearing, licking up against trees and battering Arashi hard enough, with such unexpected fury, that he felt pain before he could get his defenses up. It was over as quickly as it had begun, and the spy doubted that the surge in power had been sensed by anyone – the camp was too far away. Still, it left him breathing heavily and melted snow dripping from the trees overhead. *The dog is definitely coming into his maturity*.

“Abducted, you mean,” Inuyasha said. Long silver bangs hung over his eyes, but did not conceal his fury.

"If you prefer," Arashi nodded deferentially. "Lord Ryukostokken coveted her for the rumor that she could heal youkai, and for the enjoyment he receives from taking what belongs to another. If he takes possession of her again, she will wish not to survive the ordeal."

"Asshole's lucky Kagome didn't try to fry his ass," the dog whispered under his breath.

"Indeed," Arashi responded. He doubted Inuyasha had intended him to hear, but there was no point in subterfuge in the conversation. Not over that matter. Not when there were so many other issues that required concealment, diversion, and subversion. "I cautioned her against such action. If the Saigo Mao were to survive an assassination attempt, he would bring hell itself to those who threatened him."

"You got a point?"

"Captain Natsou was directed to incite your wrath against your brother--"

"Half-brother," Inuyasha interrupted.

"Half-brother," Arashi conceded. "If you succeed in destroying the Saidai Mao, the Lord of the North will take everything he has wanted with no opposition. If you fail, that is one more obstacle out of his way."

"Why tell me?" One clawed hand came to rest on the hilt of his sword.

Arashi paused, knowing he had to tread carefully. "You are a son of the Inu no Tashio. You were born to rule, not to defend some scrap of forest from bandits or live beneath another youkai's boot. Hanyou or not, pure youki determines power." Arashi let some of his own youki escape the rigid control he kept on it. "Do you intend to serve a youkai who views your kind as unworthy of life? Unworthy of protecting, having, the thing you desire most? A youkai who would crush that one because they are not his kind?"

Inuyasha rocked back on his heels, his eyes wide but his frown deeper than ever. A long, long moment later, he folded his arms into his sleeves. "Tell me."

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Kagome woke alone, again, but with the pleasant wisps of dreams or memories of Sesshomaru slipping into the futon beside her. Brushing her hair from her neck and nuzzling at her jaw. Placing his warm palm on her belly and rubbing soothing circles. Low rumbling in her ear that sounded like words but wasn't. She had rolled onto her stomach and into the dent he had left in the wide futon. It smelled like him – cloves and man, well, demon anyway. She smiled into the bedding. He hadn't said anything, she didn't expect him to – would have been shocked if he had, but the way he treated her, held her, comforted her spoke volumes about how he felt. His announcement at the Ringu, 'That One most treasured to the West', was a declaration if she had ever heard one; it was not words of love and not spoken directly to her, but Kagome understood that there was a great deal more meaning for Sesshomaru in the gesture. It wasn't just sex between them, although that was fantastic. *The opening act is freaking amazing*, Kagome grinned and blushed into the darkness, remembering the sound Sesshomaru had made when she put her mouth on him, remembering the way his tongue felt on her. *I'll be lucky if I don't pass out after the main show.*

The sound of servants moving quietly in the anteroom forced Kagome out of her blanket cocoon. She wrapped a heavier robe around herself and tucked her feet into slippers before poking her head out of the screens. Jaken was personally overseeing breakfast being laid out; she would have never guessed that he could squawk so quietly. She requested that someone check on Sango and invite her to eat in the family quarters before closing the screens again and starting her morning. A quick bath and then a search through the wardrobe for clothes that she could put on without assistance and Kagome felt ready to face the day. She straightened the futon, even though she knew a servant would come later and air everything out, and wove her hair into a quick braid. Shippo and Emi were sitting sleepily at the table when she arrived. The kit was combing through the pup's hair while she yawned against his vest.

They both smiled when they saw her. By the time Sango arrived, Nankae had been delivered by Hisao and the children were all alert and eating breakfast. They talked a mile a minute, over and around each other, about the day's lessons, who got the last daikon, and if it would be warm enough to play outside that afternoon. "Perhaps after naptime," Kagome answered, non-committal, as Sango closed the screen behind her. Nankae immediately started to whine, insisting that he was too old for a nap. "Really?" Kagome feigned surprise. "I had no idea! That's wonderful. I am sure Shippo and Rin will be happy to have you join them in their math lessons while Emi is sleeping." The inu capitulated, sullenly, and Kagome had to hide a smile.

"Is mothering really so easy?" Sango asked as she sat. There wasn't any sadness in her tone, for which Kagome was grateful, but there was a hint of longing. Or perhaps fear.

"No," Kagome tried to lighten her mood, "mostly it is trying to act like my own mother and hoping I don't give anyone some sort of psychological complex." At Sango's blank stare she amended, "I just say things I think she would say and hope no one notices I have no idea what I'm doing."

"I, ah, don't remember my mother very well."

"Acting like your father will work then too." Kagome hoped she was saying the right thing. She would not have considered herself the best source for such guidance, but Sango needed reassurance and she was the only one available to give it. "Parents are parents, I think," she said slowly, "no matter the gender. At least, in my time, it doesn't seem to matter if a child has two, or one, or a whole bunch of them – as long as they are cared for and loved."

The two women shared a smile, and Kagome was relieved for about two seconds until the shoji slid open again. "That is most wise, little miko." Kimi, with perfectly beautiful, graceful movements, seated herself between Shippo and Sango. Little Emi almost immediately crawled into her lap, offering the daiyoukai a rather squished piece of dried horse mackerel. Surprisingly, Kimi took the fish delicately with her teeth and made a noise of approval that had Emi smiling and settling into mokomoko to finish her own breakfast. "Although, This One would add that structure is essential to provide a strong foundation for growth."

"Maybe not quite as much structure as Sesshomaru had?" Kagome ventured carefully, hoping to earn a smile.

Kimi's amused expression did not waver, but she stated, "That One had precious little structure, given the state of this House in those years." Kagome tried not to wince. *Open mouth, insert foot.* Toga had cheated on Kimi, then essentially moved in with his pregnant mistress, during what amounted to

Sesshomaru's teenage period. "Training this morning will occur after you have met with the physician from the South. The slayer will accompany you, as well as one of the guards."

"Okay, that's – actually, does Sesshomaru know about the training?" While she had enjoyed the attention the day before, Kagome knew Sesshomaru was busy and shouldn't be leaving his work just to check on her.

"Indeed." Kimi smirked. "That One suggested that the slayer may provide insight. Reiki practice will require only stationary targets today."

"Me?" Sango looked up from her soup, surprised. Then her expression grew thoughtful. "I had thought about other weapons that might work for Kagome-chan, in melee, but there was never time and equipment while we were hunting for the shards. And then there didn't seem to be much of a reason."

"And there is my complete lack of coordination," Kagome said with a chuckle and a vague gesture. As if to emphasize the point, she accidentally knocked the back of her hand against Sango's bowl. It was only quick reflexes from her friend that kept anything from spilling. "See?" Kagome laughed wryly.

"You're not that bad," Sango tried to console her. The women looked at each other and both burst out laughing.

"What's funny?" Shippo asked, finally done stuffing his face and arguing with Rin about who used the last of the yellow crayons.

"Lady Kimi has just discovered I am a complete klutz," Kagome explained.

"Well, duh," Shippo rolled his eyes, then flinched, seeming to realize he had insulted her.

"Gome's nice though," Nankae frowned, defending her. Kagome smiled softly at the fierce expression on the little pup's face.

"And very powerful!" Rin jumped into the conversation.

"And smart," Shippo added hurriedly, obviously remembering Kagome's many lectures on the importance of schooling.

"Pretty," Emi said, pointing at Kagome. "Gome-mama pretty like Kimi-mama." Kagome blushed hotly. She was certainly not in the same league as the Western Lady, but it was nice to hear someone thought so – even if they were only a toddler.

Kimi smiled, revealing her fangs. "Enough, pups," she said with the silvery tremor of laughter under her words. "Honest praise is welcome, but not so much at one time. Kagome-san will be as arrogant as the Saidai Mao if you continue."

"Sesshomaru-sama isn't arrogant," Rin stated loyally. Everyone at the table turned to stare at the girl. She shrugged, "He *is* perfect." And on that note of odd truth, breakfast concluded.

Sesshomaru finished reading the last of his economic reports and considered, not for the first time since he woke, that it would be remiss of him not to provide Kagome with adequate instruction on the trade and harvests of the West. She was intelligent enough to learn quickly, and the knowledge would be important to her future position as his Lady. That *he* would no longer have to wade through as much paperwork was only a secondary benefit, he assured himself.

He had followed the movement of Kagome's reiki as she went about her day. Since they had returned to the shiro, he found that as long as they were both within the Western walls, the youki he left with her made it easy to locate her purity and keep her position and general welfare on the periphery of his thoughts. He knew when she woke. Was aware of her state of happiness and excitement as she moved to the guest quarters to meet with the physician. She had to pass near his study on the way, and the scents of the slayer and Eiji were with her, as they should be. Assured of her safety and state of mind, he found it easier to focus on his work than he had in the weeks since the illness first struck.

It was almost startling, when, mid-morning he felt the prickle of reiki against his skin. He looked up, and found Kento had noticed as well. He sought her out with his power and found her in his private dojo. Kimi and the slayer were with her, and Eiji stood guard outside. It was more difficult to ignore her, with her power flaring, occasionally high enough to make his secretary stiffen, but she was in no danger and the training was essential, so he forced himself back to the tedious economic reports. By mid-day Kagome had returned to their private quarters to eat with the children, and he sought out Hirimoto. The two lords left Makoto and Kento to speak privately and hunted together in the mountains above the castle. Several fat mountain goats later, Sesshomaru stood silently as the giant bear crunched through the last of his meal and with a swirl of golden youki returned to his two-legged form.

"Your mother has requested I present the miko at your ceremony," Hirimoto began without preamble.

Full of hot meat and content youki, Sesshomaru turned to walk home. "Hn." He had not asked Kimi to approach the Southern Lord, but it would be one more assurance toward Kagome's acceptance by the other youkai at the Council.

"Tsukahara will not be pleased, he holds no respect for humans."

"The eagle respects power," Sesshomaru countered evenly. He had dealt with that one many times. Never before had he given a thought to the obvious disdain that the eagle daiyoukai had for humanity. His own thoughts on the subject had changed considerably in the forty years since he had last spoken with Tsukahara. They walked in silence for a while as he considered how Kagome would react to obvious prejudice. Tsukahara might not appreciate her humanity, but Sesshomaru's intended had won over more bitter opponents with her smile and determined brightness alone. That combined with a display of reiki would swing the eagle to side with the West, he was certain.

Of course, he frowned to himself, Kagome was not likely to let the situation rest with only her acceptance. She had extremely strong opinions on equality for youkai, hanyou, and humans. He realized that other daiyoukai did not condone his use of hanyou among the ranks of his soldiers, but Tsukahara was not one of those detractors. Power was power, regardless of the source. For his miko, however, Sesshomaru was certain she would not be satisfied until she had respect on what she considered her merits. For whatever reason - and there the great inu was still puzzled over whether Kagome had any logic behind her actions at all, or if she was guided by some unseen instinct that flew in the face of nature, custom, and reason to result in the unexpected and unimaginable - Kagome did not consider her holy ability to be something worthy of knowing and allying with her for. She wanted not just allies, but

friends. More than that, she did not accept mere tolerance of what she considered to be fair treatment. She demanded willing conversion. Quietly, determinedly, she leaned against the barriers and preconceptions of those around her until she broke through.

A slayer that fought beside a hanyou. A hanyou that accepted both sides of his nature. A monk that protected demons with his sutras. Sesshomaru suppressed a self-deprecating smile. *A Saidai Mao that cherished a woman.* It would be interesting to see how Kagome slipped past beliefs that Tsukahara had held for centuries.

He turned his thoughts to the other attendees. “Kenjirosu is a better target for your concerns,” Sesshomaru stated.

Hirimoto made an angry sound, halfway between a snort and a growl. “Never have I known another to be so slippery and unyielding at the same time. You realize he is only attending in order to mock your decisions and fawn over Lady Kimi?”

“I am counting on it.” Sesshomaru could sense his companion’s unsettled youki. If Kagome could have seen it she would have giggled. The daiyoukai very nearly rolled his eyes – but such expression was unnecessary and counterproductive.

“You are looking forward to his behavior?” If he had been in his true form, Hirimoto’s fur would have been standing on end with irritation.

“No.” Sesshomaru let the bear churn with dissatisfaction for a moment. “Do you doubt the ability of Iwakura Kimi to twist the situation to her advantage?”

“No,” Hirimoto huffed and his youki settled. “But I do not have to like it.”

“We are daiyoukai,” Sesshomaru stated flatly, “there is much that we must do that is unpleasant.”

“And in the meantime, we must supply our forces and deploy our armies. Paperwork,” Hirimoto growled again.

“Hn.” Sesshomaru agreed. He would rather personally murder his way through the northern ranks, but his responsibilities were too great, the consequences too widespread, to allow such a course of action.

“But at the end, there will be the hot blood of our enemies,” Hirimoto stated with a sort of satisfied relish that spoke to Sesshomaru’s instincts as well.

He imagined Bakusaiga slicing through Ryukostokken’s face. “Yes,” he said with approval.

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Rin sat quietly with Shippo-kun - Eiji-san and Eiichi-san standing guard nearby - and watched the arrivals for the Full Moon Council. Lessons were done for the day, and her teacher was with Kagome-sama and the pups in the ima. Aina-sensei had asked very sweetly if Kagome-sama would like to watch a brief lesson in instincts for the little inu, but Shippo-kun had explained in a whisper that the lesson was really for the human woman. Kimi-sama wanted to make certain that the miko was well-versed in

youkai habits, and Shippo-kun had overheard the Lady instructing their teacher to make certain she reviewed inu development – from conception.

Rin had needed to ask what that word meant, and Shippo-kun had blushed and stammered terribly, but when he finally told her, Rin hugged him so hard he had to beg her to let go. An hour later, sitting on a high open balcony, Rin was still feeling exuberant. Sesshomaru-sama and Kagome-sama wanted to get married – Shippo-kun had said so. And Kimi-sama seemed to think that they would make babies soon. Rin was still a little vague on exactly how that happened, but her kitsune friend had at least managed to get across that Kagome-sama would be pregnant. Rin wasn't stupid, she knew what that meant. She had seen a pregnant youkai before once, and lots of times women in human villages that were big and fat with a baby. Once, Kagome-sama had even let her touch a woman in Edo who was visiting with the two mikos. Her tummy had jumped and moved and Rin could feel the baby inside.

It was all very exciting, if a little frustrating not to have any details, and Rin found it difficult to concentrate on something that she had looked forward to in the past: visiting youkai. Shippo-kun was full of questions, sometimes she forgot that he hadn't spent much time with powerful demons. Not that Inuyasha-san and Sesshomaru-sama weren't powerful. *They were!* More than anyone, except maybe Lady Kimi. But Sesshomaru-sama was different when he walked his lands than he was in the castle; he was easier, out there. In the castle, outside of his private study or Rin's room, or before Kagome-sama had come, Sesshomaru-sama was so stiff and cold that Rin felt badly for him. Sometimes she had asked to visit Edo just so that her father-figure would be able to relax for a day or two. Shippo-kun thought Sesshomaru-sama was scary and had even agreed with Rin that her lord was pretty, but he didn't know how daiyoukai could be. Especially when they were trying to impress each other.

"That is Uesugi-sama," Rin said quietly, pointing to the daiyoukai that had arrived in an elaborate kago carried by servants. The kago itself was made of dark wood that shone even in the fading afternoon light. Thick curtains were drawn back, allowing them a glimpse of the occupants. Rin could not see them very well, but Uesugi-sama had visited before, and she recognized the matching kimono of her litter-bearers.

"Wow," Shippo-kun whispered. "She's beautiful." The kitsune's eyes were so wide, it made Rin giggle.

"Rin has seen her up-close. She is very pretty, but not as pretty as Kagome-sama," she said proudly.

"Kagome is the best, but that youkai..." Shippo trailed off, and Rin had to tap his arm to regain his attention.

"Uesugi-sama is an otter demon. She likes Sesshomaru-sama very much, but she is very fussy. Everything must be just so." Rin lowered her voice further, "I do not think the servants like to be assigned to her. But she does look very elaborate all the time!" Shippo nodded, and while he pointed out the weapons carried by her guards, Rin thought about the demoness. It had been more than a year since she had come to the West, and Sesshomaru-sama had summoned Rin to eat with them almost every night. It had been strange, but she loved sitting so close to her lord, dressing in pretty kimono, and staying up late. Only now did it occur to her that Uesugi-sama had done most of the talking, in a low, pretty voice, and that Sesshomaru had positioned his cushion close enough to Rin that her hand brushed his sleeve when she ate. He had also carried her from supper to bed each night, and stayed far later than usual. Once Rin had even found him sleeping in her room, sitting up against the wall. That had been the last night they stayed at the palace. Sesshomaru-sama sent his apologies to Uesugi-sama the next morning

to let her know that a disturbance on the border required his attention. She had spent a week in Edo with Kagome-sama and Shippo-kun, and Sesshomaru-sama was often nearby. Rin wondered if maybe the disturbance was not quite so bad that Sesshomaru-sama *had* to take care of it himself. She reminded herself to ask Shippo-kun what he thought about that, later.

The kago and trailing servants moved off through an arcade towards the furthest-most guest quarters, and within moments a great press of youki washed over the courtyard. It was quickly reigned in, leaving only an impression of warning without threat, but several Western soldiers were waiting when a huge eagle landed. Several smaller demon birds followed behind, and, with another display of power, red and gold feathers ruffled and burst, revealing a tall, thin daiyoukai.

“That must be Tsukahara-sama,” Rin breathed. She had never met him, but she had heard Hisao-san and Kento-san making plans for his arrival. She squinted, trying to see in the poor light. “What does he look like?”

“Tall,” Shippo-kun said. Rin huffed and lightly punched his arm when he didn’t immediately continue. “I mean, his kimono is kind of funny. Red all over, and really puffy.” Rin rolled her eyes. Boys were so silly sometimes. “He doesn’t have nearly as many servants as that Uesugi lady.”

Ayame-san arrived next, and Rin stiffened when she saw the youkai’s wolf tale, but Shippo-kun waved excitedly and the wolf sniffed and waved back. That made Rin feel a little better to know the demoness was friends with her kitsune, but she still didn’t fully relax until the woman and her small group disappeared inside. The two children kept up the game until well after dark. The lanterns in the courtyard were lit, and they made it easier for Rin to point out the subtle, quiet arrival of Kenjirosu-sama, a water daiyoukai. Others came too, youkai that Rin didn’t recognize and one or two she thought she had heard of. Two human lords arrived as well, and those were greeted by Kento-san personally. Many Western soldiers were present but most of them stayed out of sight of the humans; Shippo-kun had to point them out to her. Those lords brought more warriors than servants, and only one of them was taken into the shiro. The other was led away down an arcade far opposite from where several daiyoukai were staying.

Shippo-kun threw his arm and tails around Rin to keep her warm, but eventually Kagome-sama came to get them for dinner. Rin slipped her hand into the miko’s as they walked back to the pack quarters. Shippo-kun bounced ahead of them, talking excitedly about everything they had seen.

“Will we get to meet them, Kagome?” His green eyes were practically dancing, and Rin felt a little excited too. Even if there were human lords and a wolf there, she would be with Sesshomaru-sama and Kagome-sama, so nothing bad would happen.

“You will get to see them,” Kagome-sama said carefully. Rin could tell she wasn’t sure of her answer; the miko often bit her lip when she was thinking. “I know you and Rin will be attending the ceremony tomorrow night, but I don’t think there will be much chance for you to talk with anyone.”

“Rin has been to one before,” she volunteered. “Rin had to sit quietly next to Hisao-san while Uesugi-sama and another youkai were introduced. The other youkai came to talk to Rin afterward, but Rin was very shy. Rin does not even remember that youkai’s name.”

“Uesugi...Uesugi...” Kagome-sama muttered. “That is the otter, right?”

“Yes, Kagome-sama!” Rin said brightly. It was good that Kagome-sama was learning so much about youkai; she was sure that it was important for when she would marry Sesshomaru-sama and become a Lady. Then Rin remembered what she had wanted to ask. “But Kagome-sama must tell me why Sesshomaru-sama does not like Uesugi-sama as much as she likes him. Uesugi-sama is very pretty, and seems very nice. You will tell me if we should not like her, Kagome-sama?” She looked up toward the miko, and was surprised to find a funny expression on her face. Not quite mad, not quite happy, a little puzzled, but also...like she had expected Rin to say something like that. It was very strange.

After many steps without saying anything, the miko finally sighed, “You must decide to like someone or not on your own impression of them, Rin-chan.” Her next words were spoken under her breath, but Rin had lived with inuyoukai for a long time, she still heard, “I suppose that means I can’t dislike them straight-off either.”

Chapter 48: No Such Thing as Coincidence

Ryukostokken waited with obvious impatience for the witch to set down her implements. Two youkai were suspended over a work bench, their black feathers slowly molting and falling to the surface. Both were near death, but even in their weakened state, the mated pair tried to stretch their youki toward each other. Specially crafted manacles restrained their power, preventing them from lashing out or even finding comfort in each other as they each watched their partner die.

“My Lord,” the witch finally acknowledged him with a bow. She was human, he knew, but with so much dark power running through her veins time had not aged her. Her expression was smooth and cool, but her dark eyes glittered with malice. The dragon lord appreciated that.

“This One will see progress,” he demanded.

She nodded, and gestured to the simple, wide-mouthed clay vessel on the worktable. The blood that dripped from the vulture demons darkened the interior until it shined wetly in the lantern light, but it was the heat of their spirits that the witch drew his attention to. “It will not be long,” she said. Her power flared slightly, prickling against his own youki, and the shadow of her aura caused the draining energy to glow faintly. “Their bond is stronger even, in death, than I expected. This magic will be most powerful.”

“Or it will be your life,” he promised. She bowed again, understanding his threat, but Ryukostokken had few concerns. Wei recommended the witch highly, and his administrator knew the consequences if he promised results and then disappointed his prince.

“The one that ingests this will be ripe for manipulation. One word, one name and scent given to the victim and their heart and mind will be bound.”

The dragon lord left the witch with a smile on his face and a newfound sense of calm. His army was nearly ready, his first wave already moving into position. He had been forced to alter his plans, after the pox had failed, but he found himself eager to personally take the field. Natsou would have the bastard pup digging a grave soon enough – either for himself or the cowardly Western Lord. Ryukostokken sent a flicker of youki to summon Wei. The spy Arashi would need to be recalled. He had a gift to deliver to the miko, and the dragon looked forward to when they would next meet, across a field of inu corpses.

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Kagome ran her fingers through Emi’s hair while she listened to Aina. The kitsune had softly suggested that she might offer knowledge regarding the development of the two pups, and Kagome had agreed. However, it had not been too long into the discussion that the miko realized there was more behind her words than a simple parent-teacher conference.

“Grooming,” she continued, “as you do now, Kagome-sama, is very soothing to inu pups. It comforts them and signals love and safety.”

“Only among inu?” Kagome asked, thinking of the boneless heap that Shippo became when she combed his hair.

“Most perceptive of you,” Aina praised. “Most youkai are tuned to the nuance of touch. Canine youkai particularly so. Kitsune, wolf, inu. Neko as well. It is with physical contact and youki manipulation that packmates mark one another and make emotional connections.”

“Youki?” Kagome asked. She thought of Sesshomaru’s reaction when she had ruffled his fur with her reiki. It had certainly sparked a reaction, and brought on physical contact.

“Yes. If you would observe, Kagome-sama,” she requested. Aina summoned Nankae from his solitary game of trying to jump over a substantial pile of cushions and the pup sat down close to her. She rumbled something soft, but higher pitched than the sounds the miko had heard Sesshomaru or Inuyasha make. The effect was subtle. Nankae’s eyes widened, then fell again and he leaned against Aina’s leg. Kagome sucked in a breath in awe as gentle tendrils of youki emanated from the kitsune and made a long, stroking motion from the boy’s forehead, down his neck and back. Nankae made a sound of contentment and snuggled into her side.

“That is the best bedtime story – *ever*,” Kagome said softly. She caught the sparkling green gaze of the kitsune. With a thought, she summoned her reiki. She was tired, after training with Sango and Kimi, so she only pulled forth a small amount. She was aware of her limits, and there was no way she would let Sesshomaru think he had been right to want to place her under supervision. Aina gasped faintly and Kagome had to ignore it as she manipulated her energy. It felt awkward, but she finally managed to create a similar stroking motion against Emi’s hair. The pup melted against her with an easy sigh. Kagome grinned at the kitsune’s startled expression, proud despite the beads of sweat dotting her brow.

“I did not realize such a thing was possible. Kagome-sama is a powerful miko, indeed.” Aina bowed and Kagome blushed.

“No, not really. It has taken forever for me to figure out things like this. And if I’m trying to do anything big, I’m still more likely to zap someone in the process. It is a good thing Sesshomaru doesn’t seem to mind, he even-” Kagome’s blush deepened and she snapped her mouth shut. Aina’s eyes were sparkling, her smile knowing. Continued application of her youki and another soft growl had both children nearly asleep. Their nap had been delayed, so it was not surprising when Nankae let out a snuffling snore.

“As most youkai know,” Aina continued slowly, “physical and youki contact are not restricted only between parents and young. Siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, even close, unrelated pack mates may use this method. A parent may use youki to offer support to adult offspring. One mate may comfort or rouse the other.” Kagome’s face was hot, and she had to remind herself to fill her lungs evenly. A sly smile in the miko’s direction made it apparent that the kitsune was purposefully providing intimate information under the guise of a parenting lesson.

Embarrassment notwithstanding, Kagome was not one to ignore potential knowledge. “Um, how, exactly?”

“Bathing, grooming. Kitsune are likely to dress and bathe with their pack, but have little modesty for their form. Inu, I understand, do not disrobe in front of others except when sparring or performing physical labor – and then only with others of the same gender. For an inu, to allow another to see them unclothed, to initiate and accept such, is quite intimate. A signal of interest.” *Well*, thought Kagome, *humans don’t generally strip down with someone unless they are interested either*. “Touch is an even more intimate act. It marks both parties with scent, which is of the utmost importance to inu. Pack

mates are marked by their alpha regularly, both to claim his territory, providing them security, and to let them know his concern and care for them. Acceptance of such between adults that are not related is the initiation of the courting period.”

That explains a lot. “And, uh, the youki?”

“Ah, yes.” Aina did not actually lean closer, but she gave Kagome that impression. As though she were with one of her future friends again and about to have a great, delicious secret imparted to her. “There are many ways...”

More than an hour later, after Kagome had woken the children and taken them back to the family quarters to meet up with Sango for supper, she was still reeling from information overload. Random flashes of heat in her cheeks were impossible to control. Kimi had tried to speak to her about similar issues, although the combination of her smirk, the enjoyment she took in Kagome’s discomfort, and the fact that she was Sesshomaru’s *mother* made it extremely difficult to listen. Aina, on the other hand, seemed closer in age to Kagome; although she knew the kitsune was probably several hundred years old. She was still embarrassed, but Kagome found it much easier to ask questions of the fox despite the graphic topics.

Sango raised her brows at Kagome’s expression when she arrived for supper, and the miko had to whisper a promise to speak with her later before she left the pups in the slayer’s care and sought out the older children. She found them with the rock brothers, huddled together in the cold, watching those arriving for the Council. Kimi’s lesson regarding the other youkai, and even the human lords, had pushed aside naps and math lessons after lunch. Kagome’s mind swirled with names and bullet points regarding power, lands, followers, and personalities.

The children were easily lured away from the dark balcony with promises of a meal, and quickly perked up with questions as they walked through the warm halls. “Will we get to meet them, Kagome?” She couldn’t help but smile at Shippo’s excitement. Just because she wasn’t enthusiastic about the welcoming ceremony didn’t mean that a child wouldn’t be. She supposed she might have been more interested if she was less worried about protocol and politics and could focus instead on meeting new and exciting people.

“You will get to see them,” she replied carefully. Kimi had mentioned that the older children would be present, but the miko couldn’t recall anything about them staying past the formal introductions. “I know you and Rin will be attending the ceremony tomorrow night, but I don’t think there will be much chance for you to talk with anyone.”

“Rin has been to one before,” the girl volunteered happily. “Rin had to sit quietly next to Hisao-san while Uesugi-sama and another youkai were introduced. The other youkai came to talk to Rin afterward, but Rin was very shy. Rin does not even remember that youkai’s name.”

“Uesugi...Uesugi...” Kagome wracked her brain for a description to go with the name. “That is the otter, right?” Kimi had smirked a great deal when she spoke about that daiyoukai. She was powerful, although not in the same category as Sesshomaru’s family, and controlled a significant port that allowed trade with China and Indonesia. Kimi had left the impression that it would not be wise to offend Uesugi, but that Sesshomaru had halted some agreement that could have brought Uesugi firmly under the control of the West.

“Yes, Kagome-sama!” Rin praised her, and Kagome felt a bit ridiculous that the child knew so much more about demons than she did. She really should study more. “But Kagome-sama must tell me why Sesshomaru-sama does not like Uesugi-sama as much as she likes him.” Kagome tripped, barely managing to right herself without pulling Rin to a stop. “Uesugi-sama is very pretty, and seems very nice. You will tell me if we should not like her, Kagome-sama?” Rin waited expectantly for an answer.

Surely she doesn't mean...but Kimi was so smug...of course, he did say he had lived centuries...she couldn't expect that there weren't...any man – demon would have...How pretty was this otter, exactly? Kagome felt her eyes narrow, and had to force herself to think reasonably. *Hormones*, she reminded herself, *hormones are making you crazier than usual. Try to act like an adult.* “You must decide to like someone or not on your own impression of them, Rin-chan.” She couldn't help but mutter, though, “I suppose that means I can't dislike them straight-off either.”

The potential for meeting her daiyoukai's ex-...whatever, if that was what Uesugi could be called, was pushed to the back of her mind while she ate with the children and Sango. Sango told a story to the younger children while she combed their hair and settled them down for bed. Kagome listened up to the point where the fisherman that rescued a turtle and was rewarded with a fantastic trip to the sea, but then excused herself to prepare futons and ensure that the rock brothers would be on guard near the children's rooms. Aina returned to take Nankae to stay with Hisao. The pup had spent a couple of nights with the captain so far, to get them both accustomed to forming a new pack. Sesshomaru had assured her that Nankae would continue to take lessons and play with the others, even after Hisao was ready to formally adopt him, at least until Hisao took a new mate. Assuming that ever would happen. Once everyone was settled and the servants had removed the bowls and food, Kagome settled down with her friend and a pot of tea.

“So,” Sango began with a smile, “what had you so flustered earlier.”

“Oh,” Kagome waved her hands in embarrassment. “It turns out I was having a lesson in youkai mat-ing...customs? I guess?”

“Do you...” Sango paused and bit her lip. “Excuse me if I presume, Kagome. You helped me so much on my wedding day. My own mother died so early, and I...I mean...” she blushed, but smiled happily, “...thank heavens you explained the basics, it made me a lot less nervous. And that Miroku!” She sputtered.

Kagome laughed, “I have no doubt that he did his best to convince you of all sorts of things.” She nudged her friend with her shoulder, “And was successful when you wanted him to be, right?” They both laughed.

“I just...I get the impression that these aren't just your rooms?” Kagome nodded with a hesitant smile. “Are you okay with that? I mean, slayers aren't exactly educated on youkai personal habits, but if you aren't happy then-”

“Sango,” Kagome began, then stopped. Her heart was full to bursting with love for her friend. Sango was concerned for her, certainly, but even though Kagome's situation was straining the morays for the era – would have been if Sesshomaru was human and completely destroyed those norms since he was a demon – the slayer still wanted to support her. “I...I love him.” The admission, aloud, relaxed her immensely. As if saying it allowed her to feel the emotion, fully. Kagome grinned. Her happiness was irrepressible. Maybe she should have told Sesshomaru first. *It would have been better to tell him first,*

she thought. But she couldn't feel bad about it. Kagome had already had her heart broken once, and that had been the love of childhood – immature and unformed. What she felt for Sesshomaru was deep and abiding. She was almost completely certain that he felt the same, even if he didn't realize it, but if she was wrong the hurt would be so much worse. She needed her friend, needed support to prop up her courage. Kagome was determined to go after what she wanted, what she knew would make her happy. She just needed to bask in the emotion first and shore up her resolve.

“Oh, Kagome,” Sango enveloped her into a tight hug. “I knew it! I just knew it! I’ve never seen him so concerned as he was during our meeting.” *And it speaks volumes about Sesshomaru that speaking directly to someone with words that aren't threats or insults translates as concern.* Sango sat back and grinned at her friend, tears of happiness glittering in her eyes. “Leave it to you to melt Sesshomaru's heart.”

“I don't know that it's love he feels – yet,” she hastily added. “Care, concern, yes. Respect. Lust – most definitely,” she winked through her blush. “I told you he is courting me, but I haven't told him yet that I...”

“That's fine,” Sango assured her. “Sometimes men, er, demons too I suppose, need to learn to speak honestly about themselves and ask what we feel. If we just told them everything, they wouldn't *learn*.”

“You are the expert,” Kagome said. And that was true. If ever there was a man who needed to be kept in line, it was Miroku. The miko didn't think Sesshomaru fit into the same category, he was in a class all his own for sure, but she recognized that they did need to work on communication more before committing to an eternity together. For both their sakes. “Enough about me,” Kagome changed the subject. “Let's talk about you, and that baby.” She gave her best friend a stern glance, “And how quickly you are going to tell your husband so that he can share in this experience.” She continued softly, “Let him help you, Sango. Miroku is worthy of that.”

“I know. I just...” Sango sighed, “I just needed a little time to get used to the idea myself, first.”

“Completely understandable. But not too much longer, okay?” She stood and fetched a textbook, paper, and pencil from her desk before seating herself again more comfortably. “If you aren't tired yet, let's talk about your family health history.”

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Kimi paused in the hallway, checking on the steady breathing of the pups. She had been busy for most of the day: gathering information, instructing the miko, making the final decisions for the welcoming ceremony. She felt justified in stealing a few moments to herself to refresh in her rooms and check on the pack before going to meet with Sesshomaru. Her senses were aware that the slayer was with the miko, she approved of the added protection until her son would be finished with his work for the day. Kimi could not help, out of long practice, but eavesdrop as she was about to move away.

“I just...I get the impression that these aren't just your rooms?” Kimi recognized the slayers voice and stood still. She appreciated the human woman's tactical insight. Appreciated the companionship and protection she offered Sesshomaru's intended. She would not appreciate any attempts to shame the miko for actions that humans might find distasteful. “Are you okay with that? I mean, slayers aren't exactly educated on youkai personal habits, but if you aren't happy then-”

“Sango.” There was a long pause in which Kimi hoped that Kagome would not let her down. It was a ridiculous hope. The miko’s infatuation with her son, her passion for him, were obvious in her action and her scent. Still, Kimi wanted to know that the heart that had been sheltered so long by a distrusting daiyoukai would be cherished. She wanted to hear the girl say it with pride to her human friend. “I...I love him.”

Tension eased in the Lady. *It is as it should be*, she thought with satisfaction. She turned and left the humans to their conversation in private. Sesshomaru loved the woman as well, a mother knew those things about her child. Kimi doubted he knew himself, or had labeled the feeling as such. A soft snort as she passed the rock demons startled them, but she paid them no heed. Sesshomaru would have convinced himself that his declaration at the Ringu was enough. That showing the miko physical affection and declaring her to be his in front of his vassals was all that was necessary. *Males could be patently obtuse*. Of course a female recognized those signs if she had a healthy mind and a nose on her face, but it was still important to hear words. It was a sign of their civilized society, of a commitment that went beyond instinct and lust to inspire a union of mind and spirit as well. As Kimi approached her son’s study, she vowed that she would not let him flounder *too much* before she stepped in and made him see reason. It would be for his own good.

She slid the screens aside without requesting entry. Sesshomaru did not look up from his work, but his secretary quickly stood and bowed. “You may leave,” she waved Kento away. The secretary looked to Sesshomaru for guidance, and the briefest nod of her son’s chin had the dark-haired inu gathering his papers and excusing himself. Kimi pulled her barrier into being as soon as the shoji had closed. “Have you chosen a gift for the courting exchange?” Despite his control over his scent and youki, Kimi detected his irritation in the faint tightening of his jaw. She smiled, the pup was too fun to bait.

“This is why you come here. Triviality.” He continued reading the scroll in his hand, but Kimi knew she had his attention. She wondered how long it would take him to let his façade of disinterest break, or if he would freely join her conversation.

“Trivial? The tangible representation of the value you place on your intended? Is that what she is worth to you?” Laughter bubbled behind her words and Sesshomaru’s jaw clenched tighter. If Kimi had known what possibilities for getting under his skin lay in the little miko, she would have swept up the human and brought her to the West ages ago.

“Inuyasha delivered my bride gift during the new moon.”

Kimi raised a brow. She was not aware that Sesshomaru had already selected an item from the treasury, and she was curious as to what was given to a widowed shrine-owner for her oldest child and only daughter. She would not give him the satisfaction of asking, but there would be several servants that would soon find themselves tasked with an inventory of the House’s wealth. More interesting was that he had trusted his half-brother with the task, and that Inuyasha’s visit had not been considered ‘terribly inconvenient’ by the miko. *And* that Sesshomaru had not been able, for reasons she *would* discover, to deliver the gift and make his claim himself. “You will have to select another. It cannot be said that the House of the Moon did not adequately provide for a mate.” She smiled sweetly before he could deny her, “If you do not have time, I am sure I could locate something the miko would find pleasing.”

“That will not be necessary.” His voice was even, but he showed her the barest hint of fang. How she enjoyed making him give in to his emotions.

"I see that Uesugi was the first to arrive." She changed topics without warning to keep him off balance. "Apparently she was not so dissuaded after her last visit."

"I do not recall your presence at that time, mother. Which of my servants did you have whispering in your ear?"

"Not a whisper, but a fair roar, Sesshomaru," she replied with a chuckle. "I understand it was quite a painful dance for you, to avoid that female's advances and maintain a lucrative trading alliance. I would not have been surprised if you had simply killed her for the presumption. It is good to see you have learned to value politics over immediate satisfaction."

"I *value* my privacy," he responded tightly, "but that is rarely respected."

Kimi ignored his obvious criticism of her. Interference was a mother's prerogative. "I look forward to seeing how that will be respected in coming days. Do you think Uesugi will be discouraged by a pending mating? Or will she attempt to replace your female?"

"Kagome cannot be replaced." His fury was short-lived, but potent. Kimi heard the distant clatter of a tray being dropped by a startled youkai as Sesshomaru's power crashed through nearby rooms. Her own silver hair floated on the currents of youki. She maintained her teasing smirk and controlled scent, but it did not escape her notice that his power had grown since last she tested him. Sesshomaru was her equal in raw energy and would inevitably surpass her. It sent a twisted pang of pride and bittersweet longing through her heart.

"You are correct, of course." Kimi conceded. "However, it will be amusing to see Uesugi discover that. Your intended does have a temper; I would advise you to make certain that she expresses it in moderation, lest you lose a valuable trading port."

"You have no concern for her safety." Sesshomaru stated, finally setting down his work.

"Uesugi's?" Kimi purposefully misunderstood. "No, I doubt the miko would purify her, although she is clearly capable of such. Her training has proved that she is not particularly adept at combat. Perhaps with a few centuries of practice, a human such as her could make a formidable opponent for a daiy-okai, but her physical restrictions, dulled senses, and natural hesitation to harm others combine to severely limit her effectiveness." Kimi nodded seriously, "The slayer has recommended more defensive weapons, for melee combat. I believe those will suffice for the time being. And the miko is remarkably accurate with ranged weapons, when motivated."

"I care little for Uesugi's safety in such an encounter, as you well know," he said dryly. "However, your assistance in training Kagome is more welcome than I expected."

"That sounded suspiciously like gratitude," Kimi bared her teeth with a smile.

"Age often corrodes hearing," Sesshomaru responded. *Another joke. Not one in centuries, and then two in the space of a week,* Kimi thought, quietly stunned. *The miko is good for him.* He abruptly cut to the heart of her visit, "Do you bring news from your informants?"

Kimi was slower than usual to reorder her thoughts, but finally responded, "I have let it be known that I desire information, but it will take time. I stressed the importance of keeping this matter quiet."

“Hn.” They spoke briefly on other topics, particularly news of incursions and spies from the North, before Sesshomaru stood. He offered her his arm and they walked in silence to the family quarters. He came to a stop outside her rooms, within view of the rock brothers whom he dismissed with a nod. It was a moment after the screens had shut between them when she heard him move away. He did not have to say what he was thinking, his youki reached out briefly, squeezing her shoulders in an unmistakable ‘thank you’.

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Sesshomaru paused in the anteroom to assess his pack. The young ones were all sleeping deeply, Emi had curled up with Rin. Nankae’s scent was faded and mingled with the teacher that had taken him to back to Hisao after supper. He could still smell the faint trace of their excitement near the table. Happiness. The spiced meat and plain rice of their meal. The slayer had joined them, and sat near Kagome long afterward leaving her own scent and that of a subtle tea in her absence. His intended was sleeping as well, her breaths soft and even from their shared bed. Her scent was sweet and purely hers. He cocked his ear and was met with the quiet shifting of embers in the bath house. It brought a smile to his lips. He had told her how he preferred her scent unsullied by others – and so she had bathed again before laying down. He would offer her the same courtesy; and when he finally wrapped his arms around her, it would be only his scent that would coat her skin.

He walked through the snow-dusted garden to the bathhouse, so as not to disturb her rest. Sesshomaru washed quickly, and debated bothering with a sleeping robe. Although he knew he would enjoy her reaction should she wake to find him naked – a blush, undoubtedly, a kiss, likely, more, he would certainly prevail upon her for – he did not relish the knowledge that he would have to leave their bed earlier than she should wake. He had a great deal of work to do before the welcome ceremony and the long days of Council meetings ahead; there was not enough time to both properly enjoy his miko and allow her adequate rest. After the internal deliberation, a sleeping juban was pulled on and tied loosely.

She felt cool to the touch, more so than usual, when he slipped under the blanket, so he pulled her snugly against his chest and draped mokomoko across her. She mumbled in her sleep, bumping her head against his chin and releasing a cloud of drowsy scent that soothed as much as it aroused. One small hand burrowed into his fur, rubbing against the skin of his tails before resting there. The other found his hair and was quickly tangled in the silver locks. Sesshomaru did not mind. Her desire to hold him close, even while she was unconscious, started a low rumble of contentment in his chest. She shifted again, pressing her curves against him, and he buried his nose in her hair.

The daiyoukai woke the next morning in nearly the same position. The small differences made him bite back a growl. Kagome had turned in his embrace, twisting mokomoko and his hair with her. Her clenched fist was almost painful in its position at the base of his skull. Almost painful, but extremely arousing. Her nails scraped against his scalp with the slightest movement of his head, and the position had the unintended consequence of directing his face towards her exposed neck. If a youkai had held him so, it would have been a demand for intimacy. Kagome slept deeply, unknowing.

Mokomoko was pressed against her back, the ends of his tails tucked up against the lower curve of her firm bottom. His miko had also demonstrated her continuing incompetency in donning fashion of his era – not that he felt the need to correct her error. Her sleeping yukata had not been properly tied, and had parted to leave several inches of exposed skin from her neck past her waist. He would have been able to see all of her, if she had not also sought out his body heat in the night. One of her legs was

thrust between his, smooth bare skin absorbing his warmth. The other had been thrown over his thigh, parting her legs and nearly welding her to his groin in her quest to get closer. He knew of only one way to give her what she desired, and was fully prepared to do so, when he heard the faint, tapping prickle of claws against rice paper. Sesshomaru nearly bit his tongue in frustration.

Shippo stood on the other side, and he might have sent a chiding flick of youki to send the kit back to bed if not for the bitter unease that layered the young one's natural nutty-woody scent. He checked to make certain that Kagome was adequately covered and pulled his youki barrier tightly around her to conceal the scent of their mutual arousal. He chuffed, quietly, to bid the kit to enter.

"Sesshomaru-sama," the young male whispered. His eyes fell on the mop of black hair that spilled out from under the covers, but he wisely did not approach. Instead he knelt in the doorway; his tails flicked nervously behind him. "Something is at the garden door. I think it is trying to get in."

Immediately, Sesshomaru's youki flared out looking for any threat to his pack. It startled the other pups awake, and made Kagome groan and stir, but he found what had worried Shippo. It was a small thing, and had been pressing against the rice paper screens, but at the brush of superior youki it lost the energy that had animated it. The daiyoukai recognized the signature and relaxed significantly.

"Go," he rumbled, "soothe the others and sleep." It was still dark out, although dawn was not far away. The kit smiled with relief and nodded, sliding the screens closed again. Sesshomaru tucked his nose back into Kagome's hair and took in a deep lungful of her scent. His intended still smelled of arousal. His cock ached. Three pups were awake one room away and an urgent message awaited his miko. *Never enough time.*

"Sesshomaru?" she questioned. Her voice was thick with sleep and need and she shifted against him again; the friction of his juban caught between her soft heat and his hard length made him clench his jaw.

"We must wake, Kagome," he managed gruffly. She seemed determined to ignore his command and burrow deeper against him. Her yukata parted wider with her movements and the slide of soft breast and tight nipple against his torso nearly made him forget why he could not remain with her – at least long enough to taste her again. He sent a short pulse of youki into mokomoko and at his will it tightened and twisted, effectively pinching her bottom.

"Oh," she pulled back sharply, blinking her eyes wide open. Her hand was still entangled in his hair so the motion brought his head with her. He pressed his lips closed, but she still made a sound of discomfort when his mouth connected forcefully with her forehead. "Ouch! Sesshomaru," she complained quietly.

Amusement warred with frustrated desire. "It is you who have injured This One, my miko," he said dryly. She pulled away again, more carefully, and eyed him while tenderly rubbing her head. Once she realized what she had done to his hair, *again*, she blushed.

"Sorry, I'm sorry." She pressed forward to work on the knots and the accompanying slide of her skin on his made her eyes widen. She emitted an adorable squeaking sound that Sesshomaru felt in an answering twitch of his flesh. He allowed her to vacillate for a few minutes, alternately rubbing herself against him and futilely tugging at his scalp. Finally, he let out a sigh that evolved into a short chuckle.

Beautiful, desirable, yes. Graceful my miko is not. “Hold still,” he murmured against her skin. With a deft move he rolled her onto her back and lay heavily on top of her, his pelvis locked securely between her legs. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted to allow a pink tongue to dart out wetly. Sesshomaru assured himself, that if ever there was a testament to his perfect control, Kagome was it. He reached up and found the loose ends of his hair, tugging gently and freeing her hand. Then he smoothed her bangs back from her forehead. Finding the beginnings of a bruise where she had smacked against him, he ran his tongue across her skin. He only rocked himself against her once. *Near perfect control.* “Come, miko,” he commanded her lowly. The scent of cinnamon fairly burned between them.

She hesitated, and he allowed himself a wicked grin. Her frustrated desire, knowing that he could make her long for him for the rest of the day, almost made up for the uneased throb he endured. “There is a message from your friend Ko.”

When he was finally getting dressed, admiring the smooth skin of his intended as she stepped into her own clothing, it occurred to him that his father may have had good reason to begin wearing his hair bound after he met Izayoi. Human females were extremely enamored of his hair.

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Kagome pulled on loose pants and a short training kimono with jerky movements. She was a little embarrassed, yes. She had practically pinned Sesshomaru down while they slept, and although she knew he could have woken her if he was irritated by her grasp on his hair, she still felt badly about it. Then there was...everything else. She wasn't sure if she was more upset that Sesshomaru had to have known how badly she wanted him – she had come dangerously close to jumping his bones and she hadn't even been awake – or upset that he hadn't let her follow through. Even after washing her face and running a wet cloth across the rest of her skin, she still felt unsatisfied and damply hot between her legs.

It was fortunate she didn't have time to dwell on it; a message from Ko, he had said. Although Sesshomaru had more layers to don, he finished at nearly the same time as her and directed her to the screens in the anteroom. A cold gust of wind, perfectly natural winter wind, blew in when she slid open the shoji. The lanterns guttered and she shivered, but her attention was focused on a strange blue leaf that skittered across the floor. The moment she touched it, she sensed the faded trace of Ko's youki. Some sort of chalky paint, rich blue and thick, coated the surface.

...remember this...blue for danger to your allies...

Kagome sat down heavily on the mat. *Inuyasha.* Somewhere in the back of her mind, she recognized that Sesshomaru had closed the screens and knelt beside her. Her thoughts had immediately gone to her hanyou friend and his bold plan to infiltrate the Northern forces. He was at risk every minute, she knew, and it was a familiar state for Inuyasha. But having it confirmed by someone so close to the enemy was terrifying. *Ko.* There were others though, not just Inuyasha, but Ko too was her ally. She was in constant danger, and her decision to help Kagome had increased that ten-fold. Kagome felt as though plaster had been poured down her throat. Her chest felt tight and hard, as though something was pressing on it from the inside out. Ko had put herself in a terrible position to help Kagome. Her stomach churned, but nothing could get past the swollen weight in her chest. Most of the youkai they had allied with during the quest for the Shikon had followed Inuyasha north or were gathering information for Sesshomaru. The faces of everyone who had ever helped her - who were helping her, helping Sesshomaru because of her - flew through her mind and each one darkened her vision further until she

could barely see the room around her through the black tunnel of fear. *Kouga. Miroku. Kaede. Genji. Sango. Shiori.* So many others.

“...ome.”

She couldn't breathe. How had she done this? Why? Again, she had attracted the hatred of a powerful enemy, and again her friends would suffer for it. She felt the dry heat of Ryukostokken's words on her neck, as though she were still a prisoner in the North. She heard the broken sound Ko made as the dragon defiled her.

“Kagome.” Sesshomaru sounded far away. She wanted to go to him, hold him, let him keep anything bad from ever touching her again. But there were so many others, so many who depended on her, who had faith in her. And she was afraid. For them. *And for myself.*

Suddenly, her vision was filled with white. The silvery hair of a daiyoukai washed away the tunnel darkening her sight. His pale face commanded her attention. “My miko,” he said softly. She focused on his golden eyes, on the warmth of his palms against her cheeks. Kagome became aware of wetness sliding between their skin and she darted out her tongue to taste salt on her lips. “Breathe.” Youki flooded her, familiar and strong. She sucked in air, almost coughing on the oxygen that her lungs had been craving. A gasping sob escaped her and she felt a wave of shame. She couldn't break down, she couldn't let fear overcome her. This was her duty, this was what was right. Her friends were counting on her, all youkai were. Sesshomaru was counting on her. The helpless feeling, from when the dragon had her chained and she could not summon her power came back. Kagome shook with terror and anger. She could not let him win, but she did not know if she was strong enough to fight. Reiki bloomed around her, so strong it was visible making the walls glow with pink light.

Sesshomaru tipped his forehead against hers and growled. It was not a sound of anger or frustration, but one of comfort and gentle reprimand. Mekomoko wrapped around her and squeezed. She took a deep, shaky breath.

“Sesshomaru,” she said softly. “It-it means danger. Our allies-”

“We will deal with it. Together.” His thumbs, calloused from his swords, caressed her cheeks. His breath was warm and moist on her mouth. His power surrounded her, circling, containing, and soothing her reiki. “I have you.” It took a few more minutes, but Kagome was finally able to control herself. Sesshomaru pressed a kiss to her lips and she laughed, rueful and a little ashamed.

“Sorry. I just- sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize.” He kissed her again lightly. “Eat. Hold your pups. We will discuss this in my study.” He hesitated, and Kagome leaned back slightly to look into his eyes. He seemed conflicted. “I will stay.”

“No, no. You have work, I'm fine.” She could see he wasn't reassured, but it was true. She was still scared. Still angry. There was still a pit of emotions and issues that she would have to delve into at some point and deal with, but she felt better, more manageable. Kagome took another deep, calming breath. Sesshomaru had helped her do that – regain equilibrium. “Really,” she smiled at him. His hands slid from her face to her neck, over her shoulders and down her arms to lightly grip her waist. He was putting his scent on her, she knew, but there was also a sense of self-reassurance in the act. He wanted

to know she was whole and safe. Her heart stirred at the thought. “Sesshomaru.” She leaned forward and kissed his jaw, running her nose under his chin and licking him lightly. The brief lesson with Aina had paid off. When she sat back, the tension had eased in his face. “This is awful and scary and I might cry again later, but right now, I am fine. Thank you.” She squeezed his hands where they cupped the top of her hips. “I will see you after breakfast.”

He kissed her once more before taking the blue leaf from her and exiting quietly. Mokokoko stayed behind, warm, comforting, and smelling of cloves.

“Mama?” Shippo’s head poked out of the doors to Rin’s room, his eyes wide. “I felt...are you and Sesshomaru okay?”

Guilt prodded her sharply, of course the young demons had sensed the power that accompanied her little breakdown. She smiled again, “We’re fine, Shippo. I just got a little emotional.”

A strange expression crossed her kit’s face, and then it smoothed into acceptance. “Right, okay. Will breakfast be here soon?” There was a respectful knock and a servant entered with tea at that moment. Kagome wasn’t sure how they always seemed to be ready with whatever she needed, but she was grateful. “I’ll get the others,” Shippo offered and ducked out of sight.

Kagome did not want to fight evil. Not again. She didn’t want to go through the danger and the tears. The blood. The sorrow. She straightened her shoulders and wiped her face on the edge of her sleeve. But she would. For all those who depended on her. Because they deserved to live without fear. Because Ryukostokken deserved to die. She would do this, and with Sesshomaru, she would not fail.

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Sesshomaru immediately set himself to work when he arrived in his main study, but found his concentration repeatedly interrupted by concern for his miko’s state. If Kento noticed that the daiyoukai would pause briefly every few minutes and his youki would expand, he was wise enough not to comment on it. She arrived only a few steps ahead of Hisao, and his captain waited for her to enter and closed the screens behind them both. She met his gaze, and he was relieved to see a slight smile on her lips. It was not until she had taken her seat next to him and her sweet scent drifted over him that the last thorn of unease was removed. Kagome would need to release the emotions that still pained her from her experience, but for the time being, she was safe, calm, and pleased to be near him. Her fingers drifted lightly down his sleeve and across the back of his hand where it rested on his desk, ostensibly to steady herself as she leaned forward to pour his tea. The touch was unexpected, and welcome.

“The miko’s Northern ally,” Sesshomaru withdrew the blue leaf from his sleeve and placed it on his desk, “sent warning.”

“Does Ryukostokken move against us? Is his army mobilized? What of the negotiations?” Hisao’s rapid questions were nothing less than Sesshomaru expected from the captain, eager to take up arms and end the veiled attacks that had foreshadowed war.

“I cannot say,” Kagome admitted. She frowned and turned a pleading expression first to Hisao, then Kento. “I am sorry I don’t know more, but we didn’t have much time to come up with a code, so it-”

“Most would not have managed as much, under such circumstances,” Kento assured her. His glare toward his friend was black.

“Oh, no,” Hisao said at nearly the same time, “I spoke to soon. I meant only to ask if anything more had been learned, from other sources...” The captain shifted uncomfortably, more from his own desire to not hurt the miko’s feelings than any reaction on Sesshomaru’s part. “...past that our allies are in danger, I mean...not that that isn’t-”

“Enough.” Sesshomaru enjoyed seeing his captain attempt to apologize to Kagome, but there were more important matters to discuss. “The slayer will go to Inuyasha with this news.” His intended stiffened beside him, and her scent became faintly concerned, but she contained any other reaction. He did not want her to worry unnecessarily, so he found himself uncharacteristically explaining himself. “If a soldier of the West were to be seen with the hanyou, it would betray an alliance with This One.”

“I get it,” Kagome smiled softly, although she still smelled of sour melon. “That would ruin Inuyasha’s chances for success, and put him in even more danger.”

Sesshomaru could not think of any words to reassure her, so he relied on familiar ground. “The slayer is a formidable opponent. For a human,” he amended. It was true. The daiyoukai had been impressed with her skill and tenacity on more than one occasion. Of course, it would be nothing to him, if they were ever opponents, but she would be a challenging adversary for most of the strong youkai in the West. Kento nodded in acceptance, Hisao seemed to consider his lord’s assessment as though he was determining the best use for the slayer on the battlefield. Kagome chuckled.

“I’ll tell her you said that,” she said with humor. Sesshomaru, as was frequently the case, could not have said what amused her. Still, her happiness covered any lingering worry in her scent.

“Shall I prepare the message, my lord?” Kento asked. Sesshomaru nodded and his secretary sat down to work immediately, although he still listened to the conversation.

Hisao started right into his daily report, clearly eager to move past his earlier blunder. “The third company is in peak condition, and eager for battle. I have repositioned them, here,” he pointed to the map of Japan that hung on Sesshomaru’s wall. “As you commanded, they have all been issued heliotrope oil – although they have complained of the smell. Second company has already reported back that they are in position,” he gestured again to the map, “and are awaiting further instructions. Field preparations have begun.” Hisao detailed the groundwork that would prepare the place of Sesshomaru’s choosing for battle with the dragons.

As the captain wound down, Kagome spoke up, “Is that a village, there?” She pointed to the map and the tiny pink freesia painted near the selected site.

“Yes,” Hisao answered, without even looking at Sesshomaru. He should have confirmed with the daiyoukai before responding, as she had no authority – yet. Sesshomaru was pleased with the misstep, it spoke to how well his closest advisors had accepted her place at his side.

“Have they been evacuated?”

Her question made Hisao pause, and Sesshomaru hesitated as well. He knew her concern, without her speaking of it. His miko would worry for the safety of those that lived in the village. That they were human might also cause her to think their heritage played a part in his decision.

“No,” he answered calmly, watching her to gauge her reaction. “They will not be.”

Hisao elaborated in an attempt to forestall any anger on the miko’s part. “It might cause interest to be taken in this area. We cannot allow any word to reach Ryukostokken that the West has its attention here.”

“It might put them in greater danger,” Kagome said slowly. Sesshomaru nodded, proud that she understood. “Then send humans.”

“What?” Hisao blinked and leaned back. Sesshomaru controlled his own reaction better, and recovered quicker. Youkai in any numbers would cause eyes to watch and tongues to whisper. And it would take numbers to evacuate the entire village. However, what Kagome suggested might be possible – although not in the way she intended. Humans would be better received by the villagers, and less noticeable to Northern spies. However, if a hundred or more people were suddenly absent, local youkai would notice, and word would reach Ryukostokken. Perhaps it would not be necessary for them to leave. Perhaps there was another way.

“Hanawa,” he stated, still turning the problem over in his mind for potential flaws.

“What?” Kagome’s confusion was evident on her face and in her scent. Kento looked up from his ink with a frown and Hisao wisely snapped his mouth shut and waited for further information.

“Monks are trained there.”

“Uh, yeah,” his miko was staring at him, but Sesshomaru ignored it. His keen mind could find no challenges that would prevent his new course of action. “They asked me to stay there,” she continued slowly, “after the Shikon...but how did you-”

“This One is aware of many things, Miko,” he repressed a smirk, enjoying her huff of irritation for a brief moment. “The shrine is well established.” He directed his gaze to Kento, who understood he was seeking information and rose to pull several scrolls from the shelves behind him.

“Well, yeah, I guess,” Kagome answered. “I mean they offered to build me a hut for my stay – so...” Sesshomaru absorbed that information while he waited for Kento. He knew that several shrines had coveted the Shikon priestess and sent invitations and even gifts to Edo to attempt to entice her to visit. It would have been a coup for any temple to have her in residence. However, he had not realized any had gone to such lengths. The expense alone of constructing stand-alone rooms was beyond most holy places, in addition to how it might upset the balance of the temple.

“My lord,” Kento held open a scroll and ran his claw down a row of figures. “Hanawa has significant wealth, but it has declined in recent years, since the death of their patron.” The secretary named several figures and items that had been given in worship. The monks there would be appropriate for his plan, so long as they did not draw any incorrect conclusions regarding his miko.

“Prepare coin,” he directed Kento, then turned his attention to Kagome. “You have had a vision,” he instructed her.

“I, I have?” Her mouth fell open and Sesshomaru smoothly split his focus. One part to the arrangement of all creatures within his domain to better serve the desires of the West. One part to how Kagome and her full, pink lower lip might be arranged to serve his desires.

“Indeed.” Swiftly, carefully so as not to prick her with his claws, he lifted her chin to close her mouth. He was fully capable of dealing with the distraction, but it would be better to avoid the impetus to leave the ruling of the West for another day so that he might enjoy his intended. “They must build a temple at Inawashiro. You will send funds to be certain it is done as you foresaw.” He paused again, his fingers still holding her chin, and spoke to Kento, “Such construction would require many humans.”

“Of course, my lord.” Kento answered the question in his statement and his understanding of Sesshomaru’s intent was obvious as he continued, “For one of Kagome-sama’s reputation, the monks will oversee the work, and personally conduct much of it themselves.”

“You want me to lie to them,” Kagome said quietly. Her blue eyes turned on him, and Sesshomaru could not be certain how she was feeling. Her face was smooth and cool, her scent a blend of worry, sadness, and trust. “If I lie, they will be there when the battle comes. The monks will protect that village with their lives.” Sesshomaru carefully considered his response. He understood Kagome’s reluctance, understood that she could not abide the thought that her actions might harm – even kill – another. It was part of her nature that he found attractive; she fought resolutely for any that she felt were unable to defend themselves. She would have wanted to save the human village even if it were not in the West; but as it was under his control, he was content that she would strive to protect those lives. As the Lady of the West should do. But it was also his responsibility, and that of his future mate as well, to understand sacrifice. War was dangerous, even more so for the weak, and he avoided it when possible. But when inevitable, as it was against the North, there would be compromises, sacrifices, decisions that put others at risk in order to ensure that the whole survived. It was a delicate balance. He searched her gaze to find a solution.

“Is that not what human monks do?” Hisao asked, trying to comfort her in his own way.

“It is just a precaution, Kagome-sama,” Kento said softly. “It is unlikely the fighting will spill over into the village.”

“If you are unwilling,” Sesshomaru began quietly, “perhaps the slayer will know-”

“Inawashiro?” Her voice was quiet, but steady. He nodded. “Are you sure?” Fear and trust were warring in her scent, nearly covering the delicate magnolia. The skin at the corners of her eyes was pinched and wrinkled.

“Yes.”

She closed her eyes and let out a shaky breath. “Inari,” she said quietly, after a long uncomfortable pause. “In my vision, a monk planted a seed and a shrine grew at the edge of the village. Night fell, and white foxes appeared, barking to wake the villagers and leading them to the shrine. For one night and one day a battle raged outside the walls. Every hut was burned to the ground, but those in the shrine with the monks survived unharmed. When dawn came the next day, the monks opened the gates, and

Inari stood in the center of the ash, surrounded by sacks of rice and coin. Their lives and prosperity were her thanks for worship at her shrine.” She opened her eyes, calmer, but still pained. “Can you write that for me, Kento? My calligraphy isn’t as nice as yours. And make certain the grain and money is set aside – for after the battle.”

“Ye-Yes, Kagome-sama,” Kento bowed shortly. Sesshomaru was, initially, just as stunned and curious as his vassals, but he repressed it.

“It shall be so,” he commanded. Hisao returned to his duties with the soldiers. After Kagome softly requested it, Kento divided the work he would have split between Sesshomaru’s desk and his own to include a portion for the miko. The three worked for several hours, interrupted only occasionally by servants bringing fresh tea or soldiers delivering reports. Although he found her presence easy to tolerate, even enjoy, and the swift efficiency that she applied to his work gratifying, the daiyoukai could not completely remove thoughts of her resolve and certainty from his mind. It was not until he was escorting her to a private lunch with the children, far from prying ears, that she explained herself.

“We went there once – my family.” He had placed her hand on his sleeve while they walked, and her fingers tightened on his arm. Her eyes stayed firmly on the ground in front of her while she stepped carefully to prevent her own clumsy nature from taking control. “They have onsen there, and boat tours of the lake. Papa’s cousin invited us to holiday at his country house. There is a shrine.” She took a deep breath, and if he had been human her fingers would have left bruises. “There are statues of Inari’s foxes at the gate house. It is the oldest structure in the village – which burned down in the Battle of Suriage-hara. Date Masamune and Shimazu...something...there were others too, but I can’t remember their names.” A choked, broken laugh burst from her lips, “I don’t even remember who won. I wasn’t paying attention to that part of the tour, I was so interested in the statutes.” She stumbled, despite her care, and he caught her in his arms and pulled her close to his chest. The sadness had returned to her scent with an almost vicious scent of despair. Sesshomaru rumbled low in his chest, desiring to comfort her even as he wanted her to finish her telling. “The tourist information claimed it was as old as ours, the Higurashi Sunset Shrine.” He cupped the base of her skull in his hand and tipped back her head, forcing her to meet his gaze.

Her words came quicker, almost desperate, “Do you see, Sesshomaru? We only just started building the shrine at Edo – Kaede, Inuyasha, Miroku, Sango and I. We put the gate at the base of the hill to the well – right where it is in my time. If Inawashiro is as old, it must be built *now*. And the battle will happen right after it is completed.” He did understand, better than she could see. He understood the fear and responsibility that she was taking on. The fear *of* responsibility. He had lived for centuries with the knowledge that the future of the West was his alone to shape – all those lives his to allow to prosper or fade. He had been young when his father was killed and the title of Lord fell to him, but he had prepared his entire life for it. His intended, Kagome, so painfully young by youkai standards, was being tasked by fate with a greater burden and she had only a few years of experiences to ready her.

“It is our battle,” she whispered. Sesshomaru pulled her into an empty storage closet and threw up his barrier. Her reiki was becoming erratic, the scent of tears not yet shed threatened to overwhelm his nose. “Inari...the statue I saw years ago – centuries from now...Mama said it looked just like me.” Sesshomaru brushed his nose against her forehead, then his lips against her cheek. It was fine. As it should be. His miko was making her own history, bending time to her will. He would soothe her fears, ease her burden.

“Hush, Kagome,” he rumbled. He pressed his mouth to hers, but her agitation did not lessen. His instincts were on alert, his nature compelling him to comfort her. To remove anything that distressed her.

“You don’t - it isn’t,” as soon as her lips were free she was searching for an explanation. “How can that be? How can it be me, if I hadn’t yet decided? If it was you who thought to build the shrine? If it isn’t my choice, then what is?” She pressed her cool hands against his cheeks, her thumbs brushing over his markings. “If the future is already determined, how can I save you?”

Her teeth sank into her lower lip, he knew it was her effort to hold back tears. Still the scent of camphor surrounded him. She worried, she feared, for him. His soft, delicate little miko. She had not given a second thought to an obligation too large to be forced upon anyone, much less a human barely into adulthood. But she was consumed with concern for him, Sesshomaru. He was first in her thoughts, and it both humbled and elevated him.

“Perhaps you do not need to, Kagome.” He brushed his thumb along her lip, and her jaw relaxed in response. A drop of red welled where she had broken the skin. The scent of it mixed with the salty wet of tears as they fell. “Because you already have.”

Chapter 49: Chemoreception, Consanguinity, and Affinity

Inuyasha sucked in air and held it in his lungs. The weather had changed for the worse, and it tasted like dry lightning in his mouth. The hairs in his nose were frozen and stuck together, making him want to sneeze. He breathed out, and the resulting cloud fogged his vision for a moment before the moisture crystalized and fell. The valley was deathly silent in the hour after midnight, and his sensitive ears could make out the minuscule *ping* as each tiny bead of ice hit the rock under his feet. He should have been sleeping under one of the furs or blankets that was provided to the soldiers. He could have been curled up in a tree, out of the damnable wind that cut against the thin skin of his ears like Tokijin – as though it enjoyed his pain. He should have at least walked through the camp, making an attempt at patrol and keeping the blood pumping in his bare feet.

Instead he was standing on a cliff overlooking the valley. The position caught the worst of the wind from two different directions: the first as it blew out of the north, the second as it whipped around the Eel Valley and blasted back at him again. The only flat ledge available was barren and smooth, would have been slippery if not for the thick grit of dirt and snow that piled in the corners and scoured at the surface. It did offer one advantage though. Inuyasha crouched, pulling his head down and tucking his hair into the collar of the fire rat to provide a little warmth and keep it from getting too tangled. He had a perfect view of the enemy encampment. It wasn't that he didn't have other eyes on the dragons. He did. It wasn't that he expected them to attack. He didn't.

The weather made sure of that. Dragons were from the North, but that didn't mean they liked the cold. Their blood was thinner and needed something else to warm it, sunshine or fire or the pulse of active youki. They could live through it fine – they were youkai – but they got damn uncomfortable fast. More so than cranes that huddled together and shared body heat. More so than bears that ate a couple extra hundred pounds of meat to provide insulation. More than furry kitsune with their foxfire, or elementals that thrived on changes in weather. Maybe not as fast as inu hanyou that didn't have fur and couldn't manage to drum up warming youki when they actually needed it.

Inuyasha couldn't complain though – wouldn't in front of his soldiers. He had asked for cold. He got it. Even now, he knew, two of the four youkai he had tasked with the effort were toiling on the opposite ridge. A mixed-blood hanyou that could manipulate the wind worked with a serow that breathed out cold youki. Even with their carefully constructed campfires and bedrolls, not one dragon would sleep well and they would all be on edge in the morning. Inuyasha's camp, however, had prepared for this. They were warm and comfortable – those who weren't on duty. Or like him, irritated by an itch on the back of his neck that he couldn't scratch. *Like eyes on me*, he thought sourly.

He studied the camp again, and, just when he was about to curse himself a paranoid fool, he saw it. A shadow, barely noticeable with the cloud cover, drifted over the wall of the ravine. Sometimes it almost seemed to disappear, then it would move sideways or up, but never down. After nearly ten minutes of squinting, Inuyasha was rewarded with a figure straightening and illuminated by a brief sliver of moonshine. *That slick-tongued bastard*. The half-breed dragon held his position for a moment longer than was necessary and it set Inuyasha's teeth on edge. Then he changed. There was no explosion of power. No awesome swirl of youki; the control was unexpected and rare. After a sizable grey dragon had taken flight, Inuyasha caught the scent of his energy on the wind. It had a metallic iron odor and tasted of sulphur with hints of mica that was flaky on his tongue. His eyes narrowed and he murmured to himself, "Where are you going, you sneaky little liar..."

Sesshomaru did not glance back at Kagome as he left his study and entered the reception hall, but he verified that her cushion was placed much closer to his than it would have normally been. His guests might think it unseemly, even after her status was announced, that he chose to position her on the dais with him, at his side, as his equal. They could think what they liked, as long as they didn't act in opposition. Sesshomaru dismissed their objections from his mind, *my actions are my own*. Kagome was his equal, in power and honor. His only equal. She would be his mate, and rule by his side. That she should have the gathered daiyoukai, powerful demons, and human lords presented to her as that status dictated was right. And he did consider this *their* presentation to *her*. Not the other way around, whatever his guests might have assumed. They would be wrong, and would discover that soon enough.

He also admitted to himself that he wanted his miko close enough to touch, if need arose. He wanted to be able to protect her, if necessary. To comfort her. Perhaps even simply to feel the cool texture of her skin or the warm breeze of her reiki, if he chose. Not all would accept his inclination. It would be preferable to secure the support of all of those present for the coming battle. It would save lives, hasten Ryukostokken's defeat. However, if he was presented with a choice between Kagome as he desired to have her – as she deserved to be – and allies, there would be no choice. He would swiftly eliminate any who wished to challenge his decision. An Alpha could not allow his actions to be contested.

“You are most honored. Give respect to the Saidai Mao, greatest of the Cardinal Lords. Ruler of the Western Lands, Tashio Iwakura Sesshomaru of the House of the Crescent Moon.” It should have been a lesser administrator that recited his titles, but as that position was currently vacant, Kento performed the duty. His voice was robust and clear, the respect in his tone obvious but not obsequious. Sesshomaru considered idly that his secretary should continue to serve in that function. His dark blue kimono, far finer than that of any other lord's secretary courtesy of Aki, spoke of the wealth of the West. He had donned hakama underneath, in deference to Sesshomaru's preferred style, and his obi was tied in a similar fashion, the red cloth embroidered in whorls of blue in every shade.

Hisao stood at the entrance to his study, waiting to follow Kagome to her place and stand behind his lord and future lady. From the corner of his eye Sesshomaru saw that Aki had taken liberties with his captain as well. The plain dark blue cloth that all of his soldiers wore had been replaced with something youki-spun in a similar shade. He wore no armor, although he had argued for it given the topic of the Council discussions, but the red sash of the West around his waist was shot through with metal threads that caught the light. As did the hilt of the one sword Kento had finally allowed, relaxing his revered protocol. It was unnecessary, certainly. After Sesshomaru himself, Hisao was easily the most skilled warrior in the room. He would not need a sword to put down any attempts at violence. The captain, however, insisted it was a matter of principle.

While the daiyoukai knelt gracefully onto his cushion, the gathered crowd offered their respect. Some bowed deeply, others knelt with lowered heads. A few lesser youkai pressed their faces to the floor. Even the most arrogant among the human lords, and Kimi had appraised him of details regarding those men that were almost disturbing in their accurate intimacy, managed a low nod.

“You are most honored.” Kento repeated the command in the same cool, expectant manner. “The Lady of the West. Utsukushi shi. Iwakura Kimi of the House of the Crescent Moon.” Sesshomaru did not have to look to know that his mother had entered the hall. The ghost of her youki proceeded her, and the whisper of admiration followed. She took a seat to his left and behind him, although she had refused the privacy screen that Kento had hesitatingly suggested. Apparently it was common in human courts to veil noble females from view. Kimi had been amused, and wondered aloud how effective

feminine wiles could be from behind such an obstruction. She also noted that her poison, should she find it necessary, would ruin the silk. Tsukahara Kazan stepped forward, apparently oblivious to the empty cushion still at Sesshomaru's side. The eagle did not manage more than opening his mouth before Kento spoke again.

"You are most honored." For a brief moment, Sesshomaru was surprised. Attention to detail was Kento's life, and protocol did not require such a command for an intended mate of a lord. He realized, with a swell of pride and satisfaction that Kento was demanding such for Kagome because he felt she truly deserved it. The humans remained quietly waiting, but the youkai in the crowd stirred, their auras rising and ebbing with uncertainty. Some, like Hirimoto, knew or had an idea of who would be introduced. Others would be blindsided. Sesshomaru preferred it that way; their reactions would be more honest, and his challengers and allies easier to discern. "The Miko no Mao." There was an immediate swell of youki – one demon actually gasped. "The Shikon Miko." The gasp turned into something closer to a snarl and Sesshomaru was forced to control his own response. It would not be the first time that evening, or even for the week of the Council, that he would have to bite back his instincts. "Higurashi Kagome."

Hisao stayed at her side, his arm extended under her hovering hand, but not touching her. Her steps were slow and measured. He knew it was a result of the narrow skirt of her kimono and her very real fear of tripping over her own feet, but her straight spine and serene expression gave her an air of purposeful deliberateness. Sesshomaru did not turn his face to her, but the vibrant blue at the edge of his vision was enough to know that she wore the clothing he had commissioned for her. It was only three layers of kimono, in deference to her difficulty with what she called 'antiquated fashion', and all of exotic demon-made fabrics that would be the envy of the youkai present and provide amazed fascination for the humans. She wore Bokuseno's flowers in her hair, and followed Kimi's example of utilizing only the barest of cosmetics. He knew his mother had been intrigued by the miko's combination of modern balms and colors with the light powders purchased in the village. She arrived at his side, and Sesshomaru was not unaware of the restrained but obvious emotion in the audience.

Shock. Admiration. Fear. Annoyance. Lust. Hatred. Curiosity.

More emotions as well, and some tightly contained which could only be guessed at. Kagome's scent was refreshing and welcome in comparison. Silky white petals, rich wood, and the underlying thrum of sour worry. With a flick of his wrist he held out his hand to her. It was unprecedented, not only for the setting but for him as an individual, but he knew she would be nervous about attempting a seiza in front of so many. A tiny sigh, barely more than an exhalation, escaped her and she settled her palm, the cool skin covered by the material of her sleeve, against his. She leaned her weight into him, and the effort was nothing to his strength, but everything to the graceful impression she made. The melon in her scent faded to nearly nothing as she found her place. From the corner of his eye, he watched her nod to him with respect, but then her neck straightened to match her spine and her gaze fell on the room. A slight smile played at her mouth, not amused as Kimi often portrayed, but tranquil and kind. Sesshomaru found an answering expression in himself that he had to crush. *She has found her mask.*

"You are called before This One," he stated flatly, finding the cold, unforgiving tone that he had cultivated to inspire fear and obedience. "Name your worth."

Tsukahara, already near the dais, opened his mouth again. He had obviously intended to take the honor of the first introduction, and his irritation at having the moment preempted by Kagome – a human – was clear. "The honor is mine," he said in a clipped tone that barely managed to be respectful. "Sky

Master. Tsukahara Kazan, of the House of Blood.” The eagle bowed low to Sesshomaru, nodded to Kimi, and pivoted back into the crowd without acknowledging Kagome. The great inu’s eyes narrowed, but he allowed no other outward sign of his displeasure. *Ignorance is not insolence*, he reminded himself.

Hirimoto stepped forward next, with an easy, rolling step that emphasized his stature and the play of muscle under his kimono. “The honor is mine,” he said sincerely. His bow was low as well, but measured in a way that implied esteem. “Second of the Cardinal Lords. Ruler of the Southern Lands. Chiyotanda Hirimoto Dokite of the House of the Ebbing Wave.” He nodded deeply to Kimi, with folded hands and a wink that those gathered behind him could not witness. Kagome received the same deference, without the wink. Which was wise, as even Sesshomaru had limits to his patience. Introductions continued, and most acknowledged the human woman at his side. Strangely, although Kento had made an attempt to explain the intricacies of human interactions at their courts, it was the warlords that seemed most uncertain with how to treat the miko. Only Matsudaira, who was precisely correct in his tone and the depth of his bow to the Western Lord and his esteemed mother, gave Kagome the same proper treatment as Hirimoto had displayed. Uesugi was subtle and smooth in her delivery, pausing only long enough to give rise to wonder if she would acknowledge the woman at his side. Sesshomaru was not impressed with her hesitation or the hint of interested youki the otter sent his way. The wolf, Ayame – Kagome had greeted her by name and smiled with ease – he knew her to carry the full authority of her grandfather. She was young, but had a calm head for discussion. Her friendship with his miko would be advantageous as well.

Hitashimashita was the last to come forward, which was unsurprising. The tree demon was older than most messengers of his kind, should have rooted decades ago, and his pace betrayed the fact. His skin was so dark it was nearly black and was heavily creased. His green hair swayed around him, as though in a breeze that no other could feel. Sesshomaru sensed the excitement Kagome found in the youkai’s appearance. “The honor is mine.” He did not bow, but the creak of his skin was enough to assure Sesshomaru that he intended the gesture. “Hitashimashita,” he introduced himself simply. His eyes, deep and warm, fastened on Kagome and he took another slow step forward, stretching out a clenched fist. Sesshomaru tensed, but could scent no animosity, only the dusty, wet smell of shaded earth and vegetation. He said nothing else, but opened his gnarled fingers to reveal a twig covered in clusters of dark pink cherry blossoms. The fragrance was soft and not unwelcome, even to superior inu noses.

“Oh,” Kagome breathed quietly. She reached out, only the tips of her fingers visible under the wide sleeve of her kimono. She glanced at Sesshomaru, questioning, and he tilted his chin. He was pleased that she sought permission, and that he was able to give it. The offering was a symbol of respect and honor beyond that received by all but a select few. Neither Kimi nor himself had been gifted with the youki imbued flowers of a ki-demon. To be the beneficiary twice over was unprecedented. “Thank you, Hitashimashita-sama,” she said with reverence. She carefully tucked the small branch into her obi and folded her hands together, nodding to the tree. A faint blush painted her cheeks, and the scent of her happiness was effusive. She gave him a wide grin. The tree creaked again, responding with his own bark-splitting smile. *And another ally has my miko won*, Sesshomaru thought with familiar admiration. *Perhaps there will be no need to slay any here this night.*

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Kagome took another deep breath and sought out Shippo and Rin with her eyes. Once the formal introductions were concluded, the children had been escorted in by the rock brothers. Other family members that had accompanied the invited attendees were allowed as well, and Hirimoto’s two children stuck

close to the kit and human girl. Whether out of instruction from their father or budding friendship, Kagome was not sure, but she was not overly picky. She wasn't sweating, thanks to modern anti-per-spirant and breathable youki cloth, but her stomach was knotted so painfully she was certain she wouldn't be able to eat for days. She had faced down countless bloodthirsty demons. She had travelled through time. She had survived the wrathful dokkouso of the Killing Perfection. She had explained to her mother why she needed birth control, for heaven's sake. There was no reason she should be afraid of a few nobles.

Except the consequences. The fate of Japan. A war. Embarrassment of Sesshomaru and his whole house. The success or failure of hundreds of Western soldiers who were counting on allies to reinforce them. Inuyasha. Kimi's assessing gaze.

Another shiver passed through her and the tail ends of mokomoko pressed against her back. She was fairly certain that no one could see the gesture, Sesshomaru certainly didn't act as though anything of importance was happening, but she appreciated the comfort he offered. The ceremony had, so far, gone better than she had feared. She hadn't tripped, Sesshomaru had helped her sit down so she didn't have to make an awkward attempt, and no one had spit in her direction or called her names. Kagome paused in her inner assessment, *I really need to reevaluate my standards for success*. She was aware, however, that not everyone was pleased with her presence. The eagle had been short with her to the point of rudeness. A lesser youkai had relocated to the furthest corner from her after his introduction, and clearly had no intention of approaching again to speak with Sesshomaru. One of the human lords, Date, she thought, had made a few innocuous remarks, combined with a gaze which she considered sleazy, that had Sesshomaru's youki rising. Without thought, she had reached out with her reiki. It soothed her daiyoukai, but several others in the room sensed the holy power and had varying levels of poor reactions to it.

Still, the tree youkai had given her the most beautiful flowers. Her hand drifted to the blossoms with that thought. And the mingling, if that was the correct word for deep bows and stilted conversations while others got to mill around and she was forced to remain seated, could not go on much longer. Dinner would be served soon. Kagome pictured with longing the moment when Kento would announce the food; her feet had fallen asleep ages ago. Her stomach rumbled, and Kagome blushed when Sesshomaru turned his face to her.

"Soon," he said quietly. His golden eyes were warm with pride and something else that wasn't quite passion but still made her heart thump harder.

She blushed, "I just--"

"Sesshomaru-sama," a silky voice interrupted her whisper. Uesugi seemed to glide across the floor until she came to a stop nearer to Sesshomaru. It did not escape Kagome's notice that the sleeves of the otter's kimono brushed against the lord's knee as she bowed. The miko felt her eyes begin to narrow, and immediately corrected the response. Kimi's lessons had been brief, but specific. *Concentrate on something that makes you feel differently. Focus. Smile*. Kagome recalled how Sesshomaru detested having others touch him. He found the scent of any but his own pack intolerable on his person or clothing, to the point that he had employed a water elemental specifically to launder his clothing and bedding. The aged rain youkai's scent was so faint, he had told the miko, that it was nearly non-existent. Whatever intentions the otter had, and Kagome was pretty sure she knew what those were, she wouldn't find Sesshomaru in a very receptive mood after purposefully releasing her scent on him. The miko's smile came easily.

“It has been too long since last I was here. I see you still maintain that effusive little human waif, how is she?”

“Well.” Sesshomaru’s cold reply did not seem to faze the demoness. Uesugi brushed silvery grey locks over her shoulder and smiled at the daiyoukai, revealing deceptively delicate fangs.

“I am most pleased to hear that, Sesshomaru-sama.” She bent forward slightly, and her smile became a bit more sultry. “If it pleases you, my lord.”

Kagome had to bite her tongue, but her smile remained fixed. *Slut*, she thought uncharitably, then had to remind herself that she had no way of knowing what expectations the otter actually had. Sesshomaru could very well have given Uesugi legitimate reason to think he would accept her advances. Kagome wasn’t anxious about his response or concerned that she might be replaced – or worse, expected to share. Both she and her daiyoukai had been very clear on those issues. However, she was still a young woman, and the desire to drive off someone so obviously interested in what she considered hers was strong.

“Hn.”

The female seemed to read something into the standard Lord of the West, this-conversation-is-over sound. “My last visit was cut short. It is unfortunate you had such pressing matters to attend to. However, there is no reason we cannot continue trade discussions when the Council is not in session. Tell me, do you still rise early and eager for...the day?” The insinuation was blatant.

Kagome could see it coming, could feel the heat of a bad decision brought on by unruly temper, but it was like a train wreck. She couldn’t stop it, and she couldn’t look away. “Yes,” she answered for him, the sweetness in her tone almost enough to put herself into insulin shock, “he does. Unfortunately, Sesshomaru-sama is otherwise occupied in the early hours. Might I suggest you speak to Kento-san, regarding an appointment?”

The otter blinked. Once. Twice. Slowly a third time. Kagome used those moments to consider Kimi’s emphasis on not losing her temper, no matter how insulting or insufferable things might become. A tendril of youki, silvery-sable and quick, reached toward Sesshomaru. If she had thought about it for even a moment, Kagome would have recognized the gesture as searching, and recognized that the Saidai Mao was more than capable of deflecting it. Instead, she reacted on instinct. Reiki slapped it down so quickly that the otter had stepped back and the room fallen silent before the first tendrils of smoke rose from the scorched floor.

Uesugi laughed. The sound was as beautiful as the youkai that made it, and it only blackened Kagome’s mood. She recognized jealousy when she felt it, she didn’t like it, but she wasn’t sure she could – or should - do anything about it. “Oh, lovely little Miko-chan,” the otter said and Kagome had to force away a scowl over the sudden familiarity. “We are going to be fast friends, I know this.” She leaned closer, and her blue eyes were warm and almost hypnotizing. “Perhaps more,” she purred. Kagome’s face burned.

“The meal is prepared,” Kento spoke loud enough to be heard over any conversations. Not that anyone was speaking in the aftermath of the interaction between Kagome and Uesugi. The miko wasn’t certain if she was grateful for the interruption, or pissed that she hadn’t gotten to be more aggressive with her

warning. Sesshomaru stood, pulling her up beside him. Mocomoko and his strong arm around her waist swept her out of the room and had her pinned between the heat of his side and the wall of his study in moments. Kimi and the children followed close behind. The moment the screen slid closed, Sesshomaru's barrier snapped into place and the children burst into excited chatter.

"Come now," Kimi said to them, but her smirk was for Kagome, "by the time we are finished refreshing ourselves, our guests will be waiting in the dining hall."

"Won't you come with us, Kagome-sama, Sesshomaru-sama?" Rin asked happily.

The brush of soft fur against her hand was the only warning she got before one tail wrapped around her wrist and Mocomoko squeezed her from hips to mid-chest. Kagome's mouth fell open, ready to reply, but Kimi forestalled her response with a flash of amused fang. "They will join us...without *too* much delay."

Kagome was still smarting from the overt advances of Uesugi. Her legs were full of pins and needles and she was breathless from the almost instantaneous relocation to the study. She couldn't seem to form a coherent response before the shoji screen closed behind Kimi and the children. Warm lips pressed against hers; she resisted at first, determined to say something. An apology for her temper, an unfounded accusation, or a plea to not make her go back in front of those strangers – she would give him all three as soon as she could manage to speak. Her umbrage melted under the demanding motion of his mouth. He licked at her, nipped at her lower lip and she wondered dazedly if anyone would notice if her makeup was ruined. Then his tongue plunged into her mouth even as his tails stroked her skin under the wide sleeves of her kimono. When he finally pulled away it was to lean his forehead against hers. Their exhalations mingled together and Kagome breathed deeply to try to order her thoughts, *I was mad about something*, but all she could taste was Sesshomaru, *right, the ex-girlfriend*, and all she could feel was his skin and fur and hair touching her. His heat, his hardness, against her.

"You undo me, Kagome," he rumbled and she melted even further. His words pulled at a memory of another time, the first time he had held her, stroked her, let her know through speech and touch that he valued her, cared for her. "You were the wonder and envy of every eye in the room. You could not hear, but I did. You are beautiful," he repeated, his nose sliding along her cheek so he could whisper in her ear. "Legendary."

"They didn't-" she swallowed against the need he had effortlessly brought to the surface. "They don't all like me."

"No," he admitted, but his pride in that statement was obvious. "But those may still respect you, and if they do not, I will deal with them." She wanted to say something then. Something about how he shouldn't kill people just for disliking her, that he should...something, but he caught her lobe in his teeth and she shivered. "Those that *like* you," his mouth was hot and wet as he traced the shell of her ear. One of his tails slipped along the inside bend of her elbow, and she moaned. "I want to rip them apart as well. The scent of their interest in what is mine stirs my instincts." He dipped his head and left a moist trail on her neck, ending abruptly in an almost painful nip, just under the edge of her collar. He pulled back to meet her eyes, and she had trouble focusing on anything but the heat in those liquid gold pools. "As I am pleased to find it stirs yours as well. The tart yuzu of your jealousy is a fire in my veins." He leaned toward her mouth again.

“Fire...in your...” she repeated weakly. *Wait, my jealousy?* Kagome wedged one arm between them and glared. “And exactly what do I have to be jealous of, Sesshomaru?”

“It is unnecessary,” he continued as though he hadn’t heard her question. When she turned her head away from his kiss he simply placed it on her jaw. “I have not been intimate with Uesugi for more than a century.”

Kagome felt ice slide down her spine, in contrast to the heat of him against her front. “But you were...” It was dumb, but she still felt slighted, cheated. Everyone had someone else in their past. Hell, she had basically dated his brother, and he wasn’t making a big deal out of it. She couldn’t help but compare herself to the youkai female though, and find herself wanting.

“I was,” he stressed the word seriously and met her eyes again. “I am not. Nor ever will be again. As you will have only me.” The strength of his embrace, the honesty and determination in his voice, convinced her.

“I’m not going to make friends with her, though,” she warned. He smiled the flashing-quick smile that never failed to send heat coursing through her and followed it with a suggestive press of his lower half against hers. Even through the multiple layers of clothing, his heat seemed to burn and beckon.

“That may be best,” he said in a low voice. “Uesugi holds her friends *close*, and I am possessive of my miko.” It took Kagome a moment to catch on to his meaning, but when she did she blushed and spluttered. He cocked his head to the side, watching her with curiosity and banked desire. “Humans do not enjoy intimacy equally?”

“No! I mean, some do, but I don’t...I just...it’s fine. That’s fine. I was just surprised.” She cleared her throat. “If we are going to encourage more demons and humans to work together, you might want to mention to any youkai that are, uh, non-discriminating, that most humans in this time are not so, ah, equal-opportunity.”

“But they are in your time,” he stated.

“Er, yeah. Some.” Kagome really wanted the conversation to be over. Surely there was something else they should be doing, like preparing to meet with the powerful guests that were waiting on the Saidai Mao to eat.

“But you are not,” he confirmed.

“Ah, no. Not that I’ve ever-” she took a deep breath and met his gaze openly. “Are you?”

“No,” he responded easily.

“Oh, okay. Well, shouldn’t we, you know, get going?”

“We have time, yet.” A glint returned to his gaze and his mouth lowered to hers again. He stopped, less than an inch away, and whispered, “Unless you would prefer to speak on the matter of Uesugi further?”

“Hell, no,” she responded fervently, and crashed her lips against his.

“Perhaps, Saidai Mao,” Hirimoto’s respectful title for him made Sesshomaru’s glare harden. The bear only referred to him so formally when he was about to impart what he considered to be fatherly advice. Sesshomaru had not had a father for more than a quarter-millennia, and had not been receptive to parental advice for far longer than that. “The next time you call a mixed-race war council together and you allow your human miko to display power that is coveted by half of the room and feared by the other half, you might consider not leaving evidence of your desire for her all over the poor woman’s neck.”

He did not deign to respond. And there was no point. He would have done the same again, wanted to – and more, at that moment. He felt no recrimination over his action. It was not only his desires that had prompted his actions. Sesshomaru valued his control with good reason; he could have restrained himself. However, he intended to create a new kind of alliance between youkai and humans. Not something fleeting borne of dire threat, but a lasting foundation that would take both species into a future that would be better than the one Kagome had described. His relationship with his miko needed to be obvious, acknowledged, and accepted as a first step in that process.

“Oh, do hush, Hirimoto-san,” Kimi rolled her eyes as she settled down into a comfortable pose on the pillows in the ima. The room smelled of rice and small, warm bodies, of kitsune and inu and excitement. It was, however, much more private than his study – so close to where some of his guests still lingered. And yet, it was not quite within the family quarters, and so Sesshomaru felt comfortable allowing Hirimoto there. The bear strolled along the walls, stopping periodically to examine one of the many colorful drawings and childish examples of calligraphy that had been hung proudly. “It was one tiny mark, and the humans have eyes too weak to see it. There was no harm done.”

“I was not speaking of the mark, but the layer of musk he left on her,” the other lord said with exasperation.

“She is mine,” Sesshomaru stated with a mixture of enjoyment and warning, “all now know this.” Hirimoto looked like he wanted to say more, and the inu daiyoukai was prepared to respond, but his mother interrupted.

“Stop fretting,” she ordered. Both males turned to look at her with distaste.

“I have never fretted,” Hirimoto declared.

“Indeed,” Kimi said dryly. “The miko will finish her cycle tomorrow, I have discussed this with her,” she said pointedly to Sesshomaru before he could protest the topic. He wanted to, though. Just because a bear could scent nearly as well as an inu, did not mean such matters should be brought up. “Without the blood-scent in the air, my son will be less possessive – which is to say, he will only cover her in his scent when he suspects the interest of another, not drench her and mark her during a state dinner.” She threw a quelling glance at Sesshomaru, which he ignored. “The Council meetings will go forward, and the miko will attend in the way we had planned.” The Western Lady did not leave room for argument. “Agreed? Excellent. Now let us move on to assessment of our guests. Tsukahara was as arrogant as ever, and reacted as expected to humans amidst the Council. I believe, however, he was impressed with Kagome’s display of power. He will be a challenge, but he will support the West.”

“Hitashimashita and Ayame are both clearly enamored of Kagome-san.” Hirimoto turned from a fairly well-drawn depiction of a large white dog with a tiny, black-haired woman on its back. “Even if you had not been assured that the trees would join us, the gesture this evening was obvious, Sesshomaru-san.” He settled onto several splayed cushions near Kimi and folded his large hands under his head to stare up at the ceiling in contemplation. “Uesugi is something else, though.”

“She will secure supply lines,” Kimi volunteered, “and is considering joining the fight personally.”

Sesshomaru did not have to wonder where his mother had gained such information. She had ears and eyes everywhere. “Kenjirosu is the only youkai that leaves me with reservations. Some of the little fish are flopping over the idea of allying with humans, and even protest attacking the North, but Kenjirosu drags them in his wake. Where he goes, they will follow.” It was true, and the Western Lord had already been considering what arguments or demonstrations might sway the water daiyoukai. His strength would be welcome in the coming battle. “It would be a simpler matter, without the human lords.”

“Without the humans, any conquest will be short-lived,” Sesshomaru said flatly. The humans could not be cut out of the alliance. He would have considered such a course of action before he had ever met Kagome. Now that he knew what she knew, what she had seen of the future, it was imperative that he begin to integrate his power into the humans’ structure. They could not be cast aside as irrelevant knowing how they would thrive if youkai died out.

“Shimazu is interested in how this may affect his enemies,” Kimi stated. “Although I have not yet determined his precise desires, I do not anticipate difficulty. Date-” Sesshomaru growled. *Date should keep his eyes from wandering, lest they wander out of his skull. Permanently.* Kimi cleared her throat, “As I was saying. Date is a simpler creature. Coin, land, power, females. His desires are open for all to see; some combination will buy his loyalty. It is Matsudaira that most vexes me.”

“Tell me, my Lady. I will be happy to discover what he is made of.” Hirimoto’s offer was made in a casual tone, his claws extended and flexing, but Sesshomaru knew the other lord would cheerfully gut the quiet human if the notion caught Kimi’s fancy. The bear was far too eager to please.

“No, thank you, old friend. I must discover this on my own. Well – by my explicit direction,” her eyes sparkled. Hirimoto laughed and Sesshomaru allowed himself a smile. His mother’s legion of informants were no doubt already pawing through every nuance of the man’s life. “We will talk again tomorrow evening, and perhaps I will have more. Now, the schedule...”

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Ko flinched at another vicious tug on her hair. Ryukostokken’s youki guided her, there was no need for physical reigning, but she knew that protests would not be well-received. The pain was minor, in comparison to anything else she had endured at his hands, so she remained quiet. She could not see the soldiers below them, but she could sense the dragons flying the air currents around her, and their numbers caused concern. Ko was not certain where they were going, or who would shortly be dead, but there would be battle. Soon.

The target was a mystery. Her injuries, and his new-found interest in human girls, had kept her out of Ryukostokken’s bed for nearly two weeks, and he did not have much use for her aside from transport or pleasure. She had kept her ears open, but was unable to learn anything aside from the fact that the

North was mobilizing and would begin the war in earnest. It was to be a surprise attack, but on whom she could not say. They had headed too far to the east - utilizing ships to carry the bulk of the army south and out of sight of the eastern coastline - to make a direct hit on Sesshomaru's shiro. But, then again, Ryukostokken could have been leading them in a loop to breach the West from the south. There was little left in the East worth attacking after the destruction of Kuren's castle, aside from a few human lords. The South was the strongest, in numbers, of all of the lands and Lord Hirimoto's soldiers were well-trained and had suffered no losses from disease.

Ko was desperate to understand what the dragon lord was planning, but she kept her lips sealed, even as he tugged harshly again. She would figure it out, or not, but there was little she could do to change the outcome. The wind demoness only hoped that if Sesshomaru was the target, Kagome had survived and the dog would be prepared to meet Ryukostokken. And end him. She wondered briefly what task the spy, Arashi, had been set to. He had left the North with Natsuo and a sizable company of soldiers. Ko did not trust the hanyou entirely, but he had expressed concern for her survival, and that was unusual enough to make her hope that he was prepared as well. Prepared to rip out Natsuo's throat if it came down to the two of them, prepared to run far and fast if Sesshomaru killed Ryukostokken. Ko doubted that a youkai of the Saidai Mao's power would leave any that had been loyal to his enemy alive.

It would be a bloody day when Sesshomaru met Ryukostokken over steel. One of many. The sound of blade on rock reached her ears; soldiers below were sharpening their weapons. Ko was tired of blood.

Chapter 50: The Grass is Always Greener

Arashi reverted to his two-legged form on the southern side of the strait. His boat was still hidden where he had left it, and he wasted no time loosening its mooring and putting the paddle to use. He was tired, not just from the flight, which had been a near sprint north, but from the pressure at the back of his skull. Something was wrong, he could feel it. Something had changed, or was changing, or would change soon. It did not bode well for his plans.

Arashi did not like the unknown. He had made a habit of research, bribery, observation, and outright theft to ensure that he always had the upper hand. He had been putting his talent to good use in the Eel Valley. Inuyasha had listened to his words, twisted less than usual but more than the inu thought. Nat-sou had been restrained from the worst of his stupidity. The Lord of the North had been left scheming and plotting, but all well within the scope of Arashi's plans. Captain Sou had a level head and would have the soldiers ready at a moment's notice. There should not have been anything out of place, but still, Arashi was unsettled.

It was the summons. Delivered in the dead of night on youki fueled breeze, a scrap of paper bearing Ryukostokken's seal and the taste of the slave wind youkai. Arashi did not like being summoned without cause. He disliked even more leaving an operation unfinished and in the hands of one such as Nat-sou who thought more with his instincts than his head. A cold dawn began to lighten the sky as he rowed, and Arashi frowned. He was tired, but there would be no rest this day.

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Kimi strolled through the gardens, heedless of the bitter cold that had settled over the West and showed no signs of letting up. Information had been trickling in all morning, but it was not enough for her to craft definitive advice for her son. Edginess was not a state she was familiar with, but the daiyoukai felt it keenly as she watched the other ladies.

Only one human lord had brought a wife with him, and she sat, composed and admirably unaffected, in the garden tea house. Braziers and furs kept the little building comfortable for the hime and several youkai females that found the weather uncomfortable. There were two others, brother and sister serow youkai that had come to the West with the male's mate, who moved through the garden with ease on their reverse-jointed legs. They were lesser demons, but alliance with them would make passage through the mountains easier. Kimi nodded shallowly to them as she passed, and they returned the gesture.

Her impatience was why she had found herself outside, with the mates of those at the Council, instead of seated in the hall where Sesshomaru was holding discussions. She was not required by protocol to be present in either, but was welcomed in both places. However, she found that she did not have the temperament that morning to sit among the lords and listen to long-winded discussions on trade and economics. Her tail was twitching with restlessness, and it would be less noticeable in the garden. Of course, she would have to join the discussion soon.

It had taken significant effort, but with Hirimoto's help she had convinced Sesshomaru that she should escort the miko to the afternoon meeting – rather than the Saidai Mao himself. There would be fewer eyes on the woman that way, allowing her some small measure of comfort in an unfamiliar situation. And while Sesshomaru's instincts would be denied scent marking her for a few hours, he could endure

it and both the woman and Kimi's plans would benefit from not immediately assaulting their guests with her status.

The smell of rice and meat wafted across the courtyard and servants came to invite the hime and youkai to dine. Kimi excused herself to the senior most of them, Kenjirosu's mate, and began to make her way to the family quarters. It would have been more polite to eat with the water youkai and make stilted conversation, but Kimi was not patient enough for that either.

Perhaps time with the pups will distract me, she thought hopefully. She did need the distraction, needed to soothe her mind. She could not play her game of point and counterpoint, induction and manipulation with less than her full attention. Sesshomaru needed her skills for the first time that he had ever admitted. Now, more than ever, she would fulfill her duty to the West.

Emi snuggled into her lap the moment she seated herself at the table across from the miko. Rin politely offered her a bowl of food, while Kagome poured into her cup. The fragrance of clean pup, hot meat, and delicate tea was effective. Kimi breathed deeply, letting it settle into her lungs and soothe the instincts that paced inside her. She listened with a smile while Rin recited the lineage of the House of the Crescent Moon. The child had learned it quicker than the miko. She made noises of admiration as Shippo temporarily turned Nankae into a rather shaggy black cushion; the eyes and tail were barely noticeable. The meal was simple, and lingered over, and when it ended she was calmed. *Pack*, she rumbled contentedly as she tucked the smallest pup in for a nap next to the male inu. The servants had cleared away the dishes and the miko's voice could be heard softly through the screens as she set the kitsune and child to lessons. Kimi scent marked the pups and let the language of her ancestors soothe them to sleep.

Rest, dream, and grow strong.

The screens closed softly behind her and she waited in the anteroom for the miko to finish. Her superior ears could not help but listen to the strange lecture, on figuring how far across a lake might be, and how much water it could hold. Kagome was a puzzle, and when the war was over, Kimi assured herself she would discover all of the human's secrets, but for the time it was enough to know that the miko had power and knowledge that would aid the West. She was loyal to Sesshomaru. She loved him. It was the most important aspect of the woman, but it would not help her in the days to come. It would be self-control, power, and a quick mind that would sway the Council. Only two out of three was not ideal, but Kimi had succeeded in the past with fewer advantages.

Kagome closed the shoji and returned a few books to her shelves. "Is it time?" Her nerves were evident in her scent, but not in her voice. Kimi was pleased to see the human maintained a straight spine and steady hands.

"Soon," she responded. "We will review our objectives first."

"I take it that 'mind your manners and make friends' isn't enough?" The miko smiled, despite her obvious concerns, and that gave Kimi added assurance.

"Not quite," she said with an answering smile. "Although, it is a good start. You know the protocol, Kento did an excellent job drilling that into you, and you are charming enough in your own way for most youkai. However," Kimi firmed up her expression, despite the slightly hurt scent that the priestess emitted, "you must be more self-assured. I understand that humans defer as a polite mannerism, and

Kento has told me that these human lords will expect it of a female – far more than what you would normally offer. But you must not. Polite, correct, but never deferential. Sesshomaru is your only superior in that room, and to allow another to condescend to you is to allow them to condescend to him. He has elevated you in status, and you must live up to that or call his decision into question. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Kimi-sama,” Kagome said slowly. Her blue eyes, so unusual for a human, were almost desperate. “I am just not sure I am capable. I was raised on a shrine – and not a wealthy one. I was never taught these kind of courtly manners. I mean - I went to public school!” The girl kept her voice low, in consideration of the naps and lessons taking place nearby, but her anxiety was obvious.

Kimi paused, ignoring her curiosity over ‘public school’, and considered the source of the miko’s concerns. “It is not the youki and power at the table that worry you, or the gravity of the discussion.” Comprehension and amused shock dawned on the inuyoukai. “You are concerned you will use the wrong form of address or spill tea.”

“Well, yeah,” she blushed and tugged on a stray lock of hair that curled over her collar. “I can barely dress myself in formal kimono, and the tea ceremony is a nightmare – even my mama said I was awful, and formal speech is really hard to remember to use – I was better in English class than at honorific grammar.”

Again, Kimi found herself forcing away leading questions regarding strange words and ideas, and instead focused on what was important to the immediate matter, “I would not say your kimono is *barely* acceptable.” The miko took that in for a moment, and then flushed brighter. Her scent lost any anxiety – replaced with irritation and embarrassment. “But Aki will assist you with that, so it is of little consequence at this time. As for your speech...” Kimi had given the matter thought and already determined how to spin it to their advantage. “You may speak to those beneath you as you see fit. You will notice Sesshomaru does not use honorifics with anyone. While he is more formal than you, that is in his nature. Your mannerisms can be interpreted as part of your humanity, your station, and your openness. And I will perform the tea ceremony tomorrow, so there is no cause for concern.” The miko opened and closed her mouth a few times, but did not seem able to form a response. Her scent was clear but for a shadow that the Lady could not place, but did not find objectionable.

The spider youkai came soon after, and Kimi watched while she expertly dressed and styled the little human. The blue forest kimono that she had worn to greet Hirimoto was complemented with hair sticks of polished lapis. A balm of shiny red cream for her lips was the only makeup Kimi would allow – although she easily gave in to the miko’s offer to share. It tasted vaguely like fruit and tingled nicely. Aki had brought needlework with her, and sat down to listen for the pups to wake. The older ones had finished their lesson and left scrolls on the miko’s desk before following the rock brothers away to the ima where their kitsune teacher waited. Kimi walked beside the human, linking their arms. It was scandalously familiar with so many guests in the castle, but Kimi did not personally object to the contact and she would rather the youkai talk about the way she doted on the human than have Kagome trip and embarrass herself. She created a barrier for scent and sound around herself and the woman before entering the hall, to allow discretion. It was only half-full, as many of the attendees were still stretching their legs after the lunch break. Sesshomaru stood at the far end. Two humans were beside him, still smelling a little awed and fearful, but deep into a heated discussion with Tsukahara. Sesshomaru’s expression was colder than usual. *This situation calls for an entrance*, Kimi decided.

"I have always found such gatherings terribly dry," she whispered to the miko. "I often find myself imagining ways to liven the process. Perhaps your kit would lend me some of his acorns, hm?" The suggestion had the intended effect, and the miko broke into a smile. Kimi dropped her barrier, and the humans closest to her were treated to a quiet chuckle and sparkling eyes. Every youkai in the room could smell the sudden appearance of her fragrance, made lighter and sweeter with amusement. Ears and noses turned toward them, but Kimi expertly steered the miko toward her selected quarry. It had the added benefit of distracting Kagome from the intense scrutiny.

"Matsudaira-san," Kimi greeted the human smoothly. His secretary fumbled and dropped the scroll he had been holding for his lord. The scent of his excitement and attraction mixed with his fear to create an unusual bouquet that tickled her nose.

"Denka-sama, Miko-sama," the lord bowed deeply to both females. His eyes were light brown and sparked with intelligence while his rather plain face betrayed no emotion. *A worthy adversary and valuable ally*, Kimi assessed. "Will you do us the honor of contributing to the discussions this afternoon?"

"Indeed, This One is most intrigued to listen to your thoughts. Humans have not been invited to...contribute to such discussions...in recent memory."

"Your words, if you will forgive the presumption, indicate that this is not the first Council of its kind."

"Ah, yes. This One recalls another where a human lord sat at the table of the West. That has been many, long years in the past.

"Then we should express gratitude for such an honor, that the Saidai Mao seeks council from humans." From another mouth, the words would have bitten with sarcasm, but Matsudaira gave them an air of questioning. *He is uncertain if Sesshomaru wants their advice, assistance, or if this is an elaborate trap. He is intelligent.*

"Your insight pleases This One. Such favor is rarely bestowed by youkai, and never before by That One." The lord followed her gaze to Sesshomaru, who kept his own eyes on those around him. Kimi was certain he heard every word of their conversation though.

"And yet, Tashio-denka has favored another of my kind." His lips turned up in a smile that did not quite reach his eyes as he looked at Kagome. The girl maintained her easy expression, but her fingers tightened on Kimi's arm. "Shall your holy council be solicited by the Saidai Mao as well, Miko-sama?"

"No, Matsudaira-san," she responded quietly. For a moment, Kimi doubted herself and her plan to use the miko as a diplomatic tool. "Not solicited, but given freely. Sesshomaru-sama aided me in difficult circumstances. I will do the same for him should the opportunity ever arise."

"What circumstances would those be, if it is not too personal a matter?"

"Such a simple thing to a daiyoukai of his power, but perhaps you heard news of the purification of the Jewel of Four Souls?" Kagome lifted her brows in sincere inquiry, her smile polite and kind. Kimi could have clapped her hands with glee.

Matsudaira's eyes widened slightly, but he gave no other indication of his surprise. "I am aware of the tale, but the description of your allies must have lost much in the retelling. You are here, then, to repay such a favor from him?"

"You misunderstand," Kagome smiled wider, and her unease had disappeared. Kimi was nearly bursting with pride in herself. Although the woman was completely unsuited to deception, in this instance her honesty would be more than adequate. "I know Sesshomaru-sama to be of the highest honor and character. His dedication to the security and prosperity of the West is admirable. Any task which he will undertake, I will humbly request to aid as I know it will further the forces of good in this world, and balance evil where it takes hold."

"Your words are inspiring, Miko-sama," Matsudaira said after a long pause. A soft gong sounded, alerting those present that the meeting would resume shortly. He bowed, "I will consider your opinion closely."

Kimi propelled the miko away and found their designated seats on Sesshomaru's left, the human between the two daiyoukai. Hirimoto and Shimazu sat across from them, their secretaries at small tables behind them, as Kento was arrayed behind Sesshomaru's place at the head of the table. The daiyoukai remained standing until all others had returned to the hall and claimed a cushion. Kimi's impatience was well controlled by the time her son announced that discussion would continue and gracefully took his place. Other matters would be settled in time; now was an opportunity to focus on her particular skills. *Such fun.*

ooo

Inuyasha stomped up the valley to the medical tent. He shouldn't have, he knew. Sesshomaru would have never allowed anyone to see how angry he was. *I ain't him*, he thought savagely. His anger wasn't really for his brother, but for the blustering thug that he was supposed to be negotiating with. And perhaps a bit for himself. He was there to get Natsou to reveal information, and it wouldn't have been difficult if the asshole could go more than two breaths without insulting him. Inuyasha could have ignored it, too. The stakes were high enough that even he could let name-calling go if it would mean saving lives. Unfortunately, he was supposed to live up to certain expectations. Miroku had coached him on it before leaving on his own mission.

"Lord Ryu-"

"Don't give that fucker a title," Inuyasha had interrupted.

"Ryukostokken," Miroku amended, "thinks he can manipulate you. He is going to convince you that you should attack Sesshomaru and that he will support you in a claim to the West."

"Killing the ice-prince I get, but why the hell would I want the West?"

"Because you are a stubborn, uncouth, power-hungry moron," Miroku explained patiently. Inuyasha was so mad he couldn't speak, just drew back his fist. "That is what he believes!" The monk waved his hands defensively and Inuyasha backed down with a scowl. "If he thought you could not be bribed or manipulated, if he thought you were smart enough to ally with your brother-"

“Half-brother,” he corrected.

“Yes, fine, half-brother,” Miroku said patiently. “If Ryukostokken thought that you were capable of recognizing what an evil creature he is, and that you have the moral character to be appalled by it, he would send a larger force than ours to meet you. He would attempt to cut you down before you could become a hindrance to him. He knows you are capable of killing a powerful dragon, so you must make certain that he believes it to have been brawn and dumb luck, not skill and strategy, which fueled your successes.”

Inuyasha thought on that for a moment. It was uncomfortably close to the truth. “A lot of times it was dumb luck,” he muttered.

“Perhaps long ago, my friend. But you have grown in the time I have known you.” Miroku grinned, “I have even seen you use your head, on occasion, for more than beating the earth into submission.” His tone turned serious, “You are not the brash and reckless hanyou you were four years ago, but you cannot let that be known to our enemies. Let them underestimate you, and they will know regret as they are defeated.”

It had been the right move, he knew, but it still, as Kagome often said, sucked. He embellished one of her favorite slang terms in his head with his fury. *It sucks giant, hairy, skunk youkai balls.* And it did. Every time he was getting close to some useful information, the idiot dragon would insult his heritage, or his soldiers, or his virility, or his mother, and then Inuyasha had to bark back like an angry child. It was fucking exhausting. The most he had determined so far was that the flying-lizard-shit-for-brains had changed tactics and was no longer focusing on a direct hit to Sesshomaru. Apparently the abrupt halt of his *plague* had been a real disappointment.

Inuyasha snorted, drawing the attention of the soldiers that had hastily cleared a path before his spiking youki. *Disappointment, yeah, that’s goin’ around. Get used to it.* The whole thing was sitting wrong with him. He was chafing against the role he had forced himself into, and it didn’t help that he was still stewing over everything that sneaky dragon hanyou had told him. And then the scaly bastard had snuck away in the middle of the night. Natsou hadn’t been aware the hanyou was leaving either; Inuyasha smirked at that. The crane guards on the ridge had gotten a real kick out of it – the captain, shrieking and blowing smoke while his half-frozen soldiers stumbled out of his way, trying to locate the hanyou without actually leaving their camp and incurring the wrath of Inuyasha’s forces.

What he needed was Miroku, in person. He needed advice, because the closest thing he had to a council was the crane lieutenant, who was committed to following orders, but his only suggestion involved dragon guts spread across the valley. He needed information about how things were going in the West, and about the progress Kouga and the pervert monk were making. He needed a cup of ramen, and a warm fire, and about two-days of sleep. And for fuck’s sake he needed to smell something that wasn’t dried-sweat-male-bird. Inuyasha stopped outside of the tent and tried to calm down before he went to check on Daigo. The messenger still couldn’t walk more than a few steps, but he was healing from the dragon attack.

What he needed was some damn information that he could actually use. And that meant he would have to go back down the valley and stand across from the mouthy idiot and pretend like he gave a shit what some half-assed dragon warrior thought of him. When he agreed to help Sesshomaru, he hadn’t imagined this. *Prick probably did, though,* he thought with a bitter taste in his mouth. *Probably enjoying*

this from his cushy, warm castle. Got Kagome all snuggled up and a bunch of hoity-toity youkai lords all ready to take their armies wherever he says. Lucky son-of-a-bitch.

ooo

“-thirty bushels more than previous years, and still those villages go hungry!”

“Do you complain that they willingly give away their harvests, or that the grain does not go to you?”

“You demons think you control our lands, but when some *thing* steps in and steals my rice, you don’t-”

“So it is your rice now, not the villagers?”

“*Thing*? I suggest you watch your tone, human!”

Sesshomaru desperately wanted to pinch the bridge of his nose to stem the ache that was building behind his eyes. That, or to cast out his acid whip across the table. Evenly. At neck height. Then he would have some peace, and, finally, agreement. He had never enjoyed council sessions even when they comprised only youkai. Too often they descended into trivial arguments and little was accomplished. The same appeared to be true for humans. The only differences were the addition of racial slurs and constant, restrained hum of violence. Perhaps there was only one difference. At least his mother was enjoying herself. Kimi was smiling into another cup of tea – they would all need more soon if the meeting continued much longer. Her amused façade was at least partially genuine. He did not enjoy being the only aggravated being present. Tsukahara had leaned over the table, his palms flat on the wood and his youki flaring. Shimazu sat several places away, between Hirimoto and Sesshomaru. The human was shouting down the eagle – which was a notable feat. The lesser youki to Tsukahara’s right was practically folded in on herself from the pressure of power around her.

“You know, I have been trying to hold my temper, Lady Kimi,” Kagome was speaking softly, and his ears immediately focused on her words. His mother had her head tipped to the side, listening, but he doubted any others in the hall could make out her polite tone under the argument. “I really have, but I cannot listen to this any longer.”

Kimi nodded and whispered in the miko’s ear, “Sometimes one must grab a pup by his ear to make him see reason.”

“Hm,” Kagome took a deep breath, and then slapped her hands against the table. A wave of purification rippled out, blowing papers away and toppling teacups. Several youkai unfortunate enough to be touching the wood yelped and snatched away smoking hands. The humans had to turn their heads from the bright pink light that followed. Sesshomaru took a deep breath of warm, salty breeze and felt his spine relax and the ache behind his eyes ease. *Blessed silence*, he thought.

“I am sure these are all terribly important matters to those who have brought them up,” his miko began pleasantly. Shimazu opened his mouth, brows beetled and one hand raised in objection. “I am not finished,” she said, her voice uncompromising and eyes flashing. Sesshomaru made certain her desires were made clear. He lifted one hand from his lap, dokkasou dripping onto the table, leaving holes and motioned toward Kagome.

“The Miko no Mao will speak,” he said flatly. Shimazu correctly interpreted his threat and closed his mouth.

“However, the issue of the North takes precedence. We must discuss the matter at hand, or we will not have the luxury of discussing anything at all. If you disagree, if you do not feel that this threat must be addressed – leave now. But,” her eyes blazed with conviction and Sesshomaru took pride in the snap of her aura, “do not request assistance or protection should you fall to the dragons. Those who remain will be occupied with a war – we will not have time to bury your dead, much less account for your harvests.” The hall was silent, but in that time the atmosphere smoothed out as well. Youki was still high, the stench of human emotions strong, but they were listening. Considering.

“I agree that these arguments must be set aside and more important matters discussed. However, I see no need to involve the humans in our situation. Let them return to their fields and young courts,” Uesugi was the first to speak.

“And depend upon demons to protect our interests?” Date snorted angrily.

“As These Ones have been doing for thousands of years, Date-san,” Kimi said evenly. One perfect eyebrow arched, “Or did you believe that you had not suffered the fate of your northern neighbors because of good karma?”

“I can take care of my own,” his voice dripped with derision. “My soldiers have defeated demons many times.”

“An army against one wild youkai is not a display of power,” Ayame interjected. Her youki was vibrating with repressed temper, which Sesshomaru understood. Wolf clans near Date’s castle had been systematically hunted, along with other lesser youkai. The humans there isolated and killed off weaker demons.

“One or ten makes no difference,” Date stated boldly.

“Something on which we agree.” Tsukahara ignored the rest of the table to focus on Sesshomaru. “Let us leave off talk and go North now. Our strength, without the humans, is more than enough.”

“You are wrong, Tsukahara-san.” Kagome’s firm statement brought silence again, and Sesshomaru’s nose was flooded with the eagle’s anger. “There is no peace to be found unless all of Japan is united in this. The dragons do not fight with honor, they will not meet you on a battlefield and respect any code. They will attack your family while you march. They will poison your wells. They will torture the bodies of your subjects and when that is not enough they will break minds and spirits. You have never faced an enemy such as this.”

“You have defeated powerful youkai, Miko-sama,” Kenjirosu said calmly. His voice was smooth and cool, without any inflection. “However, you have no experience with war, nor have you lived long enough to speak with authority regarding dragons.”

Sesshomaru’s temper rose. *How dare he.* The insult was not in his belief that Kagome was unlearned in the art of war, such ignorance was expected and true to an extent. The water daiyoukai had questioned her fitness to serve on Sesshomaru’s council. That was inexcusable. Reiki reached out and brushed against him, gaining his attention. His miko tilted her head for permission. The Saidai Mao hesitated.

He did not want her to feel pressured to discuss her experiences, did not want her to display the weakness that she had in her fear from her captivity, but it was her decision. He nodded.

“I have met Ryukostokken, Kenjirosu-san. Have you?” There was a collective intake from the table at her challenge, but she did not give anyone the opportunity to respond. “I was his prisoner recently, and saw and experienced first-hand what kind of creature that dragon is. I know how he treats his captives. I have seen how he treats his soldiers. I have heard from his own mouth his plans for the West, the East, and the South. I have watched him defile youkai – and seen both resilience and defeat. It is true that I have not lived as long as you, but I have studied wars that your teachers could not even comprehend.” Sesshomaru knew she spoke of events that were in the past as she knew it, but the flush of her skin and the spark of holy power in her eyes cast her words in a supernatural light. “I have known the death of my enemies at my hand. I know *this* enemy.” Sesshomaru felt a fierce pride in his miko. Her voice was steady, even hard, and her words resolute. The scent of her truth was thick. She had taken her weakness, something she had felt shamed her, and made it into a weapon with which to sway minds and hearts. He turned his gaze to Kenjirosu, waiting to see if he would deny her. The elemental did not refute her claim, but nor did he voice agreement. His jaw clenched, and he nodded to acknowledge that he had heard and would consider it.

“Ryukostokken was cruel and selfish, even as a whelp,” Hirimoto spoke up, “but even those many centuries ago, This One did not believe him to be stupid. Kagome-san is correct; this enemy is not to be taken lightly.”

“There is much to consider, and a mind should be in order before discussions continue,” Matusdaira, for the first time that day, spoke up from his place at the opposite end of the table. His scent was controlled, but Sesshomaru could still make out the irritation surrounding him. The source of it could not be determined, but the daiyoukai would have guessed it was similar to his own. “Perhaps a break,” he suggested. “A new day may bring more enlightened perspectives.” Privately, Sesshomaru was pleased that it had been suggested. Outwardly, he maintained a nearly bored countenance and released the Council.

When all but Hirimoto, Kento, and his own pack had departed, he turned to face Kagome. The shoji screen softly closed behind the last guest, and Kagome sagged against the table. A cloud of her emotions expanded around her, and he only then recognized that his mother had been shielding the woman’s scent. Dry, dusty mace. The sour pickle of niguari melon. Inuzansho pepper. The sharp bite of turnip flesh. His miko rose even further in his estimation. So many, strong feelings had been coursing through her but she suppressed them all to say what must be said. He needed to speak with Kimi, Hirimoto, and Kento regarding their impressions of the council, but the instinct – the desire to soothe his intended and assure her of his pride in her action took precedence.

“Go, refresh yourselves,” he instructed them. “This One will escort the miko. Progress will be discussed in This Sesshomaru’s study after you have eaten.” Each of them left with bows or smirks, as befit them, but the miko remained with eyes closed and her cheek pressed against the smooth surface of the table. His youki reached her moments before his fingers touched her neck. His power seeped under her skin and she made a sound between a moan and a purr.

“Ugh, Sesshomaru,” she mumbled. “How much longer do we have to do this?”

“The Council will last the week,” he answered absently. His awareness of her intensified with the intimacy of his power. She was exhausted, and shaking inside from nerves and the release of pressure she

must have felt during the meeting and her speech. He wanted to hold her close and shield her from ever having to endure such a thing again. He wanted to display her strength proudly. She was overcoming her fears, growing. Each action she took confirmed what he had decided weeks ago. She would be the Lady he needed, not just the female he wanted. “Your words,” he began, but she cut him off.

“I know, I’m so sorry,” she said, sitting up with a grimace of contrition. “It wasn’t my place and I’m sure you will have a terrible time making up for my insult. I am so sorry! And I completely forgot the right grammar!”

Sesshomaru blinked. *She is concerned for her honorific form?* Then he chuckled. She stared at him, wary and biting her lip. “I am proud of you, Kagome,” he said simply. Her mouth fell open and her eyes widened comically, showing white all around the blue. He chuckled again, and grasped the corner of her cushion to pull her closer.

“I...” She blushed, and the fear and anxiety faded as happiness and trust suffused her scent. Sweet carnations filled his nose and he breathed deeply of her, finally dragging her close enough to brush his mouth across her cheek.

“It was most excellently done,” he smiled against her flesh and the last of his headache disappeared. “I have often had to remind Kenjirosu of his place, but never have I managed it with such...style.” Irritation sparked around her, and he was sure she felt insulted, which would not do. “It was most enjoyable, my miko.” He pressed another kiss to her mouth, managing to pull back before he became too insistent. “And effective,” he said more seriously. She offered him a small smile, and then her stomach rumbled.

“I think I missed supper,” she said with a blushing grin.

“I will eat as well.” He stood, picking her up and waiting for her to find her balance before leading her toward the corridor. One claw on the door, he bent to her ear, his tone pitched to an affecting rumble, “and afterward, I may hunt for my own meal.” They had nearly reached their private quarters before her blush faded.

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“Where has he gone?” Arashi asked quietly. The guard visibly flinched, and bowed again, even lower.

“I do not know, Arashi-san. It is not my place to-”

Arashi nodded, releasing the young dragon from the interrogation with a sharp wave. It was not his fault that he knew nothing. It was not his fault that the lord of the North had once again changed his plans without consulting with his spy. Not that Arashi expected to be consulted, he was well aware of the disdain and contempt Ryukostokken held for him. But it would have made things easier. It was not hard to guess what the lord had done, but it was infuriating. Not the guard’s, or anyone else’s fault, but still infuriating.

The plan had been thought out carefully, so many contingencies and alternatives considered, and Ryukostokken had... Arashi could feel the heat building in his chest and he consciously pushed it down. Losing his temper would be futile. It would not solve the current dilemma, and he doubted he would feel any relief. He pivoted away from the guard and strode back out of the castle and into the courtyard. He acknowledged the deep bows and respect of many soldiers with a curt nod. Measures

would have to be taken. Resources would need to be utilized and valuable favors called in to salvage the situation. No action could be taken until he knew the extent of what the lord had accomplished – and how many dragons were lost to his aggression, but it would be wise to begin gathering information.

Unfortunately, the two most highly placed at the Northern shiro who were likely to provide insight were both with Ryukostokken. The wind demoness was required to transport the lord, and enough soldiers had been taken to require Sou command at least half of the company. Wei, even more unfortunately, remained to supervise the castle. Arashi did not find it difficult to avoid the administrator's threats and thinly-disguised informants, but it was irritating. And he was already in a poor mood. Arashi pushed it down, bringing himself under tight control. There was no room for him to make emotional mistakes – the North had enough of those as it was. It would be a calm mind that won this game. A calm mind, and a ruthless determination.

A bitter wind blew across the sea, and Arashi welcomed the bite on his skin. The last pieces would be played soon, and then all of Japan would know a new fate.

Chapter 51: A Pity, a Tête-à-tête, a Siege with a Glozing, a Murder, and A Party

The warmth of the South, even in the darkness before dawn, was invigorating. Ryukostokken clenched and unclenched his hands, enjoying the pump of blood in his veins and the excitement that coursed under his skin. *It has been too long.* He raised his hand and then swiftly dropped it, signaling his soldiers.

The first wave of dragons scaled the wall before a cry of alarm was sounded. The lord joined them, bending his knees and leaping over the whitewashed stone in one bound. His roar was answered by the soldiers that brandished their weapons and attacked with fury. Ryukostokken did not wait for the contingent he led to catch up to him, but drew his sword and cut down two bears before they even had a chance to focus on him. Shianma sang a death-song that thrilled him. The blade drank the youki of those that died on its edge, and Ryukostokken shared in the sword's surge of power. Another bear demon, larger than the first two in his true form, growled and barreled toward him, head down. The fool thought his great size would work to his advantage.

With a smooth application of youki, the dragon lord sidestepped, leaving a breeze in his wake that tossed dirt into the air – blinding his opponent. It was a simple matter then to plunge Shianma point first through thick layers of fur and bone to sever the spine. With a mighty wrench, he turned the blade sideways and sliced through fat and ribs. Gore splattered two other soldiers that had followed their comrade's charge. Ryukostokken flicked out his tongue, tasting their fear. His advance was too quick for them to avoid, and their whining screams were a music that blended into Shianma's song.

Death to my enemies. Death to the weak. Death to those that stand in my way. Death to those beneath and above me. Death is my name.

Hours later, the blood and gore that lay thick on the floors of the Southern Palace stained his shoes and the hem of his kimono. Ryukostokken could have avoided it. His body hummed with power – stolen from those he had slain. It would have been a simple matter to jump across the sunken reception hall floor to the dais on the other side, but he did not. He enjoyed it, the sound of wet slapping against the soles of his feet as he walked. He *reveled* in the crunch of odd bits of bone or the smearing squish of meat and tissue as he ground them into the wood. He took his time crossing the floor, ignoring the bodies of his own soldiers that lay where they had been felled by the powerful bear before him. Four of his strongest held the female down on her knees, her face pressed into the cushion that was intended for the Southern Lord. She was mortally wounded. Her life essence pumped out onto her clothing and saturated the uniforms of his dragons, but she yet lived. As he had ordered.

She snarled as he approached, her golden skin twisted into a mask of hate. “You will pay for this,” she threatened. Her eyes blazed red, her youki swelling and making his soldiers fight to keep her restrained.

“No,” he said softly, lovingly caressing her face with his claws before digging them into the flesh under her deceptively delicate jaw. “This One will receive exactly what he deserves. As will you.” Her life would fade in less than an hour, given the poison that coated his soldier's blades. He would have to work more quickly than he preferred to ensure her degradation was complete – that she knew her place before she sank to hell. Ryukostokken stepped back and sheathed his sword. Reaching for the knot of his obi, he commanded his soldiers, “On her back.” His tongue slithered out, waiting for the first sweet taste of her terror, but he was disappointed. The lord hated to be disappointed.

“Do not bother,” she spat, almost achieving dismissal through her anger. “I doubt I will even notice – from the likes of you. No dragon-” His temper got the better of him and he slapped her, flaying open her face and whipping her head against the floor. She let out a woozy chuckle. “Even your claws are small and soft.” Fury burned like phosphorus in his veins. Shianma plunged into the female’s belly, and the dragon lord drank up her youki while he leaned over her.

His rage washed through him, and spittle flecked her as he spoke, cleaning away tiny spots on her blood-smeared face. “This One is denied here, so know your niece will be next spread before me. Know that This One will savor the wait, and when she is ripped open and screaming, she will be healed so that she may watch her brother suffer the same.” He leaned closer, twisting his sword and relishing the way her eyes widened – finally she knew his power. “The meat of the male will give This One strength, so that your brother’s soft little cub can be taken again, and again. She will be the end of the House of the Ebbing Wave.” The pressure of blood against his blade was decreasing. Her death was near. Ryukostokken dropped to his knee beside her, bringing his lips within inches of hers. “She will know This One’s pleasure...in your place.” He released some of his flame to dance along her neck, singeing her hair. “And This One will burn down the home of your foremothers and leave the cub’s rotting corpse in the ashes.”

ooo

Five days. For five days the council meetings had continued, and Kagome was ready to tear out her hair in frustration. That morning she had finally put her foot down and told Kimi she would no longer attend. The Lady had acquiesced, easier than the miko had anticipated, and then suggested that Kagome could still be of use to Sesshomaru if she were to assist with some of the paperwork that had fallen to the wayside while Kento and he were in meetings.

Kagome seized on it with fervor. She took all of the scrolls and papers she could carry from Sesshomaru’s study and relocated to her anteroom with a pot of tea and her modern, comfortable clothes. The children had spent the morning with Aina, and the quiet solitude of her rooms and the little garden outside was a relief. The only thing that could have made it better would have been sharing it with the daiyoukai himself. Unfortunately, she had seen little of him since their late supper after the first day of meetings. Although she was aware of him settling down into their futon each night, and his brief kisses before he left in the morning, it seemed the only time they were awake together was at the blasted council table. Although she missed him, really missed not just his touch but the intimate way he smirked at her when he had backed her into a verbal corner and the soft light in his eyes when he tucked Shippo and Rin into bed, she absolutely could not stand to listen to one more pointless argument.

They argued about territory boundaries. They argued about commitments of soldiers and supplies. They argued about debts, faults, and old insults that had taken place years, sometimes centuries prior. There had even been one heated side-discussion regarding a single bag of rice, an annual drinking festival, and a suspected kitsune. And then there were the more personal remarks and overtones. Uesugi had made it embarrassingly clear, through innuendo and almost-touches, that she had turned her eye from Sesshomaru to the miko. Kagome had had enough. Kimi assured her that it was the nature of such councils, even ones conducted for such serious topics as war. She also pointed out, that as Kagome had only been attending the afternoon sessions, she was missing the more sedate – she specifically called them ‘dry’ – meetings where previous treaties and alliances were reviewed and considered. It was all a

foundation for the actual planning of a war; such issues had to be hashed out prior to a firm commitment to ally with the West. The miko also had the, in her opinion, significant pleasure of missing all of the individual discussions and meetings that Sesshomaru, Hirimoto, and Kimi had been arranging to attempt to sway the other lords and attendees one-on-one. She had tried to imagine such a lobbying conversation between Sesshomaru and the unreadable Matsudaira.

“Will you join This One,” Sesshomaru would intone very coldly and formally.

“I cannot say without proper consideration,” the human lord would reply, equally formal and polite.

Then they would stare at each other.

Bleth. Kagome shivered away that daydream – *daymare?* - and set aside another trade assessment before stopping to stretch. Nankae and Emi were taking a nap in Shippo’s room while the older children worked on a lesson. They sounded nearly finished, and she had told them they could play in the ima once they were done; the weather had been too bitter to allow them outside. Even Shippo shivered and chattered after a few minutes in the garden. She closed her eyes and focused her reiki. The rock brothers were standing guard in the hall, Aina was on her way back to the ima after, presumably, enjoying her own lunch. Aki was also on her way. Kagome smiled lightly. She enjoyed the company of the spider demon, but it also made her miss Sango that much more. She hoped the slayer had had an easy trip north to meet up with Inuyasha, and that the hanyou and monk were doing well.

She put away her pen and had just finished straightening her desk when Aki arrived with a brief knock. “Come in,” Kagome called softly. Shining iridescent eyes looked over the miko’s clothes as the spider shut the screens.

“You never cease to surprise, Kagome-sama,” she said with a smile. “I cannot say that I am not intrigued with the idea that somewhere an entire village dresses as you do. Do the males not trip over each other, unable to keep their eyes in their heads?”

Kagome glanced down at her leggings, tank top, and open flannel shirt. “Uh, not that I have ever noticed.” She laughed, “But they would probably stare if I wore one of your creations to the market.”

“Well, of course they would,” Aki said agreeably. “My kimono are the most beautiful in the world. Now, speaking of such, I have brought you a gift.” She pulled a parcel wrapped in plain brown linen from behind her back.

“Aki,” Kagome grinned, “I don’t need any more clothes. You spoil me!” She reached for the package and plopped down on a cushion at the table. The youkai sat much more gracefully.

“Not I, but Sesshomaru-sama. He was very specific in the design he wanted you to wear for the announcement ceremony.”

“Announc...” Kagome blanched. She had completely forgotten about the engagement party that Kimi had planned. Gifts. Formal presentations. Vows of intent. And everything in front of the argumentative guests that were attending the council. She felt fidgety and self-conscious just thinking about it.

“Do not tell me you forgot?” Aki’s brows raised and she laughed at Kagome’s awkward shrug. “I suppose you will say there have been other things on your mind, no? It is fine. That is why I am here. Kimi-sama asked me to help you select your gift after I fit you for this kimono.”

“Gift?”

“Yes, my lady told me she had explained it to you...” Aki’s voice faded hesitantly.

“No, I mean, yes, she did. But I already have one?”

Aki blinked. “Are you asking me, Kagome-sama?”

“No, er,” Kagome laughed, rueful. “I guess I meant to say that I had something I was going to give Sesshomaru, and my mother packed me something – in return for the bride gift he sent her. But I would like a second opinion, if you don’t mind, to make sure it is up to snuff?” At Aki’s look of confusion, she clarified, “I don’t really know what will be considered okay for this. All I know about these gifts is what Kimi told me was done at her ceremony with Toga, and that seemed a little...”

“Excessive?” Aki suggested with a smirk.

“Beyond my means,” Kagome answered diplomatically. “My family owns a shrine, you know, we aren’t nobility or anything.” She set the package on the table and rolled to her feet. “Here, let me get it.” It took her a moment to find her blue bag, tucked inside the old yellow one on the upper shelf in the wardrobe. She returned to her spot and settled the bag between her crossed legs. “I will admit, I was a little surprised to find it in here, but mama always tucks a few extra things into my bag before I leave. Although usually it is healthy snacks and betadine and stuff.” A bag of crushed chips, a clean shirt, replacement bandages for her first aid kit, and various odds and ends were piled on the table as she dug around inside.

She could feel Aki’s curiosity as she finally pulled out a rectangular cardboard jewelry box. The interior had been packed with cotton balls, and resting inside were two perfectly round pearls. Other than their uniform shape, there wasn’t anything overly special about either of them. They were largish, for pearls, about three times the size of a pencil eraser, but the colors were mismatched. One was green, the other purple, and both shone with an iridescence that was not particularly attractive, to Kagome’s taste.

“I don’t know that they can be worth very much, where I’m from,” Kagome said while she stared at the pearls. “They wouldn’t make very good jewelry. The note in the box said my father bought them for my mother before he died. It was nice of her to give them up, of course, I’m just not sure that-”

Aki made a strangled sound, and Kagome finally looked up. The youkai was staring, wide-eyed, into the box with one hand on her throat. “What?” the miko asked, alarmed.

“I do not know what shrine maidens consider to be precious, Kagome-sama, but your family must be powerful indeed if you think these would not be prized by the House of the Crescent Moon.” Her slender fingers reached out, shaking slightly, but she snatched them back before she could touch the box.

“Er, so they’ll do?” Kagome stared at the spider in confusion, then back at the box. *Maybe they are the real thing? All my friends have cultured pearls, they sell them at festival booths, for heaven’s sake. But maybe papa bought mama ocean pearls, the natural kind, as sort of a present for having Souta?* Her

line of reasoning didn't make a lot of sense. She couldn't imagine why anyone would buy their wife mismatched pearls, especially if they were going to spend enough to get the real thing; it seemed unlikely.

"Do? Can you not feel their power, Kagome-sama?" Dark blue youkai, thin as fishing line, twined around the box. Kagome watched carefully, and as Aki's power came into contact with the pearls, they began to glow. First the green, then the purple, one fading as the other brightened and then vice versa. The faint sound of the ocean and the smell of salt water teased her senses. Abruptly, it stopped and Kagome glanced up. Aki was lightly holding her head, her eyes unfocused.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," the spider chuckled at herself. "I am unused to such objects of power, it makes my youki dizzy." She blinked a few times and poured herself and Kagome each a cup of tea while the miko closed the box and set it on the table. "I am surprised you have not heard of them, although perhaps it is a story told only to youkai. A powerful sea-dragon gave those to his human son-in-law as a mating gift. They are called 'ebb' and 'flow', and they are rumored to control the tides, among other things."

"Holy shit," Kagome whispered, then blushed. "I mean, ah, that's crazy. To think those were sitting in my mom's bureau all those years." She frowned to herself, trying to remember more of the story she had been told as a child, about how her father had come to buy them. The memory was too fuzzy. "Anyway, if you think they will be okay..." Aki's awed expression and nod assured her. "Then maybe I don't need to give him the other stuff too? I picked it up before I knew about the engagement, er, courting ritual, rules...thing. Tell me what you think." The second package she had wrapped herself in plain brown paper and white string – biodegradable and simple enough for the feudal era. Inside was a coffee table book of images from the Hubble telescope and a fountain pen. The book had been on clearance at the store where she got her textbooks and she had purchased on a whim, but the pen had cost most of her allowance. Such antiquated things weren't available just anywhere, but she thought Sesshomaru would appreciate the craftsmanship and utility.

"These paintings are exquisite," Aki marveled, lightly fingering a page. "I have never seen art so fine; this will be coveted by all of the lords present." That gave Kagome second thoughts. She wasn't sure how good of an idea it would be to have powerful feudal lords desiring photos of space. The pen held the youkai's interest less, although she admired the case politely. Together, they determined that the book and pen might be suited to be given privately.

Fitting of her new kimono was next, and Kagome was amazed and surprised again by Aki's skill, and flattered that Sesshomaru had taken the time to choose the design himself. Arranging the kimono on a stand in the bedroom made the engagement seem more real, and nerves the miko hadn't realized she had surfaced at the thought. She mentally chided herself. With everything else that was happening, something as frivolous as an engagement party shouldn't even have registered on the Kagome-freaking-out scale. She couldn't help but wish, however, that her friends and family could be there. Not just to lend support, but to share in the day as well. Kagome was happy to be agreeing to mate Sesshomaru, and she wanted her friends to know that. Despite their difficulties, and the short time they had been together, the depth of their experiences and the years over which they had slowly moved from enemies, to acquaintances, to allies, to something more made her certain that she wanted to be with him.

By the time they had everything put back away, Aina was returning the children for supper and baths. She promised to meet them at the springs in a few hours to collect Nankae and take him to Hisao for

the night, and the two youkai females left at the same time. Kagome presided over a boisterous dinner – oh how she wished for an indoor jungle gym to burn off childish energy – and the rock brothers escorted them all to the hot springs. She let the boys play on their side for nearly an hour - with strict instructions to stay in the shallow end - after Nankae had been scrubbed, in hopes that they would be worn out enough to sleep. The plan seemed to work, as the pup lay his head on Aina's shoulder as soon as she picked him up. Rin and Shippo leaned heavily against each other while Kagome carried Emi upstairs. As she slid into her futon, she hoped that the council had gone better than previous days. She wanted the decision to be made, so that they could make concrete plans against Ryukostokken. And, selfishly, she wanted to have Sesshomaru to herself again. As much as she ever did, anyway, with the claims on his time from running the West. She burrowed into the blankets, purposefully taking her share out of the middle so he would have to move her to get in, and wished, more than anything, that they could have peace.

ooo

Five days. Five fuckin' awful days arguing with that dragon captain and Inuyasha was sick of it. He was drawing a line. Right there in the stone ground of the Eel valley, he actually did it. His claw shot up sparks and drew the attention of both sides of the camp, his and the idiot's. That was the idea. He needed to get that captain's attention and move the plan along, 'cause if he had to spend one more minute bullshitting when he could just kill the scaly moron and be done with it he would probably go mad.

"Alright," he barked, pointing at the dragon leader rudely, "this is it. I'm tired of fuckin' around with you. We settle this now." A vicious smile broke out on the dragon's face, but before he could draw his weapon and challenge Inuyasha to fight to the death, the hanyou continued, "If I'm gonna agree to all this shit you been saying, we're gonna do it my way. And I learned to seal a deal with a drink."

It was a stretch of the truth, but Inuyasha was betting that the dragon's sense of smell wasn't good enough to call him on it. Miroku had told him that, once, and he *had* drank sake with the perverted monk before. It was just that the two things had never coincided. That and he had never made a deal with Miroku – he wasn't stupid. And he hadn't really liked the alcohol. It made his nose burn, so he had never had more than the small half-cup that Kaede poured everyone after Naraku was defeated. He was sure his plan would work, though. And he was out of other ideas.

"You wish to drink with me, half-breed?" Natsou's lip curled up in disgust, making it clear what he thought of sharing even alcohol with a hanyou.

"Not really," he replied with a shrug and a grimace of his own. "But if I have to listen to you gloat, I'm damn well gonna do my best to ease the pain." Inuyasha sat down and pulled a bottle and two cups from the fire rat. He tilted his head to give the dragon a hard stare, "Unless you lizards are too soft for it? Sake probably puts ya right to sleep, eh? Pansy."

As he had hoped, Natsou snarled and sat down as well. After five days listening to him brag and harp on, Inuyasha was at least happy he had managed to peg the dragon as unable to let a challenge go. "I'll use my own cup." He snapped his fingers and another dragon quickly appeared with a little porcelain vessel much finer than the crude clay that Inuyasha had brought with him.

“Fine - if you’re worried I’d poison you. Don’t know how any poison would work on your black insides, but whatever.” He poured them each a good measure and threw his back without waiting for the dragon to even pick up his cup. It burned. Holy hell, it burned, but Inuyasha forced it down and did his best not to breathe for a minute while his nose tried to crawl up into his skull. When he was sure that his eyes wouldn’t water or he wouldn’t cough, he slammed his cup back down and stared at the dragon, who was frozen, about to take a sip. “Don’t ya know how to drink up north?” The accusation was effective, and Natsou snarled and tossed back his liquid as well. He didn’t seem to have the same issue with the burning and put down his cup for more. *Maybe I should have thought this through more.*

Inuyasha poured again.

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Ryukostokken was pleased. He cast aside the wind demoness with a rough motion as soon as she landed in the courtyard, and breathed a deep lungful of Northern air. The cold was horrifically bitter, and it made him smile. In defiance, he let loose a gust of flame straight up into the air. The North was his – his home and his birthright – but soon he would have all of Japan. The final taste of fear around the bear bitch had been like his first taste of triumph. The minor setbacks up to his point had only been tests of his determination. He would win. The dog would be defeated just as the bear was. He would have the miko ready and willing in his grasp. She would heal him, and then he would divest her of the purity that gave her power. His victory was close.

Finding the half-breed waiting for him when he strode into the castle only reinforced his good mood. It was time to move his plan along. “Attend This One,” he commanded. The spy stayed several paces behind him, but followed silently through the corridors. A faint scent of irritation clung to his stocky frame, but it only made Ryukostokken smile. The hanyou had not enjoyed being summoned, being forced to wait for his lord, but still he obeyed. He always obeyed his lord, his master. It was ingrained in his blood. Ryukostokken blew whorls of sulphuric smoke out through his nose. His plans had been shaken, but he had recovered, regrouped, and he was ready.

Power still thrummed in his veins from Shianma, and the additional youki was heady. “Tell This One of Natsou’s progress.” His demand was met with silence, which quickly began to wear at the lord’s patience.

“He has met with Inuyasha,” Arashi finally spoke. “Although his manner of diplomacy did not seem to be appreciated by the dog, they were still in discussions when I was called away.”

“The bastard will attack the West.” He did not need to make it a question, he needed only his own thoughts confirmed.

“I found Inuyasha to be as brash, quick-tempered, and crude as rumors have described him. He will most likely fight with Natsou, if you are prepared to order an attack, Denka-ue.”

“Do not try to dig information out of This One, whelp,” Ryukostokken reminded him of his place with a snarl. “This Ryukostokken will tell you what you need to know – and only that.” From the corner of his eye he watched the half-breed bow in apology and respect. As he should. “The South has heard Shianma’s song, and the blood of the bears was a sweet tease for the victory that will soon be mine.”

“The House of the Ebbing Wave was truly as weak as you have always said, to have been crushed under such a small force from the North. Natsou will be disappointed to have missed his last opportunity to taste bear.”

“Natsou’s disappointment is of no concern to This One,” the lord smirked to himself. Sou had not been pleased with the massacre; that captain had always been one to prefer an ‘honorable’ fight over a certain destruction of the enemy. Natsou would have found the endeavor far more enjoyable. “He will have his belly full soon. The Southern army was divided, as you said it would be. This One generously left most of the castle standing; it will be a beacon of crows when they receive word of the bloodshed. The strategy devised by This Ryukostokken is already being fulfilled; by the time the army returns to the Southern shiro, buries the corpses, and marches north again, the arrogant pup will already be dead.” He turned the final corner and approached the rooms given over to his witch. “Come, half-breed, there is a new task before you.”

ooo

“Is there agreement, then?” Hirimoto’s deep voice boomed in the hall, bringing silence to the several small groups that had broken into conversation. Kimi smiled behind her teacup. Her old friend was showing his impatience with the discussions.

“The wolves follow the West,” Ayame said in a strong voice. The little redhead’s tail twitched behind her, but her expression remained resolute. Kimi felt that she showed considerable promise in the area of politics.

“Of course you do,” muttered Uesugi with a condescending smile. “Canines.” Ayame’s sharp ears caught the quiet insult, and her eyes narrowed at the otter.

“I will consent to this alliance,” Date declared arrogantly. The Lady had to suppress an eye roll. Of course the idiot consented. It had taken less than two days to determine that his weakness for fine things had led to deep debt. Privately, Sesshomaru had offered to cover his obligations in exchange for support. In a more intimate setting which Date had been sorely disappointed in his expectations of, Kimi had suggested she would buy his markers instead. And sell them at a sharp discount to his most hated enemies.

Several of the lesser youkai voiced their support of Sesshomaru, and a few deferred commitment. Then, painfully slowly, Hitashimashita spoke, “The trees have ever been long allies of the Western Lands and remember well the friendship of the Inu no Tashio...which has been continued these long years with his most esteemed son, Saidai Mao Tashio Iwakura Sesshomaru of the House of the Crescent Moon... who has-”

“Thank you for your support,” Hirimoto interrupted. The tree blinked creakily in surprise, but did not seem to take offense.

“I cannot agree to all of these terms,” Shimazu stated flatly. “There has not been adequate time nor have my concerns been properly addressed.”

“I will agree,” Tsukahara folded his arms over his chest with finality, “when the humans prove their value to this alliance.”

Kimi did not grin or gloat over how perfectly her trap had been sprung, but she wanted to. “And what would constitute proof of such, Tsukahara-san? Immortality? Strength to match a youkai? Artifacts of legendary power?”

“Yes,” he responded shortly.

“Very well,” Kimi conceded and nodded with a smile. She did so love to have the upper hand. The expression of wary surprise on the eagle’s face was equally delicious. Hirimoto huffed and interrupted her moment of suspense. *Spoilsport*, she directed her thought at the bear.

“Kenjirosu-san?”

The water daiyoukai folded his hands precisely and looked first to the bear, then Kimi, then spoke directly to Sesshomaru. “I cannot respond as you desire at this time.”

“Nor can I,” spoke up Matsudaira, “without proper consideration.” Arguments and discussions broke out again, and Kimi turned her gaze pointedly to Sesshomaru. Neither of them had expected swift conclusion, but she knew her son, and he did not endure squabbling or indecision easily. There were only two days left of the Full Moon Council. Two days was not very long to sort through the complex and often emotional issues that had hampered the meetings. However, two days was more than adequate time for manipulations to be carried out, displays of power to reinforce position, and new incentives offered to gain acceptance. She nodded, and with a flash of disdain so quick she almost did not catch it, Sesshomaru nodded back. He had hated the idea when she first brought it up, and it sat no better with him now. She had prevailed though, as she always did, and Sesshomaru had seen reason.

A party was the obvious solution to an entrenched war council.

“This Sesshomaru,” he paused to ensure that every ear in the room was his, “extends you the honor of witnessing the Courting Ceremony. You will attend.” With that he stood and left swiftly, leaving it up to the imaginations of those present to determine if he cared for their response or not. Kimi doubted there were any foolish enough in the room to think Sesshomaru cared – or that they had an option of attendance.

“Surely not...” muttered Tsukahara.

“Sesshomaru-sama?” asked Ayame, wide-eyed.

“For the benefit of the human guests,” Kimi said sweetly, “The courting, or...betrothal, as you say...of a noble daiyoukai is a great and rare event. Often Houses plan for years for such things. The timing of this ceremony coincides with the Council.” Her carefully chosen words had the desired effect, as youkai looked slyly at one another to determine who among them had arranged a union. None seemed to give the wolf female’s suggestion of participants any credence. Sesshomaru’s long standing disdain for personal intimacy and pack, and his cold disposition prevented those present from considering the pending mating would be his. Having allowed Kagome to attend his council had been grudgingly accepted, but his reputation for finding humans generally unworthy of his notice and the situation with Inuyasha’s mother made the idea of anything permanent between the two preposterous to the youkai. Most, no doubt, had noted the Saidai Mao’s scent marking of the miko and assumed she was a temporary liaison for the daiyoukai. It did not seem to occur to the warlords that a demon would select a human as a life partner.

“We are all humbled by this honor, I am certain,” Matsudaira answered. “May I request some instruction, so that we humans do not bring disrespect to the ceremony out of ignorance.” Kimi relented, and Kento announced that protocol would be sent to all that would attend. He also informed the group, to their mixed relief and consternation, that no meetings would be held the next day.

“It is the desire of my Lord, the Saidai Mao, that all may rest and refresh themselves, and take this opportunity to collect their thoughts regarding the issues presented to this council. After the ceremony tomorrow night, meetings will resume the next day to conclude the Full Moon Council.” With that, the secretary bowed and the screens were opened to politely inform those gathered that it was time to leave.

Kimi enjoyed it all immensely. She had planned it to the last detail, including Kento’s little speech and the carefully worded instructions that would be sent to the human lords. In the next two days, her son would declare his intended, her most trusted informant would return with news, a new, magnificent kimono would be completed for her, and a war would be declared.

Kimi really did love a party.

Chapter 52: Arrangements

“Another?” Inuyasha asked, barely managing to keep his words clear. The fact that Natsou was obviously struggling to keep his posture straight was promising. “Or can dragons not hold their liquor?” The only answer was a snarl and a porcelain cup pushed toward him. Inuyasha nodded to Tomago and the hatchling sprang forward with a new bottle of sake. The crane poured two cups with a deft hand, despite his age and the nervous excitement roiling off of him. Inuyasha sniffed and had to hold back a sneeze. *Egg should be a good server by now*, he thought sourly, *sixth damn bottle and the asshole still hasn’t said anything worthwhile*.

Natsou slammed back his drink and kept his chin up and eyes closed while the burn worked its way down his throat. Inuyasha looked into his own cup with distaste before following suit. “Fuckin’ southern sake,” he muttered. The hanyou hadn’t intended to voice his complaint aloud, but the immediate attention of the dragon sharpened his senses.

“This is from the Southern Lands?” He nodded his dark head toward the bottle in the hatchling’s talons.

“Yeah, picked it up off some traders,” Inuyasha replied. A beat later he remembered he was supposed to be a ruthless asshole. “They didn’t need it anymore.”

The dragon let out a bark of laughter, startling most of the youkai that had settled in a respectful circle to watch. None but Tomago were close enough to overhear the conversation, but Natsou’s outburst drew attention. “Didn’t need it,” he repeated. “Hirimoto might – he’s wishing now, or will soon, that he had this bottle.” The dragon continued to chuckle to himself, and Inuyasha wracked his mind for clever phrasing.

“Hirimoto.” Inuyasha paused, trying to determine how much information he would be expected to have of noble youkai if he hadn’t been on speaking terms with Sesshomaru. The vague fuzz of sake on his brain made it more difficult. “That some other fucker you’re thinkin’ of sending after the ice prick? I ain’t sharing my kill.” He bared his teeth and gestured for another cup. The dragon captain seemed to think the conversation had become even funnier. He smiled widely, making Inuyasha want to claw his mouth right off his face.

“Oh, no half-breed. The Western Lord is all yours. Hirimoto is nothing – less than nothing by now.” The smile turned vicious and Inuyasha’s stomach tightened painfully. The hairs on the back of his neck rose in anticipation. “Just some weyr-less bear with nothing but empty lands and a half-burned hovel to his name.” Natsou leaned in, sharing his personal space with an air of gleeful secrecy and Inuyasha realized that the dragon was far drunker than he had let on. “Perhaps you will meet the pathetic creature in battle.”

“How would I know one lumbering bear from another?” Inuyasha held his cup carefully and breathed out evenly. His usual scowl felt frozen on his face. His jaw ached from clenching it and his throat and lungs were hot. His nose was wreathed in the vapors of alcohol, but he could still make out the carrion scent of the captain’s malice.

“He’ll be the one wild-eyed with vengeance and drenched in the taste of sorrow.” He threw back another cup with a loud smacking of his lips and held it up in the air. “Vengeance!” His yell was echoed by about half of the dragons present, and quite a few of those seemed more bewildered than enthused by the battle cry. The delicate blue and white cup cracked with the force Natsou used to slam it onto the

ground. “I’ll finish that bottle, half-breed, and you can make it up to me for missing the feast.” Tomago poured again, this time his hands were shaking enough that several drops spilled onto the dragon’s claws. Natsou did not notice. His dark eyes were unfocused, his broad face flushed with sake. “Admit defeat, little whelp, admit that you can drink no more, and I will tell you a tale of hot meat and death before the greatness of the North.”

“The bottle is yours,” Inuyasha said woodenly, sending the hatchling back to camp as soon as he set down the sake. “Not that I couldn’t keep drinking.” The bravado sounded flat to him, but he couldn’t make himself snarl and bluster. Luckily, the dragon did not seem to find it odd.

“Won’t say it, huh? I did not expect any better. But I promised a tale – and you should know the might of the North.” Inuyasha poured another cup for the captain. Clear alcohol seeped out of the crack along the side of the cup. Orange light filtered through the trees along the ridge; the sunset catching in the droplets and casting them in fire until they dripped down and fell into the dirt. “It would have been better if I had been there,” the dragon began, sipping at his drink. “My Lord confided his plan in me, before I left, and there is no harm in telling it now – it will have already been done. Ah – how I wished I could have tasted the blood...”

Natsou spoke until night fell and the sake was nothing but vapors in the bottle. Two of his soldiers came and assisted him to return to his tent. The captain called out insults to Inuyasha as he stumbled away, accusing him with a drunken laugh of being unable to stand. That much was true - of all of the insults that had been thrown his way during the disastrous week of negotiations. By the time Inuyasha was able to get his feet under him and turn back to his own camp, it was fully dark and he was stone cold sober.

“Egg,” he called softly as he crossed the line of watch. The hatchling was startled from a doze and immediately flapped and rustled until he was almost jogging to keep up with the hanyou’s purposeful stride. “Wake the Lieutenant, and have him meet me in the medical tent.”

“The Slayer-san is resting there, waiting for you. She arrived in the late afternoon.”

Inuyasha didn’t respond, but his jaw tightened further. He hoped Sango had word from Sesshomaru that they didn’t need to hide their alliance any longer; he doubted it, but he still hoped. He had wanted to kill Natsou from the beginning – just for being a prick. After his drunken confidence, Inuyasha wanted to rip out the dragon’s throat. Then again, perhaps he should ready Tessiaga even if Sango didn’t have good news. If Sesshomaru had not advanced the plan, from where Inuyasha was standing circumstances had still changed.

“Bring me the munitions expert, and find the ameonna, Niji.” He snagged the back of the hatchling’s collar before he could bolt away. “And Egg, get me paper, ink, and brush.” He had news to send to his brother, and there would be no joy in the telling or the hearing.

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Sesshomaru sat in his private study, reviewing the work Kagome had completed while he was in meetings and considering orders for supplies, protection, trade agreements, and any number of other things that were required to ensure prosperity for a large territory. It was not lost on him that the task was less tedious than ever before – due in part to Kagome’s assistance, and in part to the recent council discus-

sions. Few endeavors would not benefit from a comparison to days spent listening to youkai and human nobles bicker and deliberate. He also admitted to himself that the work was a welcome distraction for the strange tension that had been growing within him since he woke that morning.

As had become usual, it was still dark out when he had opened his eyes. The faint glow from the moon outside was enough for his preternatural eyesight to make out the smooth curve of Kagome's cheek and wild mop of dark hair that spread across his bicep. Her breath was warm against his chest; her hands buried in the fur of mokomoko. A smile had tilted his lips at the sight. He was unused to binding his hair, but the long tail secured at the base of his head had prevented her from becoming completely tangled again. Instead, he had wrapped himself around her. Her legs tucked between his, her cool skin absorbing his heat. Her torso and head pressed against him. His right arm acted as her pillow, his claws light against the back of her head. His left arm circled her waist and kept her close. He had savored the moment, despite his frustrated desires, and inhaled her scent before extracting himself and preparing for the day.

The first grey light of dawn was cast against the shoji screens as he had precisely knotted his obi and leaned down to kiss his intended. When he stood to leave, he caught sight of her kimono out of the corner of his eye. It was exactly as he had commissioned it, which was expected. Aki was a perfectionist. The delicate silks and carefully chosen colors reminded him that he would formally present Kagome before his court that night. It was welcome, satisfying, and made him anticipatory in more ways than one.

Hours later, as Sesshomaru pressed his seal to another document, he reflected that Kagome would soon be bound to him. Not permanently, only a mating and the desire to forge and protect such a bond could do as much, but the use of power that the ceremony required would be the penultimate blending of their life energy. She would accept his claim and make one of her own, before all of those that held power in Japan. He had been working toward that goal since she had agreed to heal Rin. Even before he realized that was his intent, even when his mind had clouded the issue and couched his desire, his need, in terms of political power, honorable obligation, and strategic alliance he had been seeking a way to keep her at his side. The heat that was always present at the thought of his miko surged and tightened, pressing against his organs in a way that was still unfamiliar, but not unpleasant. His instincts, too, were eager, pacing tightly inside him with obvious restraint.

The formal announcement had implications beyond his own personal goals. Although, those were no less important to him. Mating a human, a holy human, was an irrevocable statement. It declared his steadfast decision to accept the humans as allies, as potential equals. It denied that there was any force or fate that Sesshomaru could not overcome. Even his natural enemy, a miko, would be brought into the West and serve to protect and defend as Sesshomaru commanded. That was the message he would send to all in attendance. It was a message that would be carried to every corner of Japan within a fortnight. A satisfied smile split his face as he followed that thought to its logical conclusion: Ryukotsukken would know that Kagome belonged to Sesshomaru. The Saidai Mao would make a claim, and none would challenge it – or they would die at end of his claws.

A polite pulse of youki and unnecessary throat clearing brought his attention to Kento, who stood at attention near the door. Sesshomaru did not bother concealing his grin, to which Kento raised a brow. The guard on duty in the antechamber caught sight of it through the open door, and blanched. Regretfully, Sesshomaru schooled his features into his usual blank mask. It would not do to have his soldiers fearing that he might decapitate someone in his own house. It did not stop his thoughts from playing out in his mind, however. Even as he nodded to Kento to encourage him to speak, he was imagining the

many ways he would imprint his scent and claim on his miko once the ceremony was complete. The tension in his chest increased minutely.

“My lord,” Kento bowed deeply. “The honorable Matsudaira Nobutada requests an audience.”

Sesshomaru could feel the strong, controlled aura of the human war lord in the outer chamber. He smelled of the soaps that had been provided to all guests, a simple meal of miso and rice, and patience. The Saidai Mao nodded. He was interested to hear what Matsudaira had to say. The quiet lord was cunning in his reticence. His opinions had been purposefully absent from many discussions, but Sesshomaru knew from reports provided by Kimi as well as his own excellent observations of expression, words, and scent that the human was not given to announcing decisions until both the situation and the timing were orchestrated to optimal benefit.

“Sesshomaru-sama,” the war lord bowed, and the daiyoukai gave a calculated nod in response. It would be beneficial for the human to feel that he had the respect of his host. Not that Sesshomaru would have considered giving that impression if it were not true. He did not waste his effort on false accolades or attitudes. He was not his mother. The human sat where Kento indicated, on a cushion placed before Sesshomaru’s desk. The floor had not been raised in the room; but while they were on even ground, the youkai was still a head taller. Kento poured tea, and the youkai enjoyed the scent on the steam as he waited for a point to be made. He was not left to wait long.

“I must again express my gratitude for your invitation. I am honored to be welcomed within the home of such a noble daiyoukai. It is in the best interests of Japan, to have ties between our people. And our houses.” Matsudaira sipped, his face complacent.

Sesshomaru allowed one brow to quirk in interest. *Direct, perhaps even disrespectfully forward, if this were not cutting to the heart of the matter*, he thought to himself. Not even Hirimoto had drawn the conclusions that Sesshomaru had seen so clearly from the time he first proposed inviting the humans. The Full Moon Council was not merely a means to a temporary alliance against the North. It was precipice upon which the future of youkai balanced. Only a long-term association, forged in blood and power, would ensure that the West had no enemies among humans that could not easily be defeated. There was more than one way to spill blood. More than one way to secure power. Sesshomaru had never given the alternatives particular consideration, before recent events, but he was well aware of the utility.

“Indeed,” he responded shortly.

“I have hope that one of my sons, perhaps my oldest, may be able to continue to secure that interest.”

Sesshomaru set down his cup carefully. *He speaks of Rin*. It was intended as a compliment, he was aware. Despite the fact that his station and power were significantly higher than Matsudaira, the human would view it as an offer of the highest respect and providing advantage to both lords. Humans valued female children less than males, and adopted children below those born of blood. The daiyoukai knew this. Knew that Matsudaira was offering his oldest son, one who would have easily been accepted as a match to any firstborn daughter of a human lord with appreciation. Sesshomaru controlled his first response, which was to wrap his youki whip around the man’s neck and press him to the floor until he learned his place.

“If I might interject, my lords,” Kento said smoothly.

“Hn.” Sesshomaru breathed deeply, reminding himself that he needed alliances. *Ignorance is not insolence.*

“Rin-yojosan is first in the House of the Crescent Moon. She has been adopted *of his blood*. Among in-youkai, she will inherit unless Sesshomaru-sama names another child of his line.”

There was a strained pause, during which a variety of emotions flashed through Matsudaira’s scent. All were subdued and quickly repressed, but Sesshomaru gained enough insight to know that the human recognized his misstep, and would attempt to correct it. It was a balm to his honor. “Forgive me, Sesshomaru-sama. It appears I am less knowledgeable in the ways of your kind than I had hoped.”

That was enough to allow Sesshomaru to forgive the slight. The idea that his oldest child would be considered suitable for an alliance mating with a human lord- despite his wealth and political power – could be considered merely distasteful if it was suggested out of misunderstanding. “This One has others within the West better suited for such calculations.” Kento’s relief was palatable, at least to an inu, and Sesshomaru repressed the urge to cut his eyes to his secretary. He might have enjoyed the mental image of punishing the human, but he was far too controlled to act upon his desire.

“I was not aware there were other children within your House, Sesshomaru-sama. My heir was born fourteen winters ago; my next son is only six. Do you have another daughter or niece of appropriate age, or would you consider promising your next born daughter to my youngest, who is just teething?”

“The other females in This Sesshomaru’s pack are too young for your sons. They will not be appropriate for mating for several centuries.” Matsudaira’s eyes widened fractionally, but he nodded with acceptance. “A female youkai of lesser station and power would be appropriate.”

“Lesser?” Matsudaira’s expression gave away nothing, but his scent carried a quickly buried spark of irritation.

Kento would have intervened again, but Sesshomaru held him back with a raised hand. “It is no disrespect This One offers your House, Matsudaira. The least of those that you might be offered for consideration may bring wealth, power, and *years* to a son of your line.” He placed his emphasis with a light touch, but Matsudaira proved himself to be as astute as the daiyoukai had hoped. Kento smelled of surprise and interest.

“Years? How is such a thing accomplished?”

“It will become clear at the ceremony tonight.” Sesshomaru picked up his cup again, and waited for the war lord to consider his offer. It was not done lightly. Should Matsudaira agree, he would need to procure at least two females for the man to choose from. There were quite a few rather distant relations that were unmated and of appropriate age, but they would also need sufficient power to succeed in a blending of youki and spirit, as well as an open mind regarding union with a human.

“I have also a daughter, similar in age to Rin-yojosan,” he said slowly. Sesshomaru listened with attention. *Surely he does not suggest a union with the kit? The girl-child will be stooped with age, if not dead, before he is mature.* “This courting would give a measure of youki life to a human?”

“Perhaps,” Sesshomaru answered, still curious as to what end the lord was suggesting. He had already explained the difference in growth and maturity between humans and demons. Uncharacteristically, he found himself elaborating, “It is rare. But it may be done.” His voice was sterner than he had intended, but that was acceptable. He had already sensed some changes within Kagome; changes that assured him that his youki had begun to sustain her, to nourish her body as it did his, promoting long life and resiliency. However, he could not be certain of success until the mating was complete.

“She is...dear to me.” Sesshomaru could sympathize with the sentiment. He too, had ones dear to him. He had even considered placing some of his youki within Rin, to ensure her lifespan. He had not yet attempted it, as he wished to discuss the potential effects with Kagome. He had concerns for how human growth might be negatively impacted. He had determined he would wait until after the mating to solicit his miko’s opinion once she had evidence of the process and results for comparison. Matsudaira continued, “I have heard of your half-brother, and his deeds in pursuit of the Jewel of Four Souls. He fared well with human companions, and I understand he has been welcomed in your House.”

Sesshomaru could easily say that he had never been so completely taken by surprise in his entire life. The human lord sipped his tea. Kento buried his face in his work, although his covert sniffing was not unnoticed by the Saidai Mao. Sesshomaru stared, stone-faced. Matsudaira Nobutada was suggesting that his family be allied with the West through a mating between the lord’s cherished daughter and Inuyasha. It was Sesshomaru’s right, of course. The hanyou was his younger sibling, a member of his pack. The alpha could arrange any courtship he desired for those under his power. Although an actual mating could not be forced, in practice many couples had entered into such a state with little else but familial and political pressure. Sesshomaru tried to imagine what Inuyasha would say to that decree.

Fuck no.

The corner of his mouth tipped up, unbidden. Matsudaira did not miss the unusual expression. “Have I offended you in some way, Sesshomaru-sama?”

The daiyoukai continued to smirk, unable or unwilling to control his features. Inuyasha, dragged into a political mating. The idea was...humorous. And prospectively destructive. But also rife with potential for taunting his half-brother. He forced the strange notion away for later consideration, instead focusing on the more immediate issue in Matsudaira’s suggestion.

“Inu no Tashio’s hanyou. In this house. Where would you hear such a tale?” They had been depending on the elimination of the spy and Inuyasha’s reputation to secure the interest of the North. If word of Inuyasha’s amicable stay in the West, or worse, Sesshomaru’s acceptance of him into his pack, had become so widely known that even human lords were aware of the situation, Inuyasha would be in grave danger. The entire strategy that had been constructed could fall apart.

“Only from Miko-sama, I assure you.” Matsudaira seemed aware that there were deeper concerns at play, for he did not mince words. “Until I reached your shiro, I was unaware that the Shikon Miko, companion of the inu hanyou that helped defeat Naraku, resided here. Nor of any connection between that warrior and your House.” He spoke seriously, and Sesshomaru returned it with an appropriate measure of respect. As well as a small ration of trust beyond what he had ever given outside of his pack, excluding Hirimoto and Bokuseno.

“Inuyasha-san cannot be known to have This Sesshomaru’s respect.” Sesshomaru paused, “Not yet.”

Matsudaira moved his broad shoulders in a motion that seemed to convey understanding, “Of course.” The human set down his cup, and Kento poured for both lords again. “However, should there be a respected male of your House, of appropriate age, in the future, I would make considerations for my daughter.”

“That One, should he materialize, would not be welcomed by you unless he was of willing heart,” the daiyoukai warned. Reassurance that his plans were well in hand allowed Sesshomaru to dwell on the subject of alliances again. “But it shall be noted favorably.”

Matsudaira nodded in acceptance. “Until then, perhaps we may consider the other matter.”

Kento discreetly laid a sheaf of papers at his elbow, detailing the lineage of those unmated females on the fringes of his family line. Sesshomaru wondered what Kagome would say to the notion of mating off Inuyasha. *She will smell of pepper.* It would be several hours until the ceremony, but if he finished the business with Matsudaira quickly, he might find time to discuss it with her while she ate. The heat in his chest flared again.

“Hn.” He picked up the papers, determined to construct a bridge between two peoples, as well as satisfy the human lord before the next meal. Then he might satisfy some of his own needs as well.

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Kagome breathed slowly, calmly, trying to achieve something close to a state of meditation while Aki fussed with her hair. *More like designed,* she admitted to herself. Despite being a spider demon, Aki did not have eight appendages, but one would never guess from the rapid way she constructed and deconstructed hairstyles. After the first three attempts were declared ‘not quite right’ Kagome had stopped counting. She had finished lining her eyes with kohl before the youkai arrived, and had anticipated that there would be tea and chatting before they began getting ready for the ceremony.

Wishful thinking, Higurashi, she thought with longing, glancing to the tea tray that still sat on the low table in the anteroom. She realized that it had been foolish to think that anyone would expect it to take less than three hours to get ready. At home, in the future, Kagome could have been ready for a black tie event in less than an hour – not including her bath, of course. Considering that her outfit was already chosen and cosmetics had been restricted to a rouge powder, kohl, and lip gloss the prep time seemed excessive. *I bet Sesshomaru doesn’t have to go through this,* she grouched to herself. She felt justified in placing her bad mood on his shoulders. He had stopped by as she was finishing lunch and helped direct children to naps and lessons before secluding her in their room. Ten minutes of leading caresses and kisses, and one comment that suggested he had something quite funny to tell her – and then Kento was at the door, politely notifying Sesshomaru that several of his guests had requested audiences prior to the ceremony. The daiyoukai had not been pleased with the interruption. His youki made that clear to everyone in a hundred foot radius. But he still left with a searing kiss that had Kagome tingling and bothered.

Dwelling on a manufactured irritation with Sesshomaru was vastly preferable to thinking about the evening ahead of her. Kento and Kimi had coached her on the ceremony and she was sure she knew the process – she just felt completely inadequate to the execution. Nerves were wrestling in her belly. Naked, raw, nauseating nerves that made her squirm uncomfortably.

“Oh, Kagome-sama,” Aki said with disappointment. “I’ll have to start over now. And that one showed real promise too.” Kagome apologized and returned to fuming about her unsatisfying afternoon. At least she hadn’t been forced to sit through any more meetings. *Unlike Sesshomaru.* She squashed any pity for the daiyoukai.

The time to head downstairs was drawing close when Aki finally sat back with a smile on her face. She refused to allow Kagome the opportunity to check her reflection, but hustled her into the new kimono and escorted her past the rock brothers to the ima where Hirimoto was waiting for her.

“You look ravishing, little one,” he smiled broadly as Aki bowed and disappeared. No doubt to dress herself. All of Sesshomaru’s important vassals and their mates had been invited to the reception that would follow the ceremony. And the big event, Kagome felt her nerves growing again, would be outside so that everyone at the shiro could attend.

“Thank you, Hirimoto-sama,” Kagome tried to smile, but she wasn’t sure she succeeded.

“After tonight, you must not speak to This One so formally, Kagome-san,” he said gently. He presented his arm to her and Kagome carefully lifted her hand to hover over his sleeve. Given their height difference, she had to hold her arm high, more so even than with Sesshomaru. She swiftly realized that even the comparatively few layers she was wearing would feel like a lead weight by the time they reached the reception hall. As if he could sense her train of thought, Hirimoto unbent his elbow to lower his arm. “You will be held as an equal with other nobility. Once the mating is complete, your station will be above all but the Saidai Mao.”

Kagome was aware he was probably trying to make small talk, to help calm her nerves. The idea that she was effectively becoming a princess in one evening did not settle the razor-winged butterflies that were stirring in her stomach. She made a non-committal sound.

“Of course, there will be a great deal of shock when you are presented.” Hirimoto looked down at her, his dark eyes sparkling with mirth, “Kimi-san was correct, as usual, that making the participants in tonight’s ceremony a surprise would garner more attention. Sesshomaru-sama’s guests are buzzing with-”

“They don’t know?” Kagome interrupted. She could feel a frown forming, and forced her face to smooth out. It said a great deal about how her confidence in Sesshomaru, in his feelings for her, had grown and solidified recently. It did not occur to her that he was ashamed of his engagement to a human. That did not mean, however, that she understood his thought process.

“No. Of the Council members, only Kimi-san and This Hirimoto are aware. It will be a test, a way for the West to better gauge which lords will fully support a long-term association with another race.” They were approaching the division between the private, family portion of the shiro and more public areas where guests were allowed. Hirimoto lowered his voice, “You must maintain your honor and dignity, regardless of what happens. The future may be decided tonight,” he said seriously.

You have no idea, Kagome thought with a wry smile.

They began the long, careful journey down to the main level of the castle, and additional guards fell in behind them. Hirimoto offered a last consolation, “If the situation should become...tense...please do not fear. No harm will come to you.”

The time for open conversation was at an end, but Kagome could not help but murmur, “Of course not. I will be with Sesshomaru.”

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“Your attempts at subterfuge grow repetitive, Tsukahara. This One may become insulted if you are unable to expend more effort.” Kimi flicked open her fan and hid her smile behind it. The eagle daiyoukai was obviously frustrated, but he was baring the suspense better than she thought he might. His relative patience, and that of the other lords, was due only to their ignorance, she was certain. If they had known that the upcoming ceremony was for Sesshomaru they would have been significantly more eager to discover the identity of his intended. If they had known it would be the Miko no Mao, *well, there was nothing like a little posturing and perhaps a minor bloodletting to liven up a party.*

“Forgive me, Kimi-sama.” Tsukahara nodded deeply, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. His ease was partially due to the sake Kimi had insisted Sesshomaru offer the guests prior to the reception. Two cups was not enough to get any youkai, or thankfully, it appeared, any human, drunk. It was enough to smooth tensions and lift the mood. The secretary at his side was equally genial. “You cannot deny that this is your doing however. It has been many years, but I well remember the intrigue and excitement your gatherings were infamous for. It was not so long ago that a Blossom Festival was punctuated by an execution, an elopement, and at least two claim challenges.”

“Your memory betrays you,” Kimi brushed a silver lock over one shoulder, to emphasize how little involvement she had in any of the happenings at that particular gathering. Which was, of course, patently untrue. “The execution was only sentenced, not carried out – and the guilty party was only one third of the elopement.”

“Ah, yes,” the eagle’s secretary chimed in, “I believe the males managed to *both* successfully mate her before the Eastern soldiers caught up with them. It was all quite scandalous.”

Tsukahara smiled wider. “Yes, Kuren-san was nearly overcome with humiliation that his cousin had taken a kitsune to her bed. To find out there were two – brothers – *that* had him refusing to even speak her name for decades.” The secretary laughed, but Tsukahara turned knowing eyes on Kimi. “It does give one pause – to wonder – how those two managed to get into a holding cell secured by the renowned inu soldiers of the West.”

“An interesting question indeed,” Kimi waved her fan lazily. She did so love a party. “The answer is unfortunately lost to all but the individuals in question.”

“It would be quite a tale,” the secretary considered, “if they could ever be found to relate it. It was rumored that they had sailed east-” His musings were cut off as Hirimoto entered with Kagome on his arm. Kimi’s smile grew more sentimental and less mischievous. She hid the expression with her fan. The human looked exquisite – enough so that she was the equal of even youki beauty. Her cheeks were a soft pink, her skin smooth, her lips glistening red like cherries covered in dew. Aki had outdone herself with the miko’s hair as well. It looped and swirled softly on the top of her head. The whole concoction appeared quite delicate, as though it might come tumbling down at any moment – or perhaps had recently been displayed so wantonly. She was the perfect dichotomy of purity and desire. Elegance and untamed spirit.

The kimono Sesshomaru had selected enhanced the image. The outer robe was golden yellow, the exact shade, Kimi reminisced, of Toga's eyes. Belatedly it occurred to her that Kagome would no doubt have said it matched those of the current Western Lord instead. Pink and red cherry blossoms danced along one shoulder, stitched petals fell down and gathered in realistic whorls towards the bottom. At the collar, hem, and side splits a green under kimono was revealed. The black and green obi was tied simply, emphasizing the miko's figure. Her hair sticks were jade, and even from across the room Kimi's keen eyes could make out the carvings of the tale of the Jewel of Four Souls. The colors and pattern were a statement, to any who cared to think on the matter. Kagome had been arrayed as a symbol of growth and power. Purity and nobility. Eternal life.

My son does nothing by halves, she thought proudly. Aloud, she said, "You must excuse This One. A most honored guest of This House must be greeted." Her companions nodded and made polite noises, and Kimi circled the room as she approached her old friend and his charge for the evening. Snippets of conversation floated to her sensitive ears, and she watched carefully the reactions of those gathered. It was good that Sesshomaru had been called away by an urgent message. One delivered by a breathless rain demoness whose dark skin and red hair carried the faint scent of an army. Although Kimi was eager to hear what news the other son of her mate had sent, it was better that the Saidai Mao dealt with that matter while she handled the milling crowd. A jealous inu was outpaced only by one that felt his pack was being threatened. The few disrespectful comments straddled a fine line. Those in the room admired her beauty and form; Date considered that an alliance might be formed with the West by taking the miko as a third wife. Kimi suppressed a chuckle at the thought. Not only would Sesshomaru have been strained not to skewer the lord for such a suggestion, the Lady knew Kagome well enough to imagine her response. It would be less violent, but far more disgusted.

Uesugi, who was not constrained by the need to politely acknowledge those in her path, beat Kimi to the miko's side. Without either of the daiyoukai of the West to shield her scent, Kagome's discomfort was obvious. Sour melon and the sharp tang of turnips perfumed the air around her, drawing interested stares from those nearby with keen senses. Kimi suppressed an eye roll at the otter's behavior. Gorgeous and cunning the female was, without question, but her stubbornness was also unparalleled.

"Ah, there you are, my little egg with eyes," Uesugi purred as she closed in on her target. Kimi gave the otter credit for boldness. Such an affectionate phrase was rarely spoken in public. The intimacy of the words did not seem to bother Kagome nearly as much as Uesugi's next statement, spoken as she leaned within inches of the woman's cheek, "You must stand by me during the ceremony. While the Saidai Mao hosts such a declaration, we will tease him with the notion that I might steal you away from the West. Do not worry, though, even if he were to take an interest in me, I could not leave you untouched." Kagome's mouth fell open and her cheeks flushed. Kimi reached her side and linked their arms just in time to create a barrier before the raw pepper of her fury could overwhelm Uesugi.

"This One must insist that you take a place of honor, Miko," she smoothly inserted herself into the conversation. The double meaning was not lost on anyone present. Uesugi smirked, Hirimoto coughed, and Kagome blushed ever brighter. "That One will escort you to the ceremony," she nodded to the bear with a quelling glance, "assuming he does not expire from amusement first."

"This once I will allow you to be led away," Uesugi bowed shortly to the miko, then licked her lips in anticipation. "But say the word and we shall steal away somewhere private after the ceremony."

Laughter was barely contained by the Southern Lord, "The miko will be quite occupied, This Hirimoto is certain."

Kimi prodded the bear discretely with her youki. *Males could be so easily distracted at times.* “Sesshomaru-sama is delayed, but will join everyone in the garden shortly. Come, Kagome-san.” The Western Lady ignored her antecessors questioning gaze and swept them both toward the screens that led outside, Hirimoto chuckling in her wake. A servant opened them promptly and soon the three were outside in the chill air. They were alone, for a moment, but it was all the time Kimi needed. “Go with Hirimoto,” she murmured. On impulse, she ran her nose along the human woman’s cheek. Sesshomaru would find the scent-mark irritating, but for once she was not concerned with getting under her son’s skin. She acted on her own desire, to claim the miko as part of her pack. “You look more beautiful than any youkai here. Remain calm,” she leaned even closer and whispered in Kagome’s ear, “and Welcome to the House of the Crescent Moon.”

The woman was smiling and blinking back tears as Hirimoto tugged her away, to a place near the dais that had been constructed for the ceremony. Kimi continued to move through the crowd that was making its way outside, and the servants and residents that were gathering in the courtyard that bordered the garden. Her own eyes felt suspiciously moist. When everything had been seen to and she stood in a place of honor with Rin and Shippo, then Kimi acknowledged, with a smile that was more real than any she had produced in years, that this was a moment of happiness. To see her son, her own Sesshomaru that had grown up too quickly, taken on a weight that should not have been his to bear and risen to meet his responsibilities with honor and nobility, find the one that would complete him – it was a joy to her heart. If Sesshomaru and Kagome could know only a moment of the connection she had shared with Toga in the early days of their union, it would change them forever more. And Kimi knew the young couple would have far more than a moment. Sesshomaru was not one to let anything he desired slip through his claws. Nor, she was coming to know, was Kagome.

“Kimi-sama,” Rin’s whisper was as soft as a human voice could be, and they were far enough from any others that none would over hear. The lady turned her face down to look at her adopted granddaughter. “You must not cry. Kagome-sama says it will ruin our makeup.”

Kimi noted then both the faint, appropriate, traces of kohl and rouge on the girl, as well as the sensation of liquid caught in her own lashes. She snapped her fan into place so that she could remove the traces of very real emotion before any others noticed. “Indeed, little one,” she thanked Rin.

The girl nodded, and tucked her arm through the kitsune’s. “Yes, Those of the West must look most formidable tonight. And pretty,” she added.

Indeed. Kimi allowed a small chuckle.

Chapter 53: Pall Bearers and Feasts

Sesshomaru studied the ameonna before him with an expression as cold and unreadable as he had ever worn. She did not flinch under his gaze, but stared at a space over his shoulder. Her spine was straight, her posture that of a soldier at attention, despite her generous feminine figure and the natural penchant of her kind to the sensual, frivolous, and intimate. Her dark skin, usually on display among rain demons, was covered mundanely in a short red kimono and matching hakama. The dark blue obi at her waist was narrow and functional; the entire ensemble a reversal of his own livery. The lord doubted his brother had done it on purpose, doubted Inuyasha even cared or noticed what those that fought with him wore, but it was a statement that could be interpreted many ways.

“Speak,” he ordered.

“I am instructed to do so to you alone, Saidai Mao.” The words were enough to warrant his wrath, and the female bowed low in deference. However, she did not flinch or smell of fear.

“Who has given such an order?” Hisao’s eyes were narrow, but neither he nor Kento appeared affected by the faint pheromones that swirled around the youkai. The captain already knew the answer, or could guess, just as Sesshomaru did. The scent of his half-brother was easily identified. The female remained silent, but her jaw clenched and Sesshomaru’s ears picked out the tell-tale increased speed of her heart. Interesting.

He turned his eyes to Kento, then Hisao. “Leave This One,” he said coldly. They did not argue or hesitate, knowing, as he did, that she was no threat to him.

The moment the screens slid closed, she spoke, “If it would please you to raise a barrier, Sesshomaru-sama.” His curiosity intensified, but he did as requested. His half-brother had finally found retainers that understood the intricacies of war – or perhaps the monk and slayer had trained them. The youkai met his gaze, and the stench of apprehension began to seep from her pores. It was mild, as all scents from her kind, but it spoke of the gravity of her assignment. Sesshomaru placed his hands flat upon his desk and nodded, inviting her to speak.

“Inuyasha-sama has met with the northern captain, Natsou.” The respect she held for his half-brother was evident, but Sesshomaru did not dwell on it as she continued, “The dragons have attacked the South.”

The rest of her message was relayed quickly, concisely, and then she waited patiently as he summoned Hisao and Kento back. Once they had absorbed the shocking information, the ameonna was questioned and sent to rest and refresh while Sesshomaru formulated a response. He did not have the time nor the counsel that he desired. His war council was waiting on him, waiting for a celebration. His intended, his mother, and the most respected youkai – the friend and advisor to his own father – was waiting on him. Hirimoto had left the South at Sesshomaru’s request, had agreed with keenness to join in a war and committed his own army to Sesshomaru’s command. Even at that moment, he was watching over Kagome, protecting her and waiting to present her before the youkai and human lords.

It would be Sesshomaru’s responsibility to inform him of the death of his sister.

It would be Sesshomaru’s responsibility to inform him of the slaughter of every demon at the Southern shiro.

It would be Sesshomaru's responsibility to command Hirimoto to stay in the West, to summon his army and leave the bodies of his people to rot in the winter sun.

He closed his eyes, for the briefest of moments, and breathed in through his mouth. This was the burden of leadership, of ruling. He needed Hirimoto and his army to defeat the North. He needed the support of the Southern Lord to ensure that the other daiyoukai and the human lords agreed to an alliance. Sesshomaru knew he would have to force the issue. Every instinct the bear had would be screaming at him to mourn his dead, to honor those that had fallen, and to seek revenge. The Saidai Mao would reign him in, for the good of Japan. With force if necessary.

It gave him no pleasure.

"Go," he ordered his two most trusted vassals. "Assign a guard to the ameonna. She does not leave her rooms or speak to anyone without permission. Have food, hot water, and bathing supplies sent up, but no servants shall see her." He stood, smoothing his hands over the precise folds of his black kimono. "Control yourselves, before you move among the guests. The matter will remain unknown, until This One has spoken with Hirimoto."

"My lord," Kento began, then paused. His distress was evident. The secretary forced out a harsh gust of air, and his scent smoothed and lost all but the merest trace of disturbance. "Shall I retrieve Hirimoto-sama?"

Sesshomaru did not respond directly, "The ceremony continues as planned."

It was Hisao who understood his meaning first. "The old tea house would be best for a private discussion, Sesshomaru-sama. It is far from prying ears, and the mountain walls there are solid."

Kento nodded, perceiving his intent. "Tea shall be prepared and waiting at dawn, if that is acceptable."

"Let Hirimoto know to escort This One's mother."

"Additional guards-" Hisao began, but Sesshomaru interrupted him with a raised hand.

"If Kimi and I are unable to hold him, no number of your soldiers would suffice." It was a testament to how difficult the news had been to hear, and how unpalatable the task before him, that Sesshomaru dropped his formal speech. He breathed deeply again, re-centering his thoughts. "Go," he repeated. "This One shall join you in the courtyard momentarily." They bowed and took their leave. Sesshomaru spent a few essential minutes cordoning off the portion of his mind that was considering the strategic ramifications of the news. Another few minutes were required to tamp down his fury over the audacity and dishonor of the North. Precious time was dedicated to setting aside the sorrow and anger he knew his miko would feel when she was told. He was quite late already, when he had finally suppressed the pain in his chest at the thought of Hirimoto's face when he told him of the desecration of the South, and how he must wait for vengeance. Sesshomaru knew, far better than any other, what it meant to set aside personal desires for the larger goals of his people. As he stepped into the corridor and began making his way to the gardens, he was still working to control his own desire to fly north and melt every dragon he found.

The crowd was growing curious, but not overly restless, as they waited for the ceremony to start. Sesshomaru was late, Kagome knew. A shiver danced along her spine. She tried to tell herself it was from the cold winter night, but the excuse fell flat in her mind. Braziers had been strategically placed in the garden to address the comfort of human and more delicate youkai guests, and the warmth of one nearest to the dais was a welcome comfort even through the thick layers of her kimono. Hirimoto's bulk radiated heat at her side, so it was not the chill air that had her uneasy. A hum, like the buildup of static before a small shock, tingled under her skin. After a moment she realized it was Sesshomaru's youki. She had not been without at least a small measure of his energy since she had returned from her time, but the power was usually dormant – lying warm and protective at the core of her.

He is coming. The thought no more than occurred to her then a murmur at the back of the crowd alerted her to Sesshomaru's entrance. She turned her head with everyone else. His white hair stood out sharply, even among the exotically colored youkai, and he was tall enough that he was easy to spot even without the way bodies moved aside, bowing and parting before his approach. The tension under her skin became stronger, and she wanted to chalk it up to nerves and anticipation, but as he drew alongside her she caught sight of the tightness around his eyes and mouth and the hard clench of his jaw. Kagome doubted anyone else could recognize the minute changes in his stoic façade, but she knew something was wrong. She ached to reach out to him, to drag him to a quiet room and demand answers. She wanted to soothe him, not just because his tension made her uneasy, but because she did not want to see him more burdened than he already was.

There was no time for it though. The crowd closed behind him, and Sesshomaru stepped onto the dais that had been constructed in the garden. The full moon glinted off his silver hair – loose and contrasting sharply with the black of his formal clothing. The ice covered pond behind him fairly glowed, and the scene was framed by boughs of cherry trees – blooming and glowing faintly pink with kitsune magic. Her distress was forgotten for a moment as she took in his beauty. The pale skin and delicate markings of his heritage were an elegant wrapping for the deadly power underneath. His golden gaze sought out hers, and for a moment her breath caught in her chest. *This is mine*, she thought, and then his eyes continued over the crowd. Never had she known anyone as honorable, as responsible, as driven, *except maybe Inuyasha*, as sexy, *no one comes even close*, and as perfect as Sesshomaru. She also admitted to herself that she had never known anyone that could hold a candle to him as far as arrogance and ability to infuriate were concerned. She was getting engaged to him. She was going to marry him. To mate him.

She loved him.

Unbidden, her reiki stirred and washed over the youki buzzing under her skin. This was right. This was what she wanted, needed, what Sesshomaru wanted too. Even as she felt her own tension ease, she could see a marginal relaxation of his jaw. Kento approached the dais and bowed to Sesshomaru before standing on the first step. He was lower than his lord, but tall enough that everyone in the crowd could see and hear him. The pale mushroom color of his skin looked softer and warmer under the pink glow of the trees.

“Esteemed guests. Western youkai. Welcome. The House of the Crescent Moon honors you, and asks for your blessings in return, at the Courting Ceremony of the highest in that pack.” There was shifting and some quiet murmurs in the crowd. Kagome could not miss the few pointed and considering glances that were aimed at Kimi. She felt a giggle building in her chest. Sesshomaru was considered so distant

and cold by other youkai that they were more inclined to believe his position had been slighted than to think he was announcing a future mate of his own. Kento continued, raising his voice slightly to be heard above the whispers, “The Saidai Mao, greatest of the Cardinal Lords. Ruler of the Western Lands, Tashio Iwakura Sesshomaru of the House of the Crescent Moon, has chosen a mate.”

Whispers fell into dead silence. It was more than disbelief. More than shock or confusion. The soundless percussion of the crowd’s bewilderment seemed to have struck them mute and nerveless.

Kento continued, “House of the Crescent Moon, name your worth.”

Kimi glided to the dais, leaving the children with Aki, Aina, and Hisao to watch over them. Her faint smile and sparkling eyes were not affected at all by the poleaxed crowd. She gestured with an elegant hand, and Kento bowed and removed himself.

“The House of the Crescent Moon is among the oldest of the noble youkai lines...” Kimi’s voice was smooth and pleasant as she repeated her family’s history, from the first recorded inu that founded her House, to herself, to Sesshomaru. Kagome worked hard to take deep, even breaths and remain calm. Even disregarding Hirimoto’s assurances, she had no concerns for her own safety. There was no one, no group, present that would dare to do more than speak out against the Saidai Mao. Sesshomaru would kill anyone who attempted her harm, she knew. And words couldn’t really hurt her. Kagome had travelled around feudal Japan in a mid-thigh skirt with two unmarried men. She had heard every derogatory name in existence leveled at her. And she had gone to junior high school. There was no possible way that high-born youkai and human aristocrats could outdo fifteen year old girls for sheer meanness.

“Saidai Mao,” the charge in Kimi’s voice pulled Kagome from her thoughts, “name your intended.” There was a collective inhalation; as one, those gathered held their breath. Kagome raised her eyes, and met Sesshomaru’s warm golden ones.

“The Miko no Mao. The Shikon Miko. Higurashi Kagome of the Sunset Shrine of Edo.” His deep baritone spoke with unhesitating intent. The shock of the crowd was both audible and tangible in a surge of youki. Murmurs became clear snippets of conversation, some outright denying the possibility, but most expressing astonishment and disbelief that the Western Lord had chosen a human. A miko. That the Western Lord had chosen *anyone at all*. There was also resentment and envy – a great deal of it for the human woman that had caught the daiyoukai’s eye. Hilariously, one older youkai, of lesser power, noted loud enough for human ears to hear, that he felt pity for the ‘poor little girl’.

Kagome resolutely kept her eyes fixed on Kento’s shoulder. She was afraid if she met his gaze, or Sesshomaru’s, she would not be able to help grinning. Or possibly making some startled, undignified sound and darting off to hide from the eyes she could feel boring into her back. Happiness, exaltation nearing giddiness, and trepidation warred inside her.

“House of the Shikon,” Kagome could feel her eyes widen as Kimi, with four little words, gave her family the respect due nobility. “Name your worth.” Hirimoto stepped forward, and Kagome went with him, just as they had discussed. Hirimoto stopped next to Kimi, but Kagome carefully tread the last two steps to stand beside Sesshomaru. She turned her eyes to the crowd, but kept her gaze above their heads. *Breathe in, breathe out*. The reassuring presence of Sesshomaru’s youki brushing against her did more for her nerves than the calming breaths.

Hirimoto began his part in the formal recitation, “The House of the Shikon has guarded a most powerful relic since the time of the first of that line, the priestess Midoriko. The descendants...”

Kagome had discussed it all with Sesshomaru in advance, of course. They had reviewed the tales her grandfather had often told her, embellishing and making conjecture into fact where human histories had lost names to time. Kimi had told it to Hirimoto, and he would repeat it as a truth; no youkai would scent any hint of a lie in his words. The biggest discrepancy, of course, came between the last recorded descendant, Kikyo, and Kagome’s own family. Saying the two were sisters, or even cousins, was an outright lie that Kimi had immediately scented but had not pressed Kagome to tell her the truth. Kagome wasn’t certain how the issue had been handled, until she heard it herself. “...born to that priest three children. Kikyo, the last guardian of the Shikon. Kaede, the wise. And Jirou, the vigilant....” Just like that, Kagome’s grandfather became Kaede and Kikyo’s brother, and the rest of the lineage was true, if a little earlier than reality.

“Miko no Mao,” Hirimoto turned his eyes to Kagome. He was not smiling, but she could feel the encouragement in his gaze. “Name your intended.”

She took a deep breath. Her stomach was twisting weirdly, flopping a little in her belly. Several hundred youkai and humans were staring at her. There was outrage, sympathy, envy, happiness, and dumb shock in the crowd, but she tried to ignore it and focus on the solid presence of Sesshomaru at her side. Her voice did not shake, which she was grateful for, but her palms felt sweaty. “Tashio Iwakura Sesshomaru. Highest of the House of the Crescent Moon. Ruler of the Western Lands, greatest of the Cardinal Lords. The Saidai Mao.” Sesshomaru turned to face her, and she followed suit. He held out his hand, and she took it, a little embarrassed of the clamminess of her skin.

“Outrageous!” Tsukahara’s voice was clear and disgusted, and it broke a dam in the crowd. Whispers turned to loud conversations. Arguments and pointed gestures broke out in the crowd. Kagome’s nerves skyrocketed. She tried to control it, knew her scent would give away her fear and uneasiness, but there was nothing she could imagine to take her mind off of what was happening. They hated her. Hated that a weak human would get her fingers into a powerful daiyoukai – feared that she would drag him down into the dirty, mortal struggle that they viewed as the human fate. Those warlords in the crowd that found their tongues called out in response. A holy person, a pure miko, should not sully herself with a demon. Kagome flinched.

Then, she got angry. Kagome hated judgmental attitudes. There were few things more petty, more hateful, than denigrating another person for failing to meet standards that were not their own. She thought up every dirty name she had ever heard, and having been Inuyasha’s constant companion for nearly four years, there were a lot of them. She wished at that moment that her reiki could impact humans. *Think they are better than him, than Sesshomaru! Idiots! I’ll tell them a thing or-*

“Miko,” Sesshomaru said quietly. Kagome looked up, and saw not only the fury etched in his cold expression, but felt the warning clasp of his youki around her wrist. She knew what he was saying, without him having to say it. They needed to finish the ceremony. Once it was complete, then they could deal with any who still opposed their mating. She bit her lip, trying to reign in her temper, and nodded. Sesshomaru sent out a wave of youki – sharp, biting, and threatening. The youkai in the crowd, no matter their concerns, recognized it for what it was and immediately settled down. The humans were slower to react, and with more fear. Her anger was still bubbling under the surface, and Kagome recognized that she also felt disappointment. Nothing ever seemed to go *normally* for her.

Sesshomaru's control was tested again, and in the back of his mind he questioned how much more strain he could put on it before he lacerated a few major arteries out of frustration. He had prepared for the ceremony, knew what would most likely be said, thought, about his miko. About their mating. He had planned for that reaction, and for the display that would follow and put an end to all but the most foolhardy of detractors. He had not foreseen going into the ceremony agitated and with the weight of Hirimoto's news on his mind. It was an enormous effort to restrict himself to warning the crowd with his power, rather than overwhelming them and forcing submission.

Kagome's scent was not an ally to his cause. She was nervous and unsettled prior to the vulgar comments; afterward she was angry and sad. Ashamed. Those youkai that called her honor into question, that made her feel less – he would have taken great satisfaction in removing their discourteous tongues for the way they had made his intended feel. The ceremony should have been a moment of satisfaction, of triumph, of happiness, but Kagome would remember it tainted with slurs and disrespect. It was not what he wished for her. However, the ceremony had to continue. It needed to be finished, he needed to publicly claim her as his in the traditional way. Then he could threaten, subdue, and maim as he saw fit.

She understood the import of the event, and controlled herself admirably. As soon as he had warned the crowd and regained silence, Kento stepped in to continue the ceremony.

“The House of the Crescent Moon offers a gift – a symbol of the respect they hold for and the value they place upon Higurashi Kagome.” A servant stepped forward with two simple wooden boxes for Kento. Despite the anger still simmering under his skin, Sesshomaru had to suppress a smirk. He had made a misstep with Kagome when their courting began. *More than one*, he could honestly admit to himself. In this matter, he had spent considerable thought. He had taken into account not only her preferences as he had come to know them, but also the values she placed on various physical things and gestures. He felt that his gift would be well received, and in the supremely improbable event that it was not, he had all of eternity to improve upon it.

Kento, with the servant following, walked to stand behind Kagome and Sesshomaru, facing the crowd over their joined hands. He looked to the lord for permission, and Sesshomaru nodded. Kento selected the thinner of the two items first, as he had been instructed. The box itself was made of a rare wood from far across the sea. Age had darkened it to near black, and a craftsman had fit the lid so well that the seams were completely hidden. With gentle pressure at the corners, the lid slid open, and Kento held the box at an angle so that everyone could view the contents. Sesshomaru could smell Kagome's confusion.

“This One offers eight hundred cho, the land and all that it produces, all that stands upon it, all that lies under it, as well as the sky above it. Sold to the West by Lord Kuren, fifty-three years past.” He spoke loud enough that even the humans toward the back of the garden would be able to hear. Kagome's eyes widened, and she glanced from him to the ornately inked paper in the box and back again, but he doubted she truly understood. He lowered his voice and clarified, watching her closely, “Edo. The place of your shrine. The forest around it. They are yours.”

Her eyes widened to a ridiculous degree and her lips parted. Sesshomaru inhaled, and savored the changing notes in her scent. She was happy. Pleased. Trusting. Surprised. The sweet flowers of her emotions mingled together and made a soothing vapor that stirred a rumble in his chest. He denied him-

self, there in front of an audience, but committed her enjoyment of his gift to memory. It was of significant value, to both the demons and humans present. The size alone was remarkable, and deeding her the rights to all upon, under, and above the ground represented a wealth that would be envied by any but a most prosperous lord. It was the location that he had carefully chosen, however, to catch her interest. The village where her friends resided, Inuyasha's forest, and the well that linked her to her home. Those places held a special place in her heart, and in another time, far distant, it would be the place of her birth also. Sesshomaru was satisfied that he had finally come to know his miko, and what she desired. He had given her *home*. Her blue eyes shone with moisture, but she did not allow it to fall. A tremulous smile tilted the corners of her red lips.

With another brief nod, Kento closed the box and exchanged it for one heavier and more square. It unfolded, carefully constructed to create a display for the contents once open. There was a gasp in the crowd, but he kept his gaze trained on his miko. A slight frown marred her brow, and her eyes still showed white all around the blue, but he had anticipated that she would not understand. This second gift was intended for political results, not to soften his intended's heart.

"This Sesshomaru offers the seal of the House of the Shikon, and all rights, privileges, and responsibilities attached to such." The weighty silver block had been molded with the tale of the Jewel of Four Souls, and the handle shaped to resemble the orb whole and unbroken. The lower portion of the box slid out; a container of dark golden-yellow ink paste ready for use. Her scent was difficult to interpret, but the commotion in the crowd was not. All present understood that the Saidai Mao had used a power held only by him - his position - to grant the Higurashis' nobility in more than name. With the seal and land under title, they had political power. A mating with the House of the Crescent Moon ensured that they would be able to hold and expand that power if they chose. Sesshomaru listened to the comments below him with only one ear, and lowered his voice again. "It is-"

"I know," she interrupted him softly. She reached out with one hesitant hand, but withdrew before her fingers could touch the metal. "Just like grandfather's," she whispered, and Sesshomaru had a moment of confusion. "It *is* his." She turned her eyes back on his, and he understood. The winding, twisting paths of fate and time un-spiraled before him - allowing a brief moment of clarity - and then knotted up again. There was much he could discuss with her, when they had privacy for such a sensitive dialogue. He subtly squeezed her fingers, and waited until her expression had been cleared of wonder and fear before nodding again to Kento. His gifts were put away, and his intended lifted her head proudly.

"Higurashi of the Sunset Shrine of Edo, of - of the House of the Shikon," she added with a small smile, "offers a gift with respect and honor for the House of the Crescent Moon." A second servant stepped forward, and Sesshomaru was irritated by the scent of expectation that rose from the crowd. The young inu female was trembling with excitement and nerves, her tail alternately dropping near her ankles and swishing in the air behind her. She bowed and lifted a small, rectangular box for Kento to take. Sesshomaru was admittedly curious. He did not recognize the shape or make of the container, not that he was aware of every item in the vast storerooms of the West, where he had assumed she would find a gift for the ceremony. A discreet sniff revealed that it, like many of Kagome's personal belongings, carried the strange mixture of odors and trace of magic that signaled an origin on the other side of the well. His curiosity spiked. *What has my miko brought?* The lid was removed; two mismatched pearls were nestled into a bed of white cotton.

Sesshomaru froze for a moment, unblinking, while Kagome spoke, "Two are not enough to replace what was recently so well spent." Her reference to the punishment of Ryukostokken's bounty on Rin was noted, but he did not respond to it. He thought he recognized the jewels, even if the crowd did not

seem to. Swiftly, he confirmed his supposition with a cautious prod of youki. He refocused on his miko, astonished. Her anxieties were apparent, but unnecessary. There were few gifts, few things in his vast treasury, which compared to her offering.

“Ebb and Flow,” she said hesitantly. He realized she was unsure of his reaction, and so allowed his face to relax – unsmiling, but accepting. Her tension eased as well. “Watatsumi’s tide jewels.” There were stirrings in the crowd, some understanding, others still questioning the value of the gift. Sesshomaru determined to put any questions to rest. With a minor application of youki, he stirred the power in the pearls. The green orb pulsed, slowly growing in power and brightness until the entire garden was bathed in a soft glow. As it dimmed, the purple companion became brighter, casting its light out. Those gathered to watch erupted in discussions and exclamations of awe. A relic of so much power, such legend, was rare beyond belief. To see one given so easily, so humbly, was impressive. The pearls continued to mold his borrowed power and their strength increased. His sensitive ears caught the sound of the first cracks of the ice in the pond behind him and the distant swell of the river that surrounded the shiro and village. He swiftly pulled his power back, allowing the deity-blessed jewels to fade.

Kento’s voice rang out above the disquiet, “A courting has been announced. Gifts exchanged and accepted. The couple will mark their intention.”

Sesshomaru had to hold back a fierce sound of possession. He wanted to mark his miko as a mate, but such things could not be done at this time, in this place. There were far too many eyes and ears. Too many clothes, and too little time had passed to ensure that Kagome knew her desire. To ensure that her heart was wholly his. He denied the most base and strongest of his instincts and did as was expected. A small measure of his youki became visible, twining from their joined hands up and around Kagome’s arm, over the sleeve of her kimono. She responded with a warm pink ribbon of reiki. Trepidation was obvious in the demons present, particularly those close enough to sense the purification of her power. Sesshomaru was suffused with a savage pride. The scent of a warm ocean breeze tantalized his nose, but he knew that only he could experience her in that way without being harmed. She was his. Meant for him and only him.

The display of power, of their acceptance of each other, should have ended there. But before Sesshomaru could call back his youki, Kagome increased the energy she had sent out. The ribbon of reiki thickened and widened, the end slipping under his skin and burrowing into him. Their eyes locked, but she did not seem surprised. Her smile was soft and expectant, as though her action was required. Sesshomaru did not have time to question her intent or wonder how she might have concluded that the ceremonial display should become an *actual* testament to their power. Her reiki urged him, teased him, and his youki responded.

Green light flared around him, surrounding her and forcing Kento and the two servants to step back. The lord’s gratification – possession - was momentary as her holy energy retorted. It blossomed like a flower around her, pushing against his power and enveloping him momentarily. The ceremony was forgotten. The pressures of the war, of the decisions and situations ahead of him cast aside for the satisfaction – the, he recognized the emotion faintly, sheer joy of matching her. Being matched by her. A battle of wills took place on the stage, and Sesshomaru was only dimly aware of Kento herding the lesser youkai servants to safety, out of the range of both purification and suffocation. The crowd drew back from the dais, but did not flee – too entranced by the display of raw power. As Sesshomaru was entranced. The heat and energy of her power under his skin always stirred him, but it combined with the gravity of a millennia-old ceremony and those words - *mark* and *intended* – to bring his passions blazing forth.

Kagome's eyes shone with the same heady elation that was swelling in his chest. Her smooth skin was cast in rosy hues and soft shadows – from without and within. Her lips, red and shiny, were parted on the beginnings of a smile. He pushed more power between them, around them, into her, and she did the same with a short laugh. The scent of her desire, cinnamon and citrus, was strong and blended with his own rising musk. Beads of sweat glistened along her hairline, and one dripped down her temple to cascade along her jaw and neck, disappearing into her collar. His lust surged, nearly slipping his control, but it was that which brought him back to his senses. Sesshomaru wanted her. Bare, panting, wanton before him. He wanted to take. To claim. To mark. To mate. *Soon, not here.* He calmed his power, soothed it over the dancing waves of her reiki. Intentionally or not, pink light wrapped around him, shaping his energy into a sphere of green swirled with holy bands. Their power did not merge, it was not one thing. Nor did one or the other find supremacy. They leaned upon each other, drew from one another, strengthened one another. It was a display that could not be misinterpreted by any. Kagome was Sesshomaru's as he was hers, and together they were a force unlike any the world had seen.

Sesshomaru squeezed her hand gently, and Kagome's grin faded. Her happiness and stirred hunger was still evident, in her scent and the gentle tilt up of her mouth, but she calmed. As one they reclaimed what had been released until nothing but thin tendrils of power around their joined hands remained. That and the fading sensation of ocean breezes and lightning. He pulled her against his side so that their clasped hands were held in front of their bodies and he could wrap his free arm around her waist. He held his head bent for a moment longer, gazing down at her face until he was certain he had schooled his expression. When his mask was firmly in place once again, he lifted his head and assessed the gathered crowd. Satisfaction flooded him.

None present were not awed by the displays – of wealth and power. Kagome would be the next Lady of the West, and all would willingly acknowledge her right and the validity of his choice. “Celebrate,” he commanded. His voice was deeper than he would have liked, still affected by the desires his miko had stirred. Desires that were barely under his control. “Eat. Drink. Honor the intended mate of This Sesshomaru.”

He tightened his arm around her waist, carrying her weight so that his movement would not be slowed by her narrow steps. As he descended the dais, the crowd bowed and parted before him. He was intent on secluding Kagome in his study, or the nearest empty room, for as long as possible before he would be forced to rejoin the celebration – or perhaps he might manufacture an excuse not to do so at all. Kagome's small, cool fingers gripped his hand and her warm, minty breath puffed against his neck. His blood was pounding in his ears and his jaw clenched so tightly only the strength of his youkai teeth kept them from cracking. He was nearly to the shoji screens that lead to a narrow corridor and tantalizing privacy when he picked up the silvery peal of his mother's laughter from the other side of the courtyard.

“This One recalls your requirements, Tsukahara-san. A human has proven strength to match a youkai. She has produced artifacts of legendary power. Are you now ready to reenter the Council with a clearer mind and ready decision?”

His hesitation was obvious, and obviously delighted Kimi. “I also stipulated immortality,” the eagle smoothly recovered. Sesshomaru entered the shiro and slid the screens closed behind him.

His keen ears picked up Kimi's response even through the barrier, "Time will prove that as well, Sky Master." *Yes*, Sesshomaru growled to himself, certain of the truth of Bokuseno's statements and eager to continue the process, *it will*.

ooo

Kagome was still coming down from a high of power when she found herself pressed against a wall in a narrow storage room. Her feet were not touching the ground; her weight was supported entirely by the unusually soft surface at her back and Sesshomaru's hands at her waist and hip. His face was buried against her neck, nosing aside the collar of her kimono to breathe heavily against her skin. The near delirium and light-headedness that had followed her use of reiki during the ceremony eased and she became conscious that he was not moving. He did not kiss or lick or nip, as was usual when he had her in private. Warm air fanned against her, making her warm in other places as well, but Sesshomaru did not move.

She lifted her hands and placed one on his shoulder, sinking into the softness of Mokomoko, using the other to cup the back of his head. "Sesshomaru?" she called softly. He did not answer and her confusion became concern. His barrier fluctuated around them – holding, but thinner than usual. She rubbed her palm against his back and shifted slightly. He did not seem upset, but his passivity was strange. "Are you alright? Did I do something wrong?"

"Why," he asked quietly after a long pause, "did you not stop when you were supposed to?"

Kagome was baffled. "Uh, I did? Kimi said I should use as much reiki as I safely-" His growl cut her off, and Kagome felt uneasy. She repeated, "Did I do something wrong?" If she had...if she wasn't supposed to have...*oh, how embarrassing*.

"No, my miko," his voice was deep and rough and followed with a near-brutal press of his mouth against her bare neck. "Never wrong, only unexpected." He lifted his head and in the dim light that filtered through the closed rice-paper screen she could not make out the exact color of his eyes, only the way his lids remained half-closed and the dark slash of his markings on his cheeks and just over his lashes. His fangs fell over his lower lip – his expression hungry. She sucked in a breath, desperate for something to distract her from the heat pooling between her legs. "Such a trial you have become for me," he murmured, squeezing his fingers around one cheek of her bottom. Her kimono felt more confining than ever, and far too warm.

A moment later his words registered, "Trial?" She was *nearly* certain he hadn't intended to imply she was work.

"A test of my control," his head bowed and his lips brushed against her jaw, "my commitment." His tongue swept out, leaving a hot trail straight to her ear. "My dedication," he nipped at her lobe and she shivered. The idea that Sesshomaru could lose his mask of composure, that his cold façade might break because of *her* was heady. Intoxicating. Kagome felt powerful in a way that was decidedly *not* holy.

"Are you passing?" Her whisper sounded breathless in the small room. She shifted again, trying to press closer to him and finding the narrow skirt of her kimono too restricting.

“Hn.” His answer was garbled, but she didn’t mind. She understood what he was saying despite his mouth being full of her flesh. His hot tongue slid down her neck and swirled against the tender connection to her shoulder. He pressed a wet kiss into the hollow at the base of her throat, then gently seized her collarbone between his teeth. Kagome moaned, struggling to remain coherent enough to speak. He felt so good. Her fiancée. Her Sesshomaru.

She squirmed again and something soft tumbled from the wall behind her to land on the floor with a muffled plop. Sesshomaru did not pause, so she ignored it as unimportant. “You know-” she gasped as his hand squeezed again, kneading her bottom almost painfully. “You...you know...failure...” His body pressed heavily into hers, forcing the air from her lungs, but she welcomed it. Welcomed the weight of his pelvis against hers, the grip of his palm in the crease between her hip and thigh. He growled a second time, and the vibration passed from his mouth to her bones – making her muscles melt and then tighten again. She clutched at his hair and he thrust against her, causing more soft objects to fall to the floor. The motion was dissatisfying to them both. He snarled, and she struggled unsuccessfully to part her legs. He released her thigh and collarbone at the same time, only to seek out her lips with his. He kissed her furiously, and broke away only when she was desperate for air.

“It, ah,” his palm found her breasts through layers of silk and expensive cotton. “Failure,” she gasped, “builds character.”

“Pardon?” His polite inquiry was at odds with his frustrated motions to press her closer.

Kagome laughed, breathless and delighted and turned on beyond belief. “Your trial,” she explained. “If you fail to control yourself I am sure you will learn an important, character building lesson from the defeat.” His hands stilled for only a moment before she was roughly pulled to the ground. There was only a second to worry about her kimono and hair, and the anticipated hard contact with the floor, before she was nestled into a bed of silk cushions and mokomoko. Sesshomaru hovered over her, his face cast in sharp shadows and fierce angles. Silver hair caught what little light was to be had and made a glistening curtain around them.

“My character has no need for improvement,” he noted arrogantly. The half smirk on his face and the flash of white teeth kept her temper in check and the teasing easy. “But I am ever generous, with you, Ka-go-me.” He had found the end of her obi and pulled. Despite the narrow cord that held the kimono together underneath it, once the heavy fabric was loose around her waist the neckline gaped. “I will take time to help you build your character, if that is what you desire.” His nose and chin pushed aside her kimono. His lips found the aching mound of her breast.

“Yea-ah,” she breathed out, too far gone, too ready, to care that he had turned the joke on her. The sensation of his youki under her skin was still sparking against her reiki. “Ho-how...” His tongue circled her nipple and Kagome had never been so happy to have decided to leave off her bra for the evening. He sucked and her back bowed. Her hands fisted in his clothing and hair. “Wha- what’s the lesson?” While his mouth had distracted her, his hands had been busy on the ties of her garments. Three layers of kimono parted like water and Sesshomaru released her with a non-too gentle nip.

“One.” He blew across her wet flesh and she shivered, enjoying and tormented by the slick of wet heat growing between her legs. “How to repair kimono in the dark.” He pushed the sleeves off her shoulders, trapping her elbows against her sides but freeing her legs to wrap around him. In the back of her mind, Kagome was aware that she did not want her actual, first-time honest-to-goodness sex-with-

Sesshomaru to be in a closet, but that did not stop her from bucking against him. They both groaned and froze at the contact of moist, naked flesh to clothed, hot hardness.

“Two.” His voice had dropped at least an octave, and she swore she could see a red glow from his eyes. He sat up abruptly, maneuvering her onto her side so that her head and shoulders were in his lap and her legs curled around him. His own kimono fell open, revealing a soft reflection of dim light on pale musculature. The rustle of clothing near her ear alerted her to the movement of his left hand, but she was far too preoccupied with his right to be concerned. His fingers slipped between her knees and pulled the top one into a bend, hooking her leg over the crook of his elbow. The first two fingers, suspiciously – *whatever I have done for this good karma I promise I’ll do it again* – free of claws, traced swiftly up her skin to the place where she ached to be touched. His left hand seized one of hers and led her to his own pressing need, even as his right traced her folds. “Two,” he repeated, desire making his tone gravelly, “The value of balance.” Her lower weight rested on one hip, while her upper body was suspended over his lap, one palm supporting her against his thigh, the other wrapped around his member.

She stroked him, moaning at the duel sensation of him against her palm and his fingers brushing across her clitoris. “How-” she swallowed hard, “how many lessons are there?”

“Three.” He spoke so low, she could barely make out the words. His eyes were most definitely glowing red, but whatever logical train of thought which should have followed that realization derailed as his fingers plunged deeply. His other hand cupped the back of her neck. His fingers twisted slightly, rubbing together inside her. His thumb found her clit again and she barely managed to keep her eyes open as he clenched his jaw and growled to the ceiling, “Three. The importance of silence.” His barrier wavered but held as she traced the head of his cock with her thumb. He retaliated by grinding the heel of his hand against her mound as he thrust his fingers again. At the last moment, she bit her lip, hard, to keep from crying out. Kagome could taste the faint copper of blood in her mouth. Sesshomaru must have seen or smelled it, because he groaned and swooped down to lick at her lips and kiss her, ravage her mouth with his. His fingers found that special spot and he pressed up. Kagome screamed into his mouth.

The precipice was close, she could feel it just out of reach. She panted for breath as he broke the kiss, and belatedly remembered she should be moving her hand. “Good, Miko,” he rumbled. His hand moved again and when she could see past the stars bursting in her vision it was the sight of his flushed cock and glowing eyes that reminded her why the lessons were important. They were in a closet. A few hundred humans and demons – who would no doubt be able to determine what had happened between the two of them as soon as Sesshomaru’s barrier fell – were mingling and eating. Waiting for them to return.

Screw it.

“Can you be good too?” She didn’t wait for his response, didn’t even make certain he knew what she was referring to. Kagome lowered her head and took him between her lips. His hand clenched, pressing down on her clit perfectly while the slightly calloused pads of his fingers went up and in. She might have screamed a little, but her mouth was too full to let the sound out. His shout and the jerk of his hips matched the clench of her own muscles and then she was soaring, sliding, tumbling in a free fall with barely enough presence of mind to swallow before she collapsed into his lap. The only sound for several minutes was of their harsh breathing. She might have fallen asleep there, content – if a little sticky, had Sesshomaru not nudged her hip gently.

“Yeah?” She pushed herself upright, her kimono hanging from her elbows and one leg still suspended on Sesshomaru’s arm. He was smirking. A self-satisfied, sated, arrogant smirk. Kagome didn’t have the energy to work up any indignation. He had just satisfied her tremendously well, in what she guessed had been ten minutes or less. His youki barrier pressed close around them, much more solid than before. The tips of mokomoko twined playfully around her bare ankles.

“Silence is impressively important to you.” His dry comment made her blush. The dichotomy was not lost on her. Naked and with the taste of his cum in her mouth she was perfectly fine, but he even hinted about her readiness to give a blow job and embarrassment flooded her.

“You’re not so good at it,” she pointed out in a mutter.

“Hn,” he agreed. “I was...distracted.” He leaned closer and brushed his lips against hers. “I would enjoy such distraction again, soon.” He was still mostly hard, and whatever acts he was imagining had him twitching and bobbing against her breast where she lay in his lap. “Perhaps, next time, I will distract you.” She spluttered, wishing her face didn’t feel so hot and that she could come up with something witty and sultry to say. His head tipped suddenly to the side, the teasing light fading. Through the one-way barrier, she was aware of footsteps in the corridor. She held her breath, but they did not even pause and continued down the hall. Sesshomaru sighed. “As you have learned two of the three lessons so well, I will assist you with the first.”

He helped her to stand, and began adjusting her kimono in the semi-darkness. His hands brushed, cupped, and stroked far more than was really necessary for the task. Despite the distraction, it became clear to her that he was expecting them to return to the party. Dread and growing mortification knotted in her stomach. Her thighs were sticky and slowly drying, she could still taste the musky flavor of him in her mouth. She was sure any demon would smell it on her, and told him so with a choked voice. “And I’m certain my hair is a mess,” she insisted when he didn’t immediately capitulate.

“I was far too considerate for my liking,” he said calmly and adjusted one of her hair sticks. His touch brought it to her attention that not a single lock had fallen from the elaborate style. *Aki deserves a raise*, she thought, surprised, then shook her head.

“But I still-”

“There is sake in my study. A small cup will remove the taste, if it bothers you.”

“It’s kind of nice, in the moment,” she said distractedly. “But I don’t really want to keep tasting-“ she made a frustrated sound. Her daiyoukai excelled at taking her off-topic. “That’s not the point. I *smell*, Sesshomaru,” she finished bluntly. “I am sure you do too.” Her face was flaming, but the facts needed to be stated.

“Indeed.” He sounded more amused than understanding. His next comment made her eyes widen, “It will be expected, after our ceremony.”

“You mean you- with me – because they would think-” He silenced her fury with an open-mouthed kiss, but Kagome was still fuming and humiliated. It was one thing to sneak away and have sex and leave everyone wondering. It was another thing entirely to have everyone know exactly what you are doing and then have to face them still reeking of the evidence.

“Many couples are intimate after a courting ceremony,” he explained quietly against her lips. “Did you not find it stimulating?” At her slight nod, he continued, “Such a display of power will have no doubt aroused many in the crowd as well. Others will seek solitude before the night is over, and no youkai would condemn another for it.” His hands left the half-done ties of her kimono to cup her cheeks. “We must return, and it will be a long night,” he suddenly grew cold and solemn, “and a longer morning.” He inhaled against her skin, and Kagome was left wondering at what weighed on his mind, and what had been concerning him when he first entered the garden. “However,” he kissed her again, and the warmth, exclusive to her, returned to his voice, “if you are self-conscious, I can assist you.”

Kagome nodded, relieved – up until he sank to his knees and parted her clothing. His tongue was on her thigh before she could protest. One, two...five long licks and he moved to the other leg. “Kagome,” he murmured against her skin, “control yourself or this will be counterproductive.” She was aware of the moisture seeping from her core and the hands she had thrust into his hair.

“Maybe just...a few more minutes?” Her breathless, blushing suggestion was met with a dark, wicked laugh that was quickly muffled. She enjoyed his laugh immensely.

Chapter 54: Mourning

The celebration had lasted just as long as Sesshomaru had feared. Into the early morning hours, he was forced to accept congratulations and well-wishes. He had to endure admiring glances at his intended and the scent of envy and sexual interest. Not the least of which came from Uesugi. His intended, blushing darkly the entire time, had handled the otter smoothly, but Sesshomaru was not fooled. Although she had bowed and offered congratulations as had every other guest, he knew the voracious youkai well enough to understand that she did not feel defeated. Only temporarily thwarted. He was not looking forward to the maneuvering that would be required to avoid killing Uesugi for offenses committed while she attempted to woo his miko. Although the measures that would no doubt be necessary to keep his jealous intended from using the burn of purification to punish the otter for the suggestive comments she made regarding *his* person and intimate skills might make up for the task.

He had also noted, as the event dragged on, that Kimi had obviously intentionally mislead Kagome regarding the expectations of the ceremony. He did not appreciate the deception, although it would have been more surprising if his mother had managed to plan such an event without any intrigue. However, the results were more than acceptable. All present were aware of Kagome's power – her value as an ally, the danger of attacking her – and their mutual desires had been stirred and temporarily sated in a most pleasing way.

He had, of course, been correct in his assessment of their activities as well. Every demon present knew, or strongly suspected, what had taken place in the half-hour that Sesshomaru and Kagome were missing. Several couples also found opportunities for privacy during the night. There were few things that stirred a youkai's lust like a near brush with power. It was, strangely, that effect which may have swayed his most difficult opposition among the demons on the council.

Kenjirosu, with his mate gliding behind him, had approached Sesshomaru shortly before the moon was to set. Kagome was speaking with Shimazu and Hisao – the children having been escorted to bed long before by Aina and Aki. She was close enough that his need to protect and scent her was met, but far enough that with the many conversations underway she would not be able to hear him speak.

"Many Full Moon Councils have I attended, Sesshomaru-sama. And many Courting Ceremonies. This, I believe, is the first that has combined the two." Kenjirosu offered him a cup, and his mate poured sake for both daiyoukai. Sesshomaru was vividly aware that the two water demons, despite their naturally insubstantial scents, had been moved deeply by the outpouring of reiki and youki. The female allowed her sleeves to brush across her mate's arm as she moved away, a small smile at her lips.

"Hn." Sesshomaru lifted his cup in a gesture of respect and drank. The taste reminded him of Kagome's mouth. The flavor of his body on her lips and tongue. The alcohol he had offered her to cleanse the scent. The heat of her when he used his own mouth to make certain the sake had the intended effect. He drank slowly.

"Congratulations," Kenjirosu continued. His stoic face turned to the miko and Sesshomaru tensed, his acid pooling under his claws. Instinct and political benefit were rarely in accord, but he relished the uncommon moment. If a word of threat passed the demon's lips, he would die. "An extraordinary selection, which will undoubtedly increase the power of the West. In the coming days and for generations."

Sesshomaru relaxed. The elemental had not directly praised his miko, which would have been out of character, but his comments were true and held no hidden derision. The demoness refilled their cups and handed the sake to her mate so that he could do the same for her.

“Before discussions resume, I would be interested to hear the details of her experience in the North.” Kenjirosu raised one brow, clearly aware of the threatening roil of youki Sesshomaru emanated. The lord would not accommodate encouraging Kagome to relive her captivity, particularly not with an audience. “Knowledge of one’s adversary is essential to success.” Sesshomaru did not raise his cup, but contemplated the water demon. His allegiance would sway many others to join the West. The unique abilities of the youkai he could bring to battle opened up a myriad of possibilities that Sesshomaru would have to consider.

“If the miko is willing, This One will consider it.”

“It has been many years since a birth was celebrated by one of the Cardinal Lords,” the demoness abruptly changed the topic. “An event most worthy of commemoration, if it comes to pass.”

“Ran,” Kenjirosu cautioned his mate. A look passed between the two, and Sesshomaru was in the surreal position of recognizing a male that had given an order, been considered, and summarily dismissed by his female. He immediately realized that he did not wish to ever be in such a situation, and that it was an almost certainty with the strong-willed Kagome at his side.

“We have not been fated to have such a celebration yet, in our first few centuries together. I find that I look forward to the day when the House of the Crescent Moon is so blessed.” Sesshomaru clenched his jaw. The audacity of the female was staggering, to speak of such things to him, but he could also see the sparkling combination of sincerity and humor in her eyes. The Western Lord of only a few decades prior would have ended her mild teasing with a look; Sesshomaru had changed – his knowledge had changed. Ran and Kenjirosu were some of the last of their kind, and had not managed to procreate. It spoke to the female’s character, that she could admit their struggle, and in the same breath offer well wishes for another to ripen when she had not.

“Ran,” Kenjirosu’s caution became a low spoken warning. He went so far as to cup her elbow with one hand, attempting to reign her in. Sesshomaru felt a moment of empathy; he too had more than once had cause to desire his female to cease speaking – and no doubt would again.

“I have had the pleasure of speaking with your intended. Miko-sama is most...charismatic.” The descriptor did not have any underlying tone that would have slighted Kagome; the water demoness seemed to be honestly charmed by the miko. “Will a birth celebration be held soon, my lord?” Ran smirked. Her mate, for all his cool demeanor and precise logic, appeared at a complete loss for how to salvage what was swiftly becoming a social and political disaster.

It had been many, many years since Sesshomaru had been less than inscrutably cold with any outside of his pack. He reflected that the ceremony, and the interlude directly afterward, had left him in a peculiar mood. “If the miko is willing, This One will consider it.”

The shocked guffaw of Kenjirosu and the delighted laughter of Ran made it difficult to conceal a smirk, but the last hour of the celebration passed swiftly after they had excused themselves. Too soon, he found himself gesturing to Kimi across a nearly empty courtyard. Kagome was standing near a low-

burning brazier with Hirimoto, Hisao and Ayame. Not even the wolf among them would be able to hear his quiet words to his dam.

“Mother,” he greeted her as she arrived at his side. Resplendent in a detailed new kimono and intricate hairstyle, Kimi had been in her element all night. Even after hours of mingling, maneuvering, and manipulating, she was bright-eyed and full of energy. A sharp contrast to his intended, who yawned demurely behind one sleeve and blinked slowly through some story told by the inu captain.

“You look far too dour, my son, for one who has claimed his female quite thoroughly and categorically swayed your political opponents all in one evening. The additional gift of a powerful relic should surely tip even your iron mouth into a smile.”

“I am satisfied.” It was the nature of the world, Sesshomaru reflected with a touch of bitterness, that the moment which should have been a triumph for him was tarnished with the burden of his responsibilities.

“Indeed,” the smug innuendo behind the one word said more than an hour’s conversation. “Your human is quite exhausted. Shall I delay the morning discussions by an hour or more, to allow time for her rest? And your...satisfaction?”

Sesshomaru took no pleasure in ending Kimi’s teasing. “The Council shall proceed at the usual time. However, your presence is required earlier.” He noted the passing glance Hirimoto sent their way, and how the bear’s gaze lingered a moment longer on the Western Lady. Sesshomaru turned on his heel and led her behind a carefully clipped hedge.

“Sesshomaru-” she began, following him at the command of his youki. His barrier snapped into place.

“The South has been attacked,” Sesshomaru said bluntly. Kimi’s eyes widened, her mouth parting in shock. The true emotion displayed on her face was concealed in a fraction of time, but Sesshomaru would never forget the pain that paled her skin and dulled her scent – all for the coming grief of another.

“Tell me,” she demanded.

“Five mor’ mints,” Kagome mumbled into the softness of the futon. Somewhere in the back of her cottony brain she knew that they had to get up and get ready for the last day of the Council. She knew this was an important day – a war declaring day – but she was just so tired. She hadn’t slept well the night before out of nervousness. Then there had been the ceremony and precisely controlling a great deal of reiki, followed by hours of standing on hard stone pavers making small talk with the youkai and human lords. The memory of what had taken place in between sent a warm flush through her. Sesshomaru’s uncharacteristic seven minutes in heaven with her in the storage closet had been the only relaxing thing she had done in more than twenty-four hours. In fact, the more she recalled of the dark room and makeshift bed of seating cushions and soft fur, the more she thought that a few more minutes of sleep could be foregone if her fiancée was willing to help her out in a more intimate way.

“Kagome,” his voice was deep and low. Spoken directly into her ear, it should have sent a thrill of heat down her spine. She knew him too well, now. That particular tone was not his version of sultry. It was her name turned into something serious and concerning that demanded attention.

“Wha?” She sat up quickly, brushing at the crazy tangle of hair falling into her face. Her stomach knotted when she took in his expression. Sesshomaru had never, in the weeks since she had healed him, worn his icy façade when they were alone in their room. It frightened her. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

He spoke slowly, but concisely, about an attack on the South and how that news must be treated. Mokomoko wrapped around her waist and shoulders while he gripped her knee firmly with his claws. His golden eyes bored into hers, not pleading – never that – but willing her to understand that he was doing what must be done. Kagome could feel her heart twisting. For her new friend, Hirimoto, and all he had lost. For his children that would never return to the home that they remembered – not the way they expected to. For Sesshomaru. Her strong, perfect daiyoukai that would ask his friend to do the unthinkable and ignore his grief – his rage. For Sesshomaru that would not, could not, allow himself to feel guilt or trepidation over what he must do, what he would force Hirimoto, a man that had been uncle and friend and advisor to him for centuries, to do if it came to that. Sesshomaru, who gave everything of himself, even his own emotions and needs, to protect the West. For Japan.

When he finished by stating that Kimi and Hirimoto were waiting for him, Kagome cupped his cheek. “I just need ten minutes, less, if you will help me with my kimono.”

“I-” he blinked, then shook his head slowly, without dislodging her palm. “I was not asking you to come with me, Kagome.”

“I know,” she replied. She pressed a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth, trying to convey everything she felt for him in that one act. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

“Kimi will be there,” he said.

“Kimi will be there for Hirimoto,” she said softly. Kagome brushed her thumb along the magenta of his cheekbone, forcefully pushing her own tears down. Crying would not help anything at the moment. “I will be there for you.”

He kissed her back, furiously. It was not passionate, but desperate and appreciative. “It is not necessary,” he wrapped his hand around hers and squeezed gently before standing.

She stood too, and Sesshomaru caught her without a word when she tripped over the blankets tangled around her legs. “It is extremely necessary.” She could see he wanted to argue, so she fisted her hands on her hips and arched a brow. “I am your intended. My place is at your side.” Kagome held her breath, waiting for him to deny her again. It would be so like him, to refuse her comfort, her support. It was true that he would have survived, would have succeed without it. *But he shouldn’t have to*, she thought with a surge of sadness. They faced each other in silence for several long moments. Sesshomaru in his customary white kimono with the red blossoms, his armor and Tenseiga in place, and Kagome in her sleeping yukata, one shoulder threatening to slip off and her hair a mess.

“It is cold. I will select your clothing while you wash and tame yourself.”

Kagome was relieved enough that he was not going to argue the point any further that she let his insult to her bed head go without comment. She washed her face and brushed her teeth in record time. She had her hair combed and pulled into a simple ponytail just as Sesshomaru withdrew her Chinese boots from the wardrobe. He helped her into her socks and boots and tied her obi efficiently before handing her a thick hanten jacket. The symbol of the West was neatly stitched onto the back, the red thread standing out sharply on the blue material. She grabbed her gloves as well, and then followed him into the garden, where he summoned his cloud.

A million stars sparkled in the inky black sky, but Kagome knew that dawn could not be far off. The air was bitter, but she refused to tuck her face against his shoulder. She did her best to soak in the calm, the deceptive peace of the morning before they arrived at their destination. She took deep breaths, sucking in oxygen and the faint scent of cloves that clung to Sesshomaru. She had delivered news of a loved one's death before, during the hunt for the shard. She had grieved with strangers and friends alike. Never had she been in a position to demand what Sesshomaru was going to demand. Nerves and sorrow twined with the ever-present hatred for the dragon lord inside her.

The tea house was smaller than she had anticipated, but still lovely in its simplicity. The structure perched, defying gravity, on a narrow ledge between two high ridges of mountain. A steep path of wooden steps, softened by more than a foot of snow, wound up from the castle below, crisscrossing the mountainside between tall trees and even meandering under the supports for the teahouse itself before flattening out against the narrow porch that surrounded the building. The thin battens that overlaid whitewashed walls were painted a dark red. Circular windows, covered with paper screens on the inside and heavy slatted shutters on the exterior, glowed with the light of a fire within. Kimi and Hirimoto had already arrived.

"I could have gone, if you had woken me sooner," Sango said darkly.

"Yer too slow," Inuyasha replied without thought. He paused with a wince and clarified, "*Niji is* water, so nobody but an air demon can move as fast – and nobody is as sneaky."

"Sesshomaru doesn't know her, will he believe her?"

Inuyasha resumed his pacing, following the worn path in the dirt floor of the tent. It had been a risk, sure, sending the demoness, but not for the reasons that Sango suspected. Sesshomaru would smell the truth in her words easily. The problem would be if anyone caught sight of her in the castle and wondered where she had been and where she was going. All the shrouding and lying was making his skin crawl. Never, in his centuries of life, not even right after he met Kagome and got the subjugation beads, had he wanted to kill something so badly and not been able to do so.

"He'll believe her. Question is, what will he do about it?"

"He has a plan, Inuyasha. You have to be patient."

"Keh," he snorted, "that's easy for him to say. He's lazing around at his palace with Kagome while I am stuck listening to that fuckin' dragon. Ice prick needs to get off his ass and stab something." In-

uyasha stopped and stared blankly for a moment. “Never thought I’d want Sesshomaru to be more of a killer.”

“He isn’t exactly having the time of his life, you know. I saw some of those lords, and Kagome and Kimi-sama talked a lot about the council. Would you really switch places with him and sit in meetings day after day listening to people debate?”

“Fuck no,” he swore. “I just wanna...do something!” His youki burned inside him, rippling under his skin with uncomfortable anticipation. He breathed heavily, taking in the reassuringly solid scent of his friend. *The dry leathery-wood of teak. Delicate, spicy camilla tea. Heavy, thick taste of hemlock. Muffled traces of renkon.* “We don’t have a lotta time to waste, not if we’re gonna keep up this pretense of him and me bein’ enemies.”

“Pretense?”

Inuyasha ignored Sango’s smile and crinkled eyes. His friends liked to tease him, but he wasn’t stupid. He’d had some schooling before his mother died, and then Myoga had tried. Kagome even left some books lying around that they both knew weren’t for her benefit. Books that were about stuff useful for him, in his time, but were written in simple kanji. Education aside, it didn’t take a scholar to know that things were going to get bloody - fast, as soon as the first blade was drawn. Inuyasha knew, he had been in that situation before. He often had only the barest moment at the start of a fight before his enemy realized that the hanyou had been underestimated. In the coming war, they would have one battle, one instant, where they could turn their enemy’s advantage into a weakness. If they missed their chance, the North would be able to divide their forces.

Added to that was what he had learned and guessed from his conversation with the dragon hanyou. Inuyasha didn’t trust a liar with wings any better than one without, but he still had a lot to consider. He was in command of his rag-tag army; he was responsible for gaining Ryukostokken’s trust and using it against him. There was more than one way to get close enough to stick a blade in the fucker’s ribs, Inuyasha just had to *pick* one. And there was the real problem. His internal tension made his youki flare again, and he had to close his eyes and count to fifty before he got it back under control. Sesshomaru had given him the responsibility of a captain in the Western army – without any of the training and experience that went with it. *The self-serving bastard.*

He must have spoken aloud without realizing it, because Sango responded, “Not formal training, no. But you have more experience in battle than many in Sesshomaru’s army, I’m sure. And you are certainly far more experienced than any other full youkai your age.” She stood next to him and placed one small calloused hand on his shoulder. “Sesshomaru would never have trusted you with this if he didn’t think you would succeed. He might be a,” she blushed and swallowed hard, “an, ah, ice prick.” Inuyasha chuckled at her discomfort in repeating the insult. Sango continued, “but he knows how strong you are, how capable you are. That is what I told him when he asked, and he agreed with me.”

Inuyasha could feel his own blush rising and had to look away from Sango’s serious gaze, “You, ah, you said that?”

Sango was silent for long enough that Inuyasha had to look up and find out what kept her from speaking. A smile twisted the corner of her mouth. “Despite your foul mouth and complete lack of manners, you are my friend, Inuyasha-san. But friend or not,” she leaned forward, too far into his personal space

for his comfort, and poked him in the chest. Her brown eyes narrowed and her smile fell into a sterner expression. “I would not follow you into battle if I did not trust you, as a warrior and a leader.”

“Well,” Inuyasha’s eyes widened and his voice faded off. Sango was the best tactician he had ever fought with or against – including Sesshomaru. If she had been born a demon, she would have given his half-brother an unpredictable challenge. He cleared his throat. *Enough of the sap*, he thought. “Well, that’s fine then. Just, just make yourself useful someplace out of sight. I gotta go check on that scaly asshole.” He turned and left the tent, muttering to cover up a pleased blush, “Hope they cleaned that jackass up. I could smell him losing his stomach all across camp this morning.”

Arashi frowned at the little clay vessel in his hand. For once, his lord had surprised him with something that wasn’t completely ill-conceived. Distasteful, yes, but much of a spy’s work was distasteful. And the tasks that weren’t tended to rest on the side of abhorrent. He leaned back against the edge of the window opening where he sat, one leg on the sill and the other dangling outside over the ocean. Even through the spell-sealed container, he could feel the power of the concoction. The old witch Ryukostokken had contracted with was as malevolent as she was vicious, but she had made good on everything she had promised the dragon lord.

“She must drink it all – quickly. The female will become dulled to all senses, as if in a walking death. Then you must speak the name to her – Ryukostokken. What is said to her after, before the time that she wakes, that will be made true in her mind. She will know it, feel it, believe it as does a fanatic. Tell her that her feet have been embedded with fiery barbs, and she will scream when she walks. Tell her that she must come to the Northern Lord, and she will cry and bleed for every step that she takes and still walk across the whole of the earth to reach him. That name which is spoken to her will become her entire world.”

“She will equally fear and desire This One.” Ryukostokken’s eyes had taken on a red glow of his youki as he spoke, and Arashi could taste in the air his lust – for the miko’s body as well as the power over her. “You will make it so, half-breed. She will kill to flee the West and come to me. She will beg to use her power in any way I command. Beg to have me punish her, abuse her, reward her - if I choose.”

“One moon, my lord,” the witch warned. “From the time she wakes from that deathly sleep until the strength of my magic wanes. The course of one moon and then the compulsion will begin to fall.”

“This One will not need more. The miko will have nowhere to run, no one to save her, within one month’s time.” The Saigo Mao pressed the small bottle into Arashi’s hand, the stench of sulfur wreathing his breath, “Ensure it is done.”

Distasteful, but yet... There was opportunity within the dark and unnecessary desires that the Northern Lord sought to satisfy; although, what he had proposed would ensure only the miko’s absolute hatred of Ryukostokken, and most likely every dragon in the sky. Arashi’s research on the woman had taught him much, most importantly that she would not break easily. The lord had also underestimated his opponent – again. It was a matter of ego, but Ryukostokken could not even allow the thought in his mind that Sesshomaru might be his equal, much less his superior. Arashi had no such selfish blinders. He

could not afford them. It was unlikely in the extreme that Sesshomaru would allow his prized priestess to simply walk out of his castle – calling for the inu’s hated enemy. Even if such a thing were to occur, the damage that Ryukostokken and his arrogant lust could cause to what could be a beneficial relationship with the strongest holy power ever to exist was unimaginable. *No*, Arashi corrected himself with a wry smile, *it was quite imaginable. Unfortunately.*

He rolled the brew between his palms and considered the possibilities. Anything spoken to the miko would become true to her. For one month, she would believe those words regardless of her personal thoughts or feelings, regardless of how reality might conflict. He had not asked the witch, although the idea had immediately sparked in his mind, but it stood to reason that if the name “Ryukostokken” had to be spoken to her, than another name could be substituted. Any individual could become the focus of her month-long obsession. And while the dragon lord, of course, thought only of her pain and his pleasure, there were many other suggestions that could be made. More uses for a woman who wielded a power nearing that of a goddess than merely a whipped whore.

“Is that the Saigo Mao’s boot licker, there, or has some other sweat-stained half-breed wormed his way into the castle?”

The cutting tones of the wind demoness lanced across the empty arcade and surprised Arashi; he had not heard her footsteps approach. He casually slipped the potion into his kimono, despite knowing she could not see the object, and turned to face her. As always, he was struck by the contrast of her station and her bearing. She walked with a straight spine and her shoulders thrown back, as though she owed nothing and none owned her. Her pale hair, a color that defied description – sometimes blue or yellow, even silver or lavender, was pulled into a high tail that did not move as she did. No doubt the air around her held even her clothes in place if she desired it. It was a strange dichotomy represented by the female in her simple, unadorned kimono. Her power was exotic, few wind youkai had survived the purge of elementals in the North, and her strength untapped. That strength and poise contrasted to her position, the lowest of the low among Ryukostokken’s slaves. She was transport – comparable to an oxen – and a warm body to slake the lord’s lust. Still, despite her treatment during the decades he had known her, she maintained a superior quality.

In his less guarded moments, Arashi admitted to a keen fascination with Ko, but those were few and far between. More often he kept his thoughts to her utility, far beyond the menial tasks her master set her to, and wondered when that unparalleled strength would be sapped. It was not a prospect he enjoyed dwelling on.

“Boot-licker, perhaps, in the colloquial sense,” he responded lightly, “but if you seek one stained with sweat, you had best look elsewhere. Oh,” he exclaimed, as though just noticing her milky eyes, “that would be difficult, would it not?”

“Ah, yes, such witty charm.” Sarcasm dripped from her words like venom. “*It must* be the unacknowledged issue of the North. How come you to be back here so quickly, and without your brother-in-arms?”

For a moment, Arashi hesitated, turning her insults over in his mind. They traded barbs each time they met, but he had to consider that her words had a deeper meaning – one that he needed to know, or one that he did not want others to have knowledge of. Either could be disastrous for Ko’s continued health.

“Natsou is occupied in my absence,” he replied slowly. “One half-breed is valued as lowly as another, in his accounting. It does make one wonder how he manages his finances.”

“Poorly,” she answered quickly, then stopped, and shut her mouth with a snap. Arashi was intrigued by a pale pink that rose on her neck, stemming from the fading fingerprints just above her collar and rising to the tips of her pointed ears. “One as revered as Natsou for his skills on the battle field has no need for the ability to count grains of rice. That is best left to clerks.” Her monotone praise for the captain was patently false, but the words were enough that any prying ears could not fault her for dishonoring one of her betters.

“As you say,” he inclined his head politely. Ko deserved the gesture, even if it was unknown to her. “You have returned swiftly as well. Was your brief holiday south to your liking?” Arashi watched with interest as full, red lips tightened and flattened into a hard line – pressing the blood out of the flesh. *Ah, not to her liking, then.* “And from the sky, did dragons enjoy watching the little bears scurry home after your visit?”

“We travelled by sea,” she stated shortly.

That was information well received by Arashi. If there was movement, one direction or another, by the enemies of the North, the spy preferred to be the one reporting it to Ryukostokken. Or choosing not to report, as he determined was best. He would need to gather information on the Southern army before he could make further plans, and a great deal would hinge on Lord Hirimoto. While Arashi had contemplated moves and countermoves, Ko had glided closer to him. He did not dare move, but he was aware of the firm stance of her legs and the angle between them. Her breathing had evened into precise, deep breaths. Her hands were oddly free of her sleeves and held relaxed and wide near her waist.

“With the stench of so many dark humans descending upon us – that aged witch first among them, your foul odor is barely worth noticing.” Arashi filed away that bit of information. He had met one witch, but if Ryukostokken was bringing in other magic wielders, it could change his tactics. “Will you leave again soon? Or does the Saigo Mao have footwear that needs spit-polished?”

Arashi tilted his head at an angle, wondering at the female’s motives. He was aware that she had no loyalty to the North; in fact, she carried a deep hatred for Ryukostokken that he had warned her, obliquely and overtly, to conceal. He had not seen any indication, however, that her rage extended to him. Irritation, disappointment, disgust, yes, but not hatred. Not a desire to end his life. He carefully tested her intent. “Soon enough. The lord has want of my talents.”

“Which talents would those be? Lying? Thievery? Assingation? Killing?”

With a silent flick of his tongue, Arashi tasted her scent. *Crushed, dried leaves. A whisper of wood smoke. Smooth green tea.* The spy knew the taste of every youkai in the North; the knowledge was essential to his cause. As he savored Ko’s essence, rolling it around in his mouth he became aware of another flavor. A sourness. He struggled to place it while he spoke, “I would humbly suggest that I can accomplish more than a single task at one time.”

“And you always follow your master’s command.”

It was a bitter statement, and it sent a tingle of warning down Arashi’s spine. *Ume plums*, he finally identified the taste, a fruit he had never liked. What it portended, he could not yet determine. Still, he

knew he needed to respond carefully. Ko had long been a source of information, her allegiances clear, but his words could condemn them both if spoken without care. “What I do, I do without regret for the honor of the North.” His tongue flicked out again, and he could not help how his mouth twisted with the explosion of sour that overwhelmed the taste of her.

“Only a fool has no regrets,” she whispered harshly. With a flick of her hand, the milky clouds in her eyes cleared, and Arashi was shocked to see the focused green intensity that bored into him. His speechless immobility lasted only a moment, but it was all the time Ko needed. Her hands flattened, palms out and pushed forward. Their flesh did not connect, but a mighty gust of wind blasted into his chest. As carefully as he had been perched, his balance was still easily overcome by the youki-fueled air.

He fell backward out the window, knowing the rocks below were intended to crush the life from him. Ko leaned out, watching with eyes not as blind as he had believed – as any believed – to see the evidence of his death at her hands. She had revealed more than one secret to him, and Arashi knew that the one he would be forced to give up in return was well worth the information. He controlled the release of his youki expertly. Dark wings unfolded and beat the air inches from the rocks. The hazy grey light of day, filtered through a misting fog, glinted on the frigid waters below as he executed a tight circle and settled on a disused dock, slick with slime and ice.

His youki retracted just as quickly, as though it had never been, and his body reformed with the same speed. The tingling pain of the sudden transformation and reversion still rippled under his skin as he tilted his head back to see the window. He caught only the flash of white and pale blue as Ko turned and fled inside.

Arashi could feel the slight weight of the potion in his kimono and the wet spray of salt water against his boots and legs. Opportunities were swiftly opening before him, he needed only to weave them into his strategy. *A secret for a secret, Ko-san. But will you fear exposure more than you believe I would? And what has given you the courage to become an assassin?* A smile played at his thin mouth and he began the tedious hike across the sharp rocks to the castle entrance.

Hirimoto was waiting for them in the little vestibule at the front of the tea house. He had already changed into the thick, warm tabi socks that had been provided. His sandals and discarded socks were neatly stored under the bench where he sat. He smiled widely, wagging his eye brows, and Kagome was relieved and ashamed to have to look away. The bear probably thought she was embarrassed by his innuendo. Under other circumstances she might have been. As it was, she could not hope to conceal the scent of her riotous emotions if Sesshomaru had not provided his barrier for them both.

Hirimoto noticed the lack of odors, and commented slyly to Sesshomaru, “In too much of a rush this morning to bathe? More important activities keeping you busy, eh?”

“Hn,” Sesshomaru responded coldly, and sat between Kagome and Hirimoto to remove his boots. The other lord laughed, and it stirred hot coals in her stomach. Kagome would have given anything in that moment to change what needed to be said. To change the need for the saying. To travel back to a time of her choosing and truly have the power to change the past.

A bell rang, clear and perfect in the early winter morning, and all three stood to enter the tea room. Kagome was the last to take her turn at the bowl of water that had been provided for purification. Once she had dried her hands, she looked up, hoping and fearing that she would catch Kimi's eye. When the Western Lady entered she gave Kagome no such opportunity. Her kimono was heavy and formal. Her face painted artistically to highlight the sweep of her lashes while the remainder had been powdered white. Her mouth and nose disappeared into the blank canvas, concealing any expression that might have seeped through Kimi's control. Kagome wished for a moment that she had though to do the same. She doubted she could make it through the ceremony without giving away her state of mind.

Kimi seated herself formally behind her tray of implements and began the cleansing ritual without speaking. It was a time to allow the guests to clear their minds and focus, but despite the elegant and precise movements of the lady's hands and the soothing steam of the water, Kagome was not focused or eased. An ulcer burned her insides and she had to bite her lip to keep from frowning. She was grateful that Sesshomaru remained in the center, shielding her from Hirimoto. From the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of his stoic face. Perfect, cold, and ruthless. He was what he needed to be – even to someone as close to him as Hirimoto. Her heart ached for him. For them both.

Without Kagome realizing, Kimi had finished preparing the thick matcha tea. She held the bowl before her and bowed deeply, offering it to Sesshomaru. He placed his hands, without touching his mother, and returned the bow before turning the bowl and sipping at the green liquid. He offered the tea next to Hirimoto, and the bows and rotation were repeated. Sesshomaru brought the bowl to Kagome, and she sipped and bowed as the ceremony called for it. The tea was excellent. Perfect. It tasted like cardboard in her mouth.

Kimi cleaned her equipment and carried her tray through a screen at the back of the room, before returning to rekindle the fire. She did not bring the expected food and thin tea with her when she returned, but added charcoal to the fire and placed her hands in her lap.

“Are we not-” Hirimoto began with mild amusement, but Sesshomaru interrupted him.

“The Northern army had made an attack upon allies of This Sesshomaru. Breached in their stronghold and taken by surprise, they were massacred without honor or mercy. None present were left alive.” His voice was flat and hard, his face turned to the bear. Kagome watched Hirimoto's expression move from ease to shock to anger. “It is a diversion to divide the forces under This One's command and pollute with vengeance minds best left clear for war. This Sesshomaru cannot allow the enemy to succeed in this endeavor.”

It was a split second, less than that even, before Hirimoto grasped the meaning behind the discussion. Kagome wished that moment could have lasted longer. A minute, and hour, all of eternity so that a youkai she called friend would not have to realize the truth. A roar shook the roof and made the tea utensils clatter nervously. The sound was filled with pain and anger unlike anything Kagome had ever heard. There was no time to soothe, no time to question and grieve. Hirimoto's mouth had not even closed before his youki exploded around them. Even through Sesshomaru's barrier she could feel the fury of the bear's power. It incited her own reiki to rise.

Kagome found herself outside, the snow seeping into her socks, before she realized what was happening. Sesshomaru's tall back was between her and the tea house, his mokomoko withdrawing from around her waist. She leaned around him and gasped to see the finely carved wood and ancient roof

tiles shatter and blossom onto the mountain. Mekomoko covered her face, protecting her from shards of the building that shot through the air.

“No! NO!” Sounds continued angrily, but no more words came from the remains of the building.

“Protect yourself, my miko,” Sesshomaru commanded, and then he was gone and her face was abruptly uncovered.

Where the tea house had been perched, there was only a pile of splinters and crushed terra cotta tiles. In the center stood a great bear, two stories tall and just as wide. Muscles rippled under thick brown fur and Hirimoto’s jaw opened to let out another roar. His eyes were red, the gold hairs reflecting and catching the light that shone there until he looked to be crying blood. His massive hind legs bent and tensed, ready to jump. Another storm of youki, more familiar to her, blasted the mountainside. The reassuring white mass of Sesshomaru stood between her and Hirimoto. His tail was straight, the fur on his neck raised and his teeth bared. The two youkai had a conversation voiced in growls and grunts, howls and roars that sent her reiki to glow protectively at her fingertips.

Hirimoto snapped his teeth and, like a coiled spring released, he jumped into the air. He was met with the bulk and deep bark of a massive white dog. They both crashed to the ground, sending powdery snow spraying everywhere. Kagome was blinded momentarily by the icy dust, but the crack and crash of trees being felled by the battle was unmistakable. Her heart clenched in her chest and her hands fisted without thought. Holy pink light wreathed her, ready to defend Sesshomaru if it became necessary. She prayed it would not.

It seemed like time crawled by until the air cleared and she could once again see. The two demons faced one another, both breathing heavily and snarling. Hirimoto again tried to leap out of the little valley and away from the mountain. Again Sesshomaru herded him back to the ground. Despite the advantage in size and strength, Sesshomaru displayed several red patches of fur where blood had matted the hair. The bear showed no signs of injuries. *He’s holding back.* Kagome had no sooner had the thought than Hirimoto snarled and charged the great inu. Unlike Sesshomaru’s deadly elegance, the bear was made of broad planes and heavy bone intended to crush enemies, not slice them open. He hit Sesshomaru just behind his foreleg; the weight behind Hirimoto’s heavy skull produced a sickening wet crack and Sesshomaru slid back on the snow. He held his weight off of that paw and shielded his side. Stern chuffs and woofs were no doubt intended to calm and admonish, but Sesshomaru did not appear to be accomplishing either. The longer the fight continued, the angrier and more reckless Hirimoto seemed to become.

Kagome refused to see Sesshomaru be injured further. Refused to allow Hirimoto to endure the shame he would feel when he realized how he had hurt the Western Lord. “Stop it!” she cried, but neither youkai paid any attention to her. “Stop!” she yelled again, the second time with a wave of purification that drew the eyes of the giant inu, and the wrath of the bear. She had only wanted them to calm down, for Hirimoto to calm down and listen. Kagome locked eyes with Kimi, standing untouched in her silks on the far side of the rubble. The priestess had no way to appease the demon that opened his mouth on a roar and rushed at her.

Moving too fast for human eyes to see anything other than a magenta silk blur, it was Kimi that ended things. Youki swirled and stormed. Snow was kicked into the air again amid a cacophony of snarls and growls. When it settled, Kagome’s eyes found Sesshomaru first. He stood straight and tall, not a hair out of place, with blood dripping from a cut above his eye and a bruise beginning to darken on his jaw.

He held one arm stiffly at his side where he had last been hit. His golden gaze met hers for a moment, and his eyes narrowed, but he swiftly returned his focus to the two youkai before him.

If a photograph had been taken in that moment, Kagome was sure a viewer would think the two nobles entwined in a passionate embrace. Hirimoto had his hands clenched at the bottom edge of Kimi's purple obi, his face tucked down against her much lower shoulder. The Lady was braced against him, leaning up to thrust one hand through his hair, the other balanced on his bicep. Her face was hidden in the crook of his neck. It was intimate, but the targeted weight of Kimi's youki made that image an obvious lie. Kagome's eyes saw what her senses were telling her a moment later as Hirimoto sank to his knees. Kimi bent at the waist to follow him down, and when she straightened and turned, her face was dripping with blood.

"Go," she said to Sesshomaru. Her voice was low and sent a chill down Kagome's spine. When she opened her mouth again, it revealed sharp fangs stained dark pink. "Your miko will see to your wounds. Eat. Tend your Council." She did not lick the blood from her chin and it dripped onto her chest, staining the elaborate silver embroidered flowers at her collar. Kagome shivered involuntarily. She had always been aware of Kimi's power, but in that moment, she saw the terrible beauty in the inudaiyoukai. She was a creature of absolutes that would not be thwarted, not even by the love of her greatest friend. She was a ruler, in every sense of the word, and her will was fact. Kagome prayed that she would never see Sesshomaru and Kimi in opposition. The world would bend and break and crumble away under the force of their wills.

"My responsibility-" Sesshomaru began in a heavy tone, his eyes flashing.

"Has been fulfilled," Kimi finished. Her face was cold, and her voice remained devoid of emotion, but her shoulders relaxed slightly. The sloping line gave her an aura of exhaustion. "It is done. Grief must be allowed, then you shall have obedience."

"Mother," his voice had a note of warning, his youki still tense and large in the new clearing.

"Saidai Mao," she snarled. Kagome took an involuntary step backward, her reiki flaring under the oppressive weight of youki. Kimi's eyes burned red and her power became a tangible, visible whorl of amber sparks around her legs. She leaned forward, exposing Hirimoto and threatening her own son with wicked claws. The bear remained in the snow, the hem of his kimono wet with melt and his eyes downcast – defeated. Dark blood stained his collar and hair. As quickly as she had moved, Kimi withdrew her youki and her aggression. "Allow me this, my son," she said calmly. The shining brass of her eyes beseeched him to understand. "See to yourself, your Council, and allow me to see to my old friend."

Sesshomaru was silent for a long moment, and Kagome held her breath fearfully. Finally, he nodded and walked stiffly to her side. He was hurting, she could see that, but the worst of his injuries were more traumatic and less easy to cure than broken skin. He did not speak to her, only wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to his good side. As they rose on his cloud, she looked back on the decimated tea house and the two forms kneeling together, their heads bent and hands clasped.

Chapter 55: Declaration

Kagome had finished wiping the blood from Sesshomaru's skin and pushing his broken ribs back into his body when a breakfast tray arrived. She fetched it silently, hoping not to wake the children, and returned to their room. The daiyoukai remained just as she had left him, still and uncommunicative, seated with his legs crossed and chest bare on their futon. Bakusaiga lay at his side, his stained kimono discarded on the floor. She could feel the weight of his gaze on her as she poured tea and arranged bowls of soup. He was angry.

She doubted anyone else would have ever recognized it. His youki was tightly controlled, his face impassive, his spine straight despite the pinkened bandage that wrapped around his chest, holding his bones inside until his body could heal the damage. Kagome understood the emotion. No doubt he was angry with himself, with Hirimoto, with Ryukostokken and even his own mother. She set down her cup after only one sip and reached out to touch him. *The situation he had been forced into, because of his position and the actions of an evil-*

"Do not ever do such a thing again," Sesshomaru said quietly.

Kagome paused, hand hovering in midair and fingers barely inches from his knee. There was a moment of confusion where her brain could not reconcile her own train of thought with his cold expression and words. He spoke so low, so deeply, it was almost a growl.

"You will not disobey This One."

Oh no. Kagome thought with dismay and a tiny amount of heartbreak. Then her temper surged. *Oh. No.* "Excuse me," she said carefully. She hoped he could hear the anger she was holding back. She hoped that after the problems and resolutions in communication over the last several weeks, after he had fought beside her against Naraku and seen her stand her ground in arguments against his brother, against him, that he would realize he was making a mistake. Deflecting his emotions into anger against her was uncalled for.

"You were ordered to protect yourself." He did growl then, and his golden eyes narrowed on her. His youki was hard and hot in the room, reaching out and pressing against her, down upon her, trying to pin her in place.

"I did what I thought needed to be done, Sesshomaru – which I have always done." Kagome breathed deeply and counted to five. *He's hurt, he's lashing out, he is more than this,* she reminded herself. "Which I will always do."

"Fool," he snarled. He moved, the suddenness startling although it was much slower than she knew he was capable of. His hands latched onto her upper arms, pulling her toward him, but not into his lap or an embrace. He held her awkwardly, suspended a half foot from his body with her legs tangled in her kimono and stretched under her. "You would have been killed. Weak, fragile, human," he growled, "dying to protect those that do not need it. Being slaughtered by One more powerful than you can imagine. Fool," he repeated.

They stared at one another for a time that stretched out painfully, both angry. Both hurting. Oddly, it was Kagome's reason that returned first. He was afraid. Ashamed of what his responsibility had de-

manded he do and afraid of the consequences to her. “Do you really think that’s true, Sesshomaru?” She spoke softly, trying to break in behind his angry gaze and find understanding. “Do you really think I’m not powerful enough to stop Hirimoto?”

“Power,” he made a sound that was caught between a derisive snort and a growl. “Power means nothing if you will not use it. To stop another you call friend, when they would be injured, to hurt one that is not your enemy. No, my miko-” His voice broke and he looked away. Kagome didn’t move, almost didn’t dare to breathe, despite his hands tightening painfully on her arms. Sesshomaru was struggling with something inside himself, something she would never have believed him capable of feeling. He had been worried for her life, not because he thought her weak – but because he believed her too soft-hearted to cause another pain.

He had been worried for her. And he was focusing on that in order to silence, at least temporarily, the memory of Hirimoto, bleeding and grieving in the snow.

“Have I ever hesitated before, Sesshomaru?” She watched his eyes close and his throat moved as he swallowed. He did not respond, but he was listening. “When Inuyasha, my best friend, would have destroyed everything around him in his rage, did I ever hesitate to use my power to stop him? Even if he got hurt?” His eyes remained closed, and Kagome tried to brush her hands across his shoulders. Her biceps spasmed in pain, and his hands tightened reflexively, so she settled for cupping his elbows. “You have to trust me too, Sesshomaru. I make my own choices, and you have to believe in me, or this won’t work.”

ooo

Sesshomaru breathed shallowly, not because of the dull ache in his slowly mending ribs, but in a futile effort to keep her scent out of his lungs. He had overreacted, was overreacting, he knew that. Kimi’s actions had surprised and overwhelmed him, if it was possible for such a thing to occur. His mother had taken his responsibility upon herself, had forced her will upon her own closest friend. Whether she had acted to spare him from doing so, or out of a belief that she could ease Hirimoto’s pain and anger, he did not know. But to hold himself back from injuring the bear, holding his power in check while attacked, and then to see his opponent turn on his intended – it had been more than he had thought to prepare himself for. Kagome wasn’t hurt, wouldn’t have been hurt. One blast of her reiki shield, which she had been working on with Kimi for more than a week, would have startled Hirimoto out of his blind attack. And if it had not, Sesshomaru would have brought his true strength against the other lord. Instead of allowing the bear to vent some of his frustration and grief against his own flesh, Sesshomaru would have pinned him down and broken Hirimoto’s jaw before he let Kagome be injured. He knew that, but still he struggled with the lancing terror that had nearly severed his spine when Kagome drew the attention of a half-crazed daiyoukai.

It would have been better if Hirimoto had done greater damage to This body. He pushed that thought, and the sour emotions that went with it, deep down and refocused on Kagome.

It wasn’t that one instance. He was aware of that as well. It was the reminder that she would always be smaller, more fragile, more kind-hearted than any enemy that would try to hurt her – to hurt him through her. Their courting ceremony and the time they had spent together had only strengthened his instinct to protect, to shelter. Even while he realized that she needed his safeguard less – he wanted to give *more*. It took everything he had to not crush her in his embrace. To not force her down to the futon and punish her disobedience, her independence, and then force her to accept his dominance and shelter.

To pin her down and mark her, brand her, with his scent and his teeth and claws until she cried out his name in submission. For all he had done to extend her life, she could still be taken from him. He wanted to lock her away so that nothing could ever hurt her, not even herself. The effort to shackle those urges caused most of what she said to fade into the background.

“...my own choices,” her words finally penetrated his haze of emotion and struggle for control, “you have to believe in me, or this won’t work.”

My choices are my own. He had always lived by that edict, and his intended voiced the same steadfast belief. He knew her strength. Knew her power. Was proud and intrigued and aroused by those things in her. He simply did not know if he could let her choices outweigh his need to keep her safe. He did not know if the things that he cherished in her were worth more to him than the whole of her, at his side, forever. In the moment of indecision, Sesshomaru breathed deeply of her scent and became aware of three things simultaneously.

She smelled of trust. Patiently, Kagome was waiting for him to agree with her, to give her his faith, as though it were a foregone conclusion. It made a recalcitrant part of him long to do the opposite.

He loved her. It was a logical conclusion. Her happiness, her security, her life as she wished it to be was more important to him than even his own needs. He was aware that the emotion existed, even among youkai. He knew the symptoms. Despite the suddenness of his revelation, it was not surprising. It was Kagome.

His hands were overly full of soft flesh, his claws dangerously close to piercing her skin.

Sesshomaru relaxed his hold immediately and swept her into his lap, burying his nose against the side of her neck. *Magnolia, silky and fresh with dew. Cherry wood new and sharp. Warm gardenias. Sour niguari melon. Sweet carnations.* His chest cramped with pain, reminding him of his injury. Her breath puffed against his hair. One small hand came to rest on his jaw and caressed him lightly. He breathed again. She would be, already was, everything he needed her to be. It only remained for him to accept that gift.

Mokomoko tightened around her, pulling her close and supporting her while he reached for her abandoned soup. His fingers brushed hers and he met her eyes when he handed it over. The wide blue of her gaze was worried, searching, piercing him straight to his heart. Her lower lip was caught in her teeth, the ripe red flesh abused. “Are we-” she began at the same time he started,

“I am-”

They both stopped, and she smiled. It was small and sweet and began the process of easing the tension in him. “You first,” she said.

“I apologize,” he said simply. She didn’t ask him to explain, for which he was grateful. Instead she stretched out an arm and snagged his tea cup, sloshing a small amount over the rim and onto her fingers and the bedding. “You must be more careful. More vigilant.”

“We will talk more about it later,” she promised easily, but there was a weight to her gaze that he took seriously. She held the tea out, and rather than taking it he drank from her hand. “I’m sorry too,” she

softly. “For Hirimoto, I mean. I’m sorry for what he is going through, and sorry you had to be the one to tell him. I will wait with his children, when he tells them, if you think that will be okay.”

He could not manage his characteristic ‘hn’ but only nodded. It was an experience unlike any other, to have the burden of his responsibilities recognized and the weight shared. They ate in a silence that gradually became more comfortable. His own meal finished, Sesshomaru pressed a kiss to her head and evaluated the state of his injuries while he reviewed his plans for the last day of the Full Moon Council. “After the meeting,” he said finally. “Hirimoto has more that he must do, first, and his children cannot know until that is complete.”

She was uncomfortable with it, he could tell by her scent and her fidgeting, but she nodded. “Will it take very long, do you think?”

He did not answer her directly, but pressed his mouth gently to hers. She tasted of tea and miso, of soft heat and sweet flowers. “Allies will declare themselves today, and enemies make themselves known. There will not be much time, after this. There are still those who will report on the outcome of the Council. The news will ride on swift wings North, and Ryukostokken will know all that align themselves with the West.”

“Spies,” Kagome muttered with disgust. Then her expression turned thoughtful and Sesshomaru was again reminded that his intended, his miko, was far cleverer than the average female. “Why say so at the meeting then, why not-” her eyes widened in sudden comprehension, “Oh!”

“Yes,” he confirmed for her.

“Sesshomaru,” she said, with a smile that bordered on wicked and made him forget, for a short while, the terrible gravity of their situation, “I didn’t know you were so sneaky.”

He pressed another kiss to her mouth, then one to her jaw, directly below her ear. “I believe you have been introduced to my mother.”

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Kimi found her seat at the council table and silently thanked her kitsune mother for long lessons in misdirection and concealment. Her lips smiled, her eyes sparkled with amusement. Her mouth teased and mocked. All while her chest was gripped in a vise. She had, early that morning, forced her oldest and dearest friend to submit to her. She had used superior youki to break him and command that he set his grief aside. There were very few days when she did not relish, or at least enjoy, her role as Lady of the West. Today was one of the few.

Sesshomaru was still in private meetings, and Kagome had not yet arrived, but Kimi knew the fierce miko would soon. After the newly announced couple had left the remains of the tea house the inu demoness had stayed there for several hours with Hirimoto. By the time they had both cleaned up enough to be respectable and slipped back into the palace, Kimi wished for nothing so much as to forget the day. To make them all forget the day. But that was not to be. They all had responsibilities greater than themselves. Greater than their wants and needs. Greater than love or grief. So she had bathed and changed and made an appearance in the gardens, in the breakfast room, in private meetings with lords that still struggled with what role they would commit to in the coming war.

Matsudaira entered and they nodded to one another. Tsukahara took his seat midway down the table and gave quiet directions to his secretary. Kagome entered only moments later, on Hirimoto's arm. Kimi had declared that the bear would escort the priestess, and it was a calculated choice. Although Hirimoto kept his youki controlled and his face blank, close inspection by any who had known him more than a few decades would have revealed that something was wrong with the Southern Lord. However, with the newly intended mate of the Saidai Mao beside him, few in the room even spared a glance for Hirimoto.

There were polite greetings and congratulations, innuendos, and knowing smiles. The miko blushed hotly, and without Kimi or Sesshomaru to conceal her scent, the light natural fragrance of the human was washed with embarrassment, anxiety, and a floral note that some would call infatuation or lust, but Kimi knew to be love. The sensory spectacle distracted eyes and noses from the uncommon tightness around Hirimoto's eyes and the deeply buried storm of his youki. He brought the miko to her seat beside Kimi and then stepped around to his own place across the table. Makoto sat behind his father; ink and brush ready like all of the secretaries in attendance, but his curious smile was directed toward the human female. Kimi locked away any stray thoughts as to what that youth would soon become privy to, and what he would have to endure.

All of the attendees had taken their seats by the time Sesshomaru entered, and Kimi raised a shield around Kagome as the Saidai Mao stalked to the head of the table. A mother could always recognize when their pup was hurting, and Sesshomaru, despite his stoic expression and deadly intent, was injured. His fight with Hirimoto had broken ribs, and Kimi could sense the swirl of his youki around the wounds – but Sesshomaru prevented it from healing entirely. He was hurting, but the physical pain was only a reminder he was forcing upon himself of the emotional ordeal. *So much that is necessary is bitter on the tongue*, Kimi thought. He settled gracefully, and tea was poured before servants withdrew and screens were silently closed.

"You have been called here to answer the West. Your decision will be heard today." His voice was cold and hard, and every demon and human in the room reacted to the serious tone and grew still and quiet.

"I offer my support to the West and Lord Sesshomaru," stated Date, breaking the silence. He bowed his head to the Saidai Mao with an arrogance that concealed how his support had been forced. Others near him voiced their accord, including the wolf demoness. Kimi's eyes skipped ahead as the conversation moved around the table; she watched the faces of those who were not yet the center of attention. She already thought she knew who would leave and who would stay by Sesshomaru's side, but a change of heart from one of the lords was not impossible.

Matsudaira, from his place at the far end, was quiet for a long breath when the declarations reached him. "I have listened much these past days, and considered how the outcome of this discord, and potential alliances, might benefit my family in generations to come. I have looked to many of you, listened to your arguments and your concerns. In the end, however, it is only my mind that can make this decision for me. Only what is in my heart matters – how I feel my actions may best serve my objectives. I will not stand with you, Sesshomaru-sama." There was a gasp from someone along the table, and a muttered curse from Date. "I do not side with your enemy, but I shall not gather my warriors and march with you."

"Go," Sesshomaru said flatly. The human lord stood and bowed deeply, first to Sesshomaru, then to Kimi, and departed. Anticipation contracted low in her belly and the Western Lady had to force her

muscles to relax and reign in her instincts. The declarations were slow to begin again, and were kept short. Most supported Sesshomaru. Only one minor youkai and two more human lords took their leave.

One of Kenjirosu's supporters was next to speak when a commotion in the corridor became loud enough to disturb even the humans. The screens snapped open and a panting, wild-eyed bear youkai entered. He managed only a disgracefully shallow bow before dashing to Hirimoto. "My lord!" he cried. "The Southern Palace has been attacked! Dragons flew in from the sea and surprised our sentries." Kimi had anticipated the event, had even sent her own interest to slow such a messenger down – just enough so that the news would be timed to arrive during the meeting. Still, she could not help the tightening of her muscles, her instincts readying to fight or flee. Hirimoto's eyes had gone wide, and he was beginning to stand even as the guard fell to his knees in supplication. "No one – your honored sister – they are all dead, my lord!"

His roar was just as loud and painful as it had been hours ago when he first heard the news. Kimi doubted any present, outside of her own pack, guessed that Hirimoto was acting. The bear's fist slammed into the wall and he growled in his own language, *the enemy's soul will be devoured for this*. Another guard, this one inu, appeared at the doorway and bowed swiftly.

"Speak," Sesshomaru commanded.

"A runner has come from the South, my lord. None survived the attack on the shiro, but a human villager saw the dragons flying low at night, some walked through the forest. The human saw some of the attack, but could speak nothing else of it to the youkai patrol." He swallowed, the young dog's anxiety and racing heart making his scent sour. "Initial reports indicate the forces of the South have been halved."

"This is what your waiting brings about," Hirimoto snarled, throwing a reddened glance at Sesshomaru. "Makoto – stay in the West. Protect your sister." He was gone before the young male could respond. Makoto's legs were shaking, his back pressed against the wall and his face chalky. From across the table, Kimi could sense his youki, formless and directionless, alternately fighting for release and curling defensively around himself. He was not even old enough to transform and follow his father.

The room erupted into questions and shouting. The bear guard ignored them all to chase after his lord, so the council members turned on each other. Kimi could smell the stench of fear and anger in the room. The pretense had been calculated, precise, but still she wished it had not been necessary. To be forced to halt one's own deep grief so quickly and suddenly, and then, so soon, to require its facsimile before an audience was brutal.

"This cannot be allowed!"

"Reinforcements should be–"

"–damage already done–"

"If the South was vulnerable, then we all are!"

"–North now, and draw blood–"

“Silence.” As if the sound had been pulled from the room like a flame being snuffed out, mouths closed and eyes turned to Sesshomaru. Kimi looked with the rest, and saw what held them spellbound. The Saidai Mao was fiercely cold and beautifully terrible. His eyes remained cast down at the table, where his large, slender hands rested, palms flat against the wood. Behind him, around him, was an aura of power that threatened to blot out light as well as sound. His youki was made visible – the green so dark it was nearly black. The sound of hearts beating too quickly, of dry throats swallowing, of nervous breaths, were loud in Kimi’s sensitive ears. Slowly, he looked up and Kimi was relieved that he had retained control of himself, for a moment she had doubted that he was acting - as they had discussed. His eyes remained burnished gold, however, cold and calculating. A distant part of her felt pride in her son’s newly displayed ability to manipulate allies and enemies alike. A quieter, mournful part of her noted that the very coldness she despaired of him ever shedding is what made such a deception possible.

“This One will hear your decision,” he said again, the command obvious.

Out of turn, Shimazu spoke up, “This cannot be allowed to continue. My men will fight with the youkai of the West.”

“The trees,” Hitashimashita creaked, concise for once, “support the West.” Other youkai and human lords voiced their support, and then the circle was nearly completed, back to Uesugi that was seated next to Kenjirosu.

The otter folded her hands together carefully. “My people are not warriors,” she began, “we have little to offer in the way of weapons and skill on the battlefield. I do not see that my support would assist the West.” Ayame made a snarling noise in the back of her throat, green eyes narrowed at the beautiful youki across from her. “However,” Useugi continued with a vicious smile thrown at the redhead, “my port is useless without trading partners. And I doubt Ryukostokken will barter fairly.” She turned her eyes on Kagome with a sensuous tilt of her lips; then her gaze slid to Sesshomaru and what had been sultry became dangerous. “I will not allow my markets to be usurped. I will support the West with supplies and information.”

“I was of one mind last night, after the radical display of power in the courtyard.” Kenjirosu spoke with measured words that Kimi recognized for their menace. His smooth, cool voice and blue eyes drew the focus of everyone in the room. “After further discussions, I was of another. And now, this new information...” He paused, considering the empty place where Hirimoto had been seated and the shaken young daiyoukai grieving behind it. “Ryukostokken has invaded the oldest holding among youkai. He has violated the code of honor long established by the youkai courts. He has no honor, no morality, no mercy by which he might be reasoned with.” He faced Sesshomaru and nodded deeply. “Saidai Mao, I will not oppose that which will succeed, but no strategy voiced before this gathering will succeed against such an enemy.”

Without any further discussion, he stood. Before he had even left the room, two other lesser youkai made their statements and hastily followed the water demon out. A guard shut the screens quietly. The shock in the room was evident, but not overwhelming. Kimi watched carefully for eyes and ears that were more interested in their surroundings than the revelations of the first hour of the meeting. There were two she singled out, among the secretaries, whom she would need to point out to Sesshomaru later. Informants could be used against their master, she was well aware. Her smile was firmly in place, and as easy and mildly amused as ever, but her face felt stiff, her eyes overly dry.

“Now then, lords, This One has ordered refreshment, so that you may enter into discussions of war without the distraction of dry throats.” She flicked her youki gracefully and servants bearing tea and light snacks entered. “Please partake. The West thanks you for your allegiance.” She stood, pulling Kagome with her and sweeping out of the room past Makoto’s desk. The miko gathered him up without hesitation and the trio were halfway to the guest quarters, with two of Hisao’s finest guards trailing them, when the cub broke down.

“They’re really dead?” he whispered.

“Oh, sweetie,” Kagome responded softly. Kimi could smell the miko’s tears, mingling with those of the young demon that she swept into a hug. The Western Lady urged them along, unwilling to stand in an open corridor while the son of her oldest friend grieved. War brought hard choices, hard actions upon them all. Later, as she held Makoto while Mitsu keened and wailed into the miko’s chest, she made a silent promise. *I will see that whelp made powerless and alone before he dies at my feet.*

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Inuyasha leaned against the sharp rock wall of the valley and stared into the dragon’s camp. It had taken a full day of retching, another uncomfortably cold night, and a morning of screaming and kicking at his subordinates, but Natsou seemed to be back to his old self. The hanyou’s eyes narrowed. Inuyasha had always been a good judge of character. He had to be, growing up as he did. Knowing when a smile was honest or a mask to get a small, hungry boy alone and unsuspecting had meant the difference between freedom and death – or fates worse than death – more than once in his short childhood. Despite all his bluster towards the three humans - and one annoying kitsune - whom he now counted as his closest friends, he had always known their intentions. He hadn’t always agreed with them – he sure as hell still didn’t always understand them. *Kagome and Sesshomaru, together*, the thought sent a bewildered shiver down his spine. But he knew, just watching his friends, that their loyalty was his. He didn’t always feel he deserved it, but he knew. Just like he knew that Sesshomaru had never really wanted to kill him. Past that, he doubted anyone could guess what was going on in the ice prick’s mind, but that had been enough to forge an alliance against Naraku.

That and Kagome.

He didn’t have Kagome with him, but Sango had his back, which was nearly as good. Better, if there was going to be any actual fighting. And there was. *Oh, hell yes*, he thought with satisfaction, *there is definitely going to be fighting. And blood. And a whole lotta dead dragons.* Inuyasha knew that because he knew people, or in this case, youkai. Knew how to read them. Knew when they were earnest and when their actions and expressions were just a mask.

Almost half of the dragons in Natsou’s camp were wearing masks.

The dragon captain would scream and they’d bow and carry out orders. He’d kick or take a swing at a soldier that wasn’t moving fast enough or maybe just irritated him, and they would apologize and accept punishment. But they didn’t want to. When the Natsou turned his back, there were sidelong glances. Short and easy to miss, but they were there. They tensed when he walked by. They eased away and followed his orders to the letter – but not the spirit. There were a hundred little ways in which those

soldiers were disobeying Natsou, but he couldn't see it. Inuyasha could. He smiled, one fang falling over his lower lip.

"What do you see?" Sango's quiet voice didn't startle him, he had heard her soft, gliding footsteps a hundred yards back, but his little hatchling secretary squawked and jumped about a foot in the air. Drawing the attention of a few dragons at the edge of their camp. They eyed him carefully, but went on about their business.

"Settle down, egg," Inuyasha muttered. "You can't be lettin' somebody get the drop on you like that," he snorted, "or at least try to act like they didn't."

"She's a slayer," Tomago whined, with a mixture of awe and fear in his voice.

"So?" Inuyasha could imagine the raised brow and look of disbelief that Sango was no doubt throwing at his back, so amended, "Just cause there is no way she wouldn't get the drop on you, don't mean you have to act like it. Half the battle is actin' like you ain't impressed by the other guy." Tomago nodded solemnly and thought over his words, making Inuyasha roll his eyes. *Damn kid, thinks I know what the hell I'm talking about*, he snorted, half disbelieving, to himself. He idly picked up a stone and stood again, rolling it between his fingers.

"Well?" Sango asked quietly.

"Well what?" Inuyasha didn't think before he threw the question over his shoulder. If his count was good, and he gave himself some breathing room with the numbers, then Natsou would have only two-thirds the number of warriors that Inuyasha had. That would be half of his group – if, and it was a big if, if Inuyasha could convince the half that had no respect for their captain to lay down their weapons. He figured between the youkai, monks, and a few surprise traps he had prepared in advance, that he could take all the dragons on. But, if he was a lot more careful than he preferred, he wouldn't have to. Facing half as many enemies would mean half as few injuries to his own soldiers. *If the monks can take position on the ridge, then-*

"There are few times I have wished for power over the kotodomo," Sango said mildly, "but it would garner your attention."

Inuyasha blinked and rewound their conversation, stifling the urge to spin around so that the slayer was no longer at his back. He winced when he realized he had ignored her. "Sorry," he muttered. "I see a little crack. Right down the middle."

"Hm. A little crack can cut a rock in half, given time. I don't think we can wait that long."

"Not time. Pressure." Inuyasha was aware of the hatchling's confused gaze hopping between the two old friends, but he kept his eyes on the enemy. *Pressure*, he thought, *I just need to find the right point*. Natsou left his tent and strode toward a small training area. The dragons there stopped and bowed, and he demanded an opponent. The mock battle was quick and messy, leaving a dusky copper-skinned youkai writhing on the ground. Natsou's cruel grin earned him both sincere congratulations and stiffly cool nods. The captain spoke to the injured soldier, reprimanding him for a petty offense, nothing worthy of such a punishment.

"Pressure?" Tomago questioned, puzzled.

“Properly applied,” Sango said with the air of an instructor, “one finger can destroy even the most fearsome of demons.”

“You can do more with a clenched fist,” Inuyasha pointed out. He squeezed the stone in his hand and it broke with a muffled crunch and a spray of dust between his knuckles. “And it is more fun.”

“I thought...” Tomago’s voice trailed off until Inuyasha glanced over and raised his eyebrows. “I thought we were, uh, showing them our bellies?”

Inuyasha barked out a short laugh that startled several nearby bird youkai. “Some can do more damage that way.” He brushed his hands off on his pants and wiped the smile from his face. “Egg, get me every kitsune and tabuki we have in camp. I want them up at the tent in an hour.”

“Planning on starting trouble, Inuyasha?” Sango murmured. He could hear the smile in her voice.

“Miroku said I should play to my strengths.”

Sesshomaru watched the ameonna glide out of the courtyard and had to force his jaw to unclench. Deep violet shadows stretched from the buildings and dormant trees in the nearby garden. Cold, still air, the crisp taste of snow thickening in his nose, sat heavily over the shiro. The day had been long. Long and distasteful. More than distasteful. Offensive. Repugnant, even. He had just finished dictating a message for Inuyasha that the water demon would repeat to the hanyou, word for word. The command therein could very well get his half-brother killed.

Prior to that he had secured himself in his study with Hisao and Kimi while Kento and Jaken ensured that all of the council members and their entourages were packed and prepared to leave at first light – those that did not depart immediately. They had taken the plans and resources offered by the allies of the Full Moon Council and dissected them, pulled them apart and reformed them to fit within a greater framework of war. Knowing the coming battle, having prepared every defense and offense, made Sesshomaru long to draw his blade. The tactics they would use were not his preferred methods, but it was the best of all they had to offer. Strong, skilled soldiers. Spies. Former enemies. Sheer numbers in human allies. Wild, nearly uncontrollable youkai that were often more beast than demon. Holy power. The risks were immense. Defeat was intolerable. Those he respected most, cared for most, those he loved would be in the most danger. It was an unacceptable eventuality that he had to force himself to accept.

And those hours secluded in planning had been preceded by hours more with those left of the Full Moon Council. Uesugi had agreed to send scouts along the coasts and report back of any movement. Sesshomaru would not be taken by surprise a second time if Ryukostokken tried to move his forces across the water. The otter had also offered supplies - of particular importance to the human soldiers. They would require food and some camp comforts if they were to move quickly without stripping the land of stored grain and cloth that disease-ravaged villages needed desperately. Ayame had left almost immediately to gather her wolves. She had the furthest to travel overland, but her pack was swift and Sesshomaru trusted her be ready. Tsukahara had been surprisingly helpful in dealing with the humans. Date needed significant coaching on the methods of youkai warfare, and the eagle had been patient with him. Sesshomaru recognized that Tsukahara did so out of strategic necessity – Date had the largest

standing army of any of the humans, all well-equipped and trained. Still, it made the final planning run smoother when the amount of derogatory insinuations and misunderstandings were kept to a minimum. The trees were also already positioning themselves. They would act primarily as a communication network, alerting Sesshomaru to any change in the enemy's position and relaying information from the far spread allies of the West.

Nothing was said of the absence of Kenjirosu or Matsudaira. None dared after Sesshomaru had ended speculation on Hirimoto's involvement in the war. As they had discussed, he left his answer vague, but unarguable, "That One fights alongside the West." It was true, but open to interpretation among those who were without doubt smuggling parts of the battle plan to the North. Ryukostokken must believe that Hirimoto would not be able to return, might not be willing to return, to Sesshomaru's side and take part in the war. If the ruse was revealed, then Hirimoto's suffering would be tarnished. Sesshomaru would not allow that.

It had been a long day, but in the cold of a burgeoning storm, Sesshomaru admitted that he preferred his meetings and the distasteful subterfuge to the task that Kagome had been set. She had spent most of the day comforting the mourning cubs of the South. He would not have known what to say, what words to offer that might console after such a loss. It was ironic, that he who had suffered the death of his own father and the near destruction of his lands could not offer sympathy to Makoto and Mitsu. He was not certain he was capable of it. Of greater import, Sesshomaru could not attempt such a thing. His attention was already on a dangerous precipice. The defeat of Ryukostokken should have been at the forefront of his mind – the only occupation for his thoughts. The Saidai Mao was managing to keep his emotions and concerns – for Kagome, Hirimoto, even Inuyasha – in check, but if they escaped the tight confines he had placed around them his instincts would rage wild and unimpeded. A sword drawn out of fear and sentiment was not drawn by a master.

Kagome had done what he could not, without his having to command it. *To ask*, he thought wryly. She, of the generous heart and ferocious desire to protect would soothe bruised spirits and dry tears. His miko would do everything possible to make the artifice that was required of Hirimoto more tolerable. The disarray in his thoughts was entirely her fault – hers for bringing these needs and desires and concerns for others into his mind. But she was also his salvation in that chaos. Kagome was like a stone at the center of a zen garden; the sand flowed around her, but she anchored focus. She anchored him.

Sesshomaru breathed deeply and sent out his youki to locate her. She was in their rooms, not sleeping, but no doubt preparing for bed. The pups slept deeply in their respective rooms. Sesshomaru turned on his heel to seek her out. He would need to hunt and return to his study yet that night, but he also desired the warm waters of the hot springs to cleanse the scent of council members and tension from his skin while the steam settled his thoughts. He did not doubt his ability to persuade Kagome to join him. She could sleep after, and he could do the work that must be done.

Chapter 56: Impetus for Rebellion

“You will ensure the potion is delivered and used, exactly as This One desires.” Ryukostokken’s barely restrained excitement was far more disconcerting than any angry commands he had ever issued. Arashi murmured agreement and bowed. From the corner of his eye he could see the profile of the wind demoness. She had been summoned shortly after he arrived in the throne room, and the spy was curious as to why. Almost as curious was whether she would reveal what she had seen – and if the lord would believe that a lowly hanyou was capable of transformation and flight which he himself could no longer sustain.

“Then you will meet with Natsou and inform him of This Ryukostokken’s will. Follow the half-breed pup and the Northern contingent. If they deviate or attempt to flee the battle, see their death. This One will meet both sons of the dead dog on the field.”

“I will do all within my power to ensure such a meeting, denka-ue.” He bowed again, and the tension radiating off of the wind demoness increased. Arashi wondered that none of the others present seemed to notice. But then, the lord and his administrator, even Sou, were well used to the sight of youkai strung taut and ready to fly apart.

“Arrive in advance of them at This One’s side. Have your sword ready.”

Arashi bowed and walked backward from the room, a gesture of respect that was not required, and which he did not usually offer. The excuse for slower movement was necessary to hear Wei’s next task.

“Divide the dark miko and integrate them into the ranks. This One will watch a demonstration of their effectiveness from the sky. Any who fail to impress, will-” The words were cut off as a guard in the corridor closed the screen, but Arashi had heard enough. The idea that Ryukostokken would utilize humans, or as near to human as the creatures tainted by evil magic and unnatural life could be, to reinforce his army was highly improbable. But not impossible, as what he had overheard demonstrated. Fortunately, Arashi was familiar with planning for the unlikely, and he had a contingency for such an occasion. It only needed to be put into action.

Despite her attempt to murder him, Arashi wished Ko well as he departed the Northern shiro. She would find no rest in the coming weeks. When the war was over, and the future of Japan determined, he hoped she would find an easier place in the world. He nodded to the guards at the gate, whom bowed as usual when he passed. The docks were busy, preparing the many boats that would ferry the army to the mainland. As he passed them, dragons paused, some nodding or bowing, others cutting him sidelong glances and curling their lips with disgust. Arashi ignored most of them. He had more important tasks, more undecided action, in his future. There was little time for the prejudices or bet-hedging of those that had no place at the table. Their fates would be decided by the players, and Arashi had already determined who would win.

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“Why the fuck would I want to know how to read? Ain’t a need for it when I can get answers easier.” Inuyasha flexed his claws to demonstrate how he could extract information without use of kanji. The display made his stomach churn. It hadn’t been all that many years since he had ignored any desire to

learn and had scoffed with sincerity at anyone that displayed a scholarly bent. Pretending to be the idiot that he had once aspired to be was revolting. But it did the job.

“That might be the first thing you have said that I find interesting, half-breed,” Natsou snorted. “Life would be easier, no? If we could kill the messenger. Or at least maim him.”

The skinny young dragon that was waiting for Natsou to finish writing gulped - audibly. Inuyasha shifted impatiently and tried to read the upside down ink without looking like he was reading it. The Northern captain had put down exactly what they had agreed upon. Inuyasha and his soldiers would march south with Natsou and the dragons. They would remain hidden until Ryukostokken had engaged the enemy, then they would attack Sesshomaru's flank. As soon as they received word of where the battle was to take place, they would position themselves for a defeat of the West. There were also several comments on Natsou's low opinion of Inuyasha and dogs in general, but the hanyou ignored them. He had claimed he couldn't read, and even if he was willing to tip his hand in this instance, he didn't really care what the asshole dragon thought of him.

He did care, however, that his tactic to put pressure on that same asshole appeared to be working. The ink brush snapped between Natsou's clawed fingers, and he cursed. It took several minutes of berating and a kick to his secretary's ribs, which sounded like the crunch of crisp celery in a bag of cherry mash, for him to be given a new brush and ink. Inuyasha had to hide a smirk. He had seen evidence throughout the Northern camp that the captain had been having a rough couple of days. Several dragons had been assigned to unnecessary manual labor - punishment for perceived offenses. More than one guard stationed close to Natsou sported bruises and cuts. The atmosphere around the table that had been positioned between the two small armies, on the same spot as the drinking match, was tense.

Two dragons swooped down from the sky, and Inuyasha had to force himself to startle and grab the hilt of his sword. *Right on time*, he thought. Luckily, his delayed action was covered by Natsou's exclamation.

“What the hell are you idiots doing?” he snarled. “I ordered you to walk the perimeter!”

There was a pause, and the soldiers shared a hesitant look. “No, captain-san,” the older soldier said cautiously, “the duty roster assigned an aerial patrol.”

“Are you calling me a liar, soldier?” Natsou stood and stalked over to the uneasy dragons. The youki of their quick transformation was still swirling around their feet anxiously as their superior leaned into their faces, one after the other.

“No, sir,” came a quick, flat response.

“And you?”

The younger dragon's voice cracked nervously, “No, no sir!”

“Then you disobeyed orders.” He turned on his heel and flicked a glance to his personal guard. “Fifty lashes. Each.” Both of the scouts looked stunned, but the older one quickly shut down his expression. Inuyasha still caught a glimpse of a deep resentment there. Natsou returned to his seat, and Inuyasha catalogued the circles under the captain's eyes which had grown noticeably deeper from lack of sleep. He was also wearing something fur-lined under his kimono; the cold was clearly affecting him. *A few*

more days, Inuyasha thought, *and his nerves would be worn so thin that he would snap and turn on his own men at the slightest provocation*. Natsou put more force than was necessary into pressing his seal onto the paper. Inuyasha dipped his first two claws in ink to make a simple scrawl.

“Pardon the interruption, captain-san,” a soldier out of breath from running, bowed hastily. “There is a problem with the rear guard. They claim they were all ordered to laundry duty, as punishment for inattentiveness, so there has been no one watching their position all morning. And I have no record of such an order.”

“I didn’t give it!” Natsou roared. *Or the snapping could happen sooner*, Inuyasha congratulated himself. The captain flung the paper at the messenger, not even waiting for the ink to dry, and stood so quickly he overturned the table. “Incompetence! They will beg for laundry duty when I am finished.” He threw a command over his shoulder as he left, “Go back to your camp, half-breed. I will summon you when the North is ready to taste blood.” His comments to the soldier at his side were low and punctuated with a hiss, but Inuyasha’s keen hearing still caught them, “I will taste blood this day, if there is one more instance of this wretched stupidity!” The messenger, smart enough not to stick around with such a volatile captain, rolled up the paper and tucked it into his sleeve as he ran off.

Inuyasha managed to keep a smile off of his face until he was well within his own camp. The hatchling appeared at his side, eager.

“Is it working, Inuyasha-sama?”

“Hn.” Inuyasha considered the growing discontent in the northern camp. “Get the kitsune in there right away – while he’s out of his tent. Take anything that isn’t nailed down – then steal the nails if they can. I want him frothing at the mouth.” Tomago nodded and hopped away to carry out his orders. Inuyasha continued on through the camp. It was time to ready his forces. Permission from Sesshomaru or no, he was going to take decisive action with Natsou. Now that the captain had signed the letter to Ryukostokken, he was no more than dead weight.

Inuyasha planned on making him actual dead weight. That night, if possible.

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Ko forced herself to remain still while Ryukostokken stalked across the dais in the throne room. Wei sat perpendicular to her, closer to his lord, and she could feel his eyes on her whenever she moved. It was not the administrator, or even the Northern lord – for once - that had her petrified. The spy, Arashi, sat not ten feet to her right. He knelt in seiza and bowed appropriately whenever it seemed to be warranted. He did not seem to be paying any attention to her whatsoever.

She had tried to kill him.

Ryukostokken continued to speak of his plans to descend upon the West and how to maneuver Natsou and Inuyasha as he needed them, and Ko memorized everything as always. Memorized without really listening. She couldn’t make herself – would have to spend hours later reviewing all that was discussed and interpreting the tone of the Saigo Mao and his vassals. There was no possible way to pay attention when at any moment she could be accused of attempted murder. Murder of one of Ryukostokken’s most valued assets.

Murder that had failed.

The failure would be her death, she knew that. If nothing else, she could have tried to pretend that Arashi had attacked her, or that he had ill-intent toward Ryukostokken. Neither were believable and for all of his faults, his depravities, the dragon lord could taste a lie before it even passed her lips. She had tried to kill the favorite, most skilled spy of the North and if questioned, there would be no getting out of responsibility for that act. Her death for it would have been quick, as quick as Ryukostokken ever made such things, and no more painful than her life over the past twenty years, if not for her blunder.

He knew her secret.

Not that she was a traitor, although she didn't feel the term applied. She had never sworn any oath – freely given or otherwise – to Ryukostokken. Arashi knew that she could see. More than that, even, he knew that she was willing to kill to upset the North's battle strategy. If the hanyou shared that information, she would wish for death a thousand times over. Her sight would be nothing more but another way that she could be tortured. There were youkai that had been in the dungeon for decades – tormented until they could not be recognized as demons any longer. Until they could not recognize themselves, even in their own minds. That would be Ko's future, if Arashi talked.

At any moment, she expected him to speak up, to catch the Saigo Mao's attention with a word or a cleared throat, and then the end of her life would begin. Ko could feel her heart beating in her chest, quickly, hard enough that the dragons could have heard it if they were listening. Her youki was coiled up, tight. Tighter than a spring. So tight her chest ached and her stomach cramped from the force required to keep it buried inside. There would be no explosion of power to help her escape. There was no flight on the wind that could carry her from that place. Even if, by some miracle, she could be quick enough to live to breathe freely, if she did not use her position to end Ryukostokken then it would all have been for naught. Years of brutal mistreatment and slavery had led to this moment, where she could choose to risk everything in order to gain what she wanted most: the death of Ryukostokken. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from trembling.

Nothing happened.

Arashi was standing, bowing, moving backward toward the doorway even as Ryukostokken continued. It took a long moment before Ko breathed again. Before she realized that she had stopped breathing for several minutes. Air rushed into her lungs and the haze of fear cleared with each sweet inhale. She was safe. For another day. Arashi was leaving the shiro, and would not return until after the battle.

The sudden release of pressure inside her seemed to pop her ears, and she could comprehend what the dragon lord was saying, "...will watch a demonstration of their effectiveness from the sky. Any who fail to impress, will be drained by the crone in the grotto. Wei, make sure she is aware that any power or vitality she takes from the other females is to be used in service to This One. Have Sou brought here – the soldiers must be prepared to move."

"With humility, what is their destination, my lord?" Wei was groveling more than usual. Ko noted absently that the scarring in his throat from Ryukostokken's claws was still making his voice rasp – weeks after the assault.

"Do not question This Ryukostokken," he answered in a dark voice, his pacing falling to a stop. "This One will decide when and where the dog will meet his end. You shall know when it pleases me to tell

you – not before.” In a sudden burst of movement, he was standing before her. Ko could feel the heat of his body against her cheeks. She surmised that he was mere inches away. “This One has use of you,” his voice dripped with a sour lust that turned her stomach. Her fear and disgust must have been palatable, although she kept them from her expression. His claws thrust into her hair and he used a painful grip to haul her to her feet. “Oh, no, little breeze,” the stench of sulfur blew against her face, “you will share your duties with others tonight. This One must keep you well enough to fly, for there will be blood even sweeter than yours. Soon. Very soon.”

Hours later, still covered in sticky liquids, none of which were hers but few that had been given freely, Ko stood atop the oldest portion of the castle. The rock around her was crumbling, the roof open to the snow that fell steadily. None came to this abandoned area, except her and a few rats too wise or too cowardly to steal from a dragons’ lair. She dismissed the haze from her eyes and watched the snow pile for a few minutes, softening the broken edges of discarded stone blocks. The peace was calming after the tension that had screamed inside her all day.

From within her kimono she pulled a branch of boxwood. The evergreen bough was only eight inches long, but it was covered in small leaves. Ko was aware that the code she and Kagome were using was imprecise, at best. However, once she knew the human had survived to return to the West, she began thinking of ways to impart more meaning to each message. Ryukostokken had, at first, been furious when news came that the miko lived, but Ko had struggled to contain her joy and excitement. Even while she toiled to meet the whims of the Northern Lord, she plotted the best way to smuggle information to Kagome.

Ko gripped the exposed wood tightly and ran her fingers down the spine – removing the leaves and creating a waxy green pile in her hand. From her obi she pulled a small paper packet of red clay. Painstakingly, she smeared a thumbprint of soil on each leaf. Ko held out her palm and called out her youki. A warm wind, dry and sweet, swirled around her. It picked the leaves out of her hand and hardened the clay as it carried them upward. Drops of water, snowflakes that melted around the funnel of air, fell onto Ko’s shoulders and face.

She stayed there, staring into the thickening snow, long after her message had disappeared into the night. Anticipation was thick like an invisible fog around her, seeping into her pores and collecting in the marrow of her bones. She shivered. Not from cold or fear, although she felt them both. Ko wondered why Arashi had said nothing. Wondered why a spy, a male that would be outcast for the circumstances of his birth alone were it not for his infamous talents, would keep such valuable information to himself. Ko shook her head and took one last glance at the world around her before clouding her vision again. Arashi’s reasons, his end-game, were inconsequential. He could not reveal her secrets when he was not at Ryukostokken’s side, and that would not happen again until the final battle. Twenty years of slavery. Twenty years of the sounds of death, the screams and pleas of those begging for it, ringing in her ears. Twenty years since her body was her own. Ko breathed deeply and a brutal smile twisted her lips.

The end was coming.

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Arashi remained motionless, allowing the deep shadows of old growth trees and the steep rock of the mountain to conceal his position. Night was still heavily upon the West, although dawn would begin to

lighten the sky in little more than an hour. He kept his eyes closed, rather than allow the sheen of his dark vision to reveal his location. Instead, he relied on his other senses to track his surroundings.

Large, fat flakes of snow fell on his face and exposed hands, chilling the dark skin in tiny stinging slaps that quickly melted into cool rivers, cascading into his collar and sleeves. His tongue flickered out and he tasted the biting cold of the season, the slow decomposition of leaves and old vegetation under the snow, the tang of iron and silver in the mountain, and the growing trace of heavily sweetened fruit and delicate flowers. The wind was dying down, but it still whistled faintly through a distant rock formation. The faint crunch of boots on snow, a deliberate sound he was sure, caused him to open his eyes.

She did not speak until she was almost within arm's reach, and then she halted, "I saw your request for a meeting." One red brow rose pointedly and her mouth puckered into a suppressed smirk. "I would have guessed you to be more subtle than that."

Arashi smiled easily. Aina was one of the few informants he worked with that made his skills enjoyable. "It has been a while since I have practiced drawing, but I thought it turned out quite well." The huts on her path from the shiro to the dog captain's home had been decorated with tiny figures traced into the snow on their ledges and porches. Miniature foxes, constellations that appear only just before dawn, and the kanji for mountain and forest. "I do hope that you erased my masterpieces as you passed by."

"Perhaps I should have left them," she teased. "Captain-san would have been most entertained, I'm sure, to smell dragon on pictures of his adopted pup's nanny."

"You were to gain employment within the lord's family," he chided, much more gently than he wanted to. His plans had hinged on her placement near the miko. Aina had never failed him before, but if she had, his objectives would become much riskier to secure. For both of them.

"Have faith, my scaly friend." The kitsune laughed and the sound of tiny bells rang melodiously under her voice. Manufactured, but still pleasing to the ear. He relaxed at her reassurance. "Is this the portion of our consultation where I share all the details of the household? I should demand better treatment. At least buy me tea first." She blinked slowly, coyly. "Or pay my fee."

"Such a hard bargain you drive," he murmured appreciatively. Arashi withdrew a bag of coins and small trinkets and tossed it. Her quick hands snatched it from the air and tucked it away.

"There was quite the revelry here, just a few nights ago," she began.

Her information was interesting and useful, as always, but it was not the primary purpose of Arashi's visit. As soon as she began to wind down and show signs of returning to her teasing demeanor, he interrupted, "I do have another task for you, and this is not one you may refuse, little trickster." He stepped away from the tree where he had been leaning and allowed some of his youki to escape, twining around her ankles. Her eyes widened and some of her fear scented the air before she brought herself under control.

"I always like a challenge," she boasted, flipping a lock of red hair over her shoulder, "for the right price."

Arashi pulled both hands from his sleeves and revealed another tinkling sack of coin as well as the non-descript clay vessel that was his mission in the West. “You must prepare a tea...”

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Inuyasha jerked his head to the side and motioned to Kirara. “Go, as fast as you can and still stay hidden.”

Sango’s brown eyes sparked with concern and more than a little defiance. “You need me here. I should be watching your back.”

“What I need is for the ice prick to know things are about to get bloody up here. I ain’t waitin’ on orders from him, but I’m not stupid enough to think he shouldn’t know what I’m gonna do.” Inuyasha firmed up his jaw and folded his arms over his chest to show her he was serious. As usual with the two females in his pack, she ignored him.

“This plan is, at best, just reckless enough to take Natsou by surprise. If you’re lucky, you might even accomplish this with only minor injuries on your side. But if you-”

“What I need,” he placed as much stress on the word as he dared, then quickly lowered his voice when it drew attention. It was nearing dark, but those few soldiers still tending to duties or walking through the camp stared curiously at their leader and his human companion. “What I need,” he continued in a quieter voice, “is for your little bamboo shoot in there to be safe and sound when this is all over.” He glanced pointedly to her stomach. Her eyes widened in understanding and a twinge of fear, and Inuyasha felt a little guilty for playing on her emotions. Then her eyes narrowed and her mouth opened. *Shit, that ain’t good*, he thought desperately.

“I wouldn’t bring it up,” he finished hurriedly, “but this message has to get to Sesshomaru. There isn’t anyone I trust more than you to get the job done. If that protects the, the,” his eyes darted to the side and he whispered, feeling silly but knowing it was a secret that should be kept, “the baby, then that’s two birds – one stone, yeah?”

“I can be more help here.” Her voice was calm, but her body was set in tense, stubborn lines.

“I’ve got lots of idiots that can crack skulls, Sango. I only got one person here I trust with my life – with the lives of everyone I am responsible for.” His voice felt raw and he turned his head to the side to clear it, embarrassed. He was completely surprised with the scent of saltwater hit his nose.

Tears were flooding the slayer’s eyes, and Inuyasha had no idea what to do. With Kagome, a gruff hug and a pat on the back would have solved it. But this was Sango. She was not a crier. Thankfully, she solved the problem for him.

“Fine. I’ll go. But you better not get killed while I’m away, or I’ll tell Kagome all about where her precious homework was disappearing to – back in the beginning.” Inuyasha’s stomach blanched. The priestess from the future could hold a grudge a long time, when she put her mind to it, and Sango knew how to fight dirty. “Just make certain you follow the plan, Inuyasha.” He followed her over to Kirara and stood by while the neko transformed and Sango hopped on. “Oh, and Inuyasha,” she called with a smile. He breathed a sigh of relief and smiled back. “If you tell anyone about this,” she waved to her

still watery eyes, “I will make the kotodomo seem like a shiatsu massage.” With that, the slayer took off.

It was several minutes before he realized he was still standing in the same place, mouth open and staring at the spot where she had disappeared into the darkening sky. Soldiers were throwing glances his way, although none dared come close enough to have overheard his conversation. His teeth snapped together loudly and he pivoted on his heel and stalked toward the tent where monks were preparing for an attack. *Women*, he muttered to himself, *let Sesshomaru try to manage ‘em*. That thought cleared his mood considerably, and he had a spring in his step by the time he reached the place where Tomago was waiting for him.

“She’s off then?” his secretary asked with trepidation.

“I told her to go, so she went,” Inuyasha simplified with a blustery snort. “That’s how to deal with women, Egg.” He brushed open the flap on the tent, making the gathered soldiers inside look up from the maps and diagrams laid over a barrel. “Now pay attention, and I’ll show you how to deal with dragons.”

Chapter 57: End Game

“Arms loose,” Kimi repeated, for what seemed to Kagome was the billionth time, “you are announcing your movements.”

Obediently, the miko forced her arms to hang more naturally at her sides and continued their conversation, “When do you think he will return?”

“Today, perhaps. Tomorrow evening, at the latest,” Kimi murmured absently. She waved her hand as though brushing back a stray hair. A fine spray of yellow acid arched across the tatami mat. Kagome ducked and rolled, banging one knee hard against the ground. She gritted her teeth against the pain and whipped her wooden bokken up to protect her face and neck. A few splatters landed on the hem of her shirt, burning holes through the cotton.

“And no one will notice an army of bear youkai marching into the West?” She stood, breathing hard, and tried to prepare for the next attack. Kimi, despite the hours they had already spent training that morning, looked cool and composed. Her kimono was a pale cream, dyed with elegant swaths of browns and embroidered with spirals and shooting streaks in gold thread. The design reminded Kagome of modern art.

“Widen your stance,” Kimi prompted gently. Kagome looked down at her bare feet, only to be broadsided by a wave of youki that knocked her onto her butt. “Never let down your guard.” Kagome let out a grumpy sigh and struggled to get up. She had always prided herself on a cheery disposition, no matter the situation, but there was only so much humiliating defeat she could take before even *her* optimism wore thin. She had bruises in places she shouldn’t have been able to get bruises. Her reiki was tired, her skin itchy with dried sweat and wet in places from fresh sweat, and her head was beginning to ache. Training with Kimi day after day was no walk in the park.

“Of course Hirimoto will be noticed,” Kimi picked up the strand of discussion easily, “it would be impossible to hide the movement of that many demons. However, they will travel at night, keeping their detection by humans unlikely, and measures have been put in place to guard against youkai espionage.”

“What kind-” Kagome let out a little screeching gasp as her feet were swept out from under her. Whatever Kimi did, it was too quick for human eyes, but it ended with the miko sprawled on her stomach – her practice sword on the other side of the large room. “Ugh,” she grunted and flopped onto her back.

“You may have a brief rest,” Kimi allowed. Kagome took the opportunity to gasp for air like a fish out of water and try to will her body not to melt into a relieved puddle.

When she could speak again, she repeated, “What kind of measures?”

“This and that,” Kimi shrugged delicately. “A little counter-spying, a few holy auras, one or two tongues removed and nailed to trees. The usual.” Kagome was concerned that she felt very little surprise over what Kimi considered ‘the usual’. “Should word of his return to the West reach Ryukotoken, it does not alter our plans. It may even work to our advantage if the dragon believes our only ally to be tired from travel and grief. If Ryuu feels he knows our secrets, then he will be less inclined to look deeper.”

“Okay,” Kagome nodded and her forehead crinkled in thought as she stared at the ceiling. “That’s why Sesshomaru left the map of Inawashiro in the council room, right? He wanted anyone who is spying for the North to think they had found a secret.”

“Very good, Miko, I may make you into a devious mind yet,” Kimi’s approving smile looked sinister from upside down.

“Er, no, thank you,” she responded awkwardly. “So the spy-”

“Spies,” Kimi corrected, “there were three among the staff of the councilors.”

“Spies, then. They see the ‘hidden’,” Kagome made air quotes as she traced the wooden beams above her with her eyes, “map that marks a route near Inawashiro and think they have found a good spot to ambush us. But really that is where Sesshomaru wanted them all along.”

“Correct. There are still other variables that must be understood, alternatives that need to be removed from Ryukostokken’s consideration, but that is the heart of the matter.”

Kagome rolled to her knees and sat facing the Western Lady for a moment. She seemed tired. Not that she looked it. Kimi was as flawlessly beautiful as ever, but her shoulders were stiff and if Kagome squinted, she could see a haze of golden youki around the demoness that thrummed with a desperate sort of agitation. Her dealings with Hirimoto had been difficult for her. *Understatement of the year*, Kagome knew. Whatever had happened at the teahouse in the blink between the charge of a grief stricken bear and Kimi’s jaw around his neck, it had profoundly affected the lady.

“He won’t hold it against you,” she blurted, then covered her mouth with a hand. Her face was on fire. She couldn’t believe she had said something so thoughtless and presumptive to Kimi. The daiyoukai’s eyes widened, the magenta lines on her lids emphasizing the dark gold of her iris. Her lips parted, and Kagome thought she would say something, but her expression quickly shuttered.

The reason for her nonresponse was apparent when a moment later a knock came on the shoji screen. “Enter,” Kimi commanded. Aina slid the screen carefully open, remaining on her knees on the porch and bowing low. Kagome was on her feet in an instant.

“What is it? What’s wrong? Is one of the kids-”

“No, Kagome-sama. Nothing untoward has occurred,” Aina assured with a soft smile as she raised her head. Thick locks of loose red hair slid across her simple kimono. “Nankae-kun and Shippo-kun are training with the other youkai children. Rin-yojosan is reading to Emi-chan in the family quarters. The rock demons are on guard there.”

Kagome let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Oh, okay, thanks. Well, um,” she brushed a sweaty lock of hair back and tried to stab it into her ponytail, “was there something you wanted?”

“My Lady is needed in the shiro. I have only come to request her presence.” Aina bowed again.

Kagome opened her mouth, ready to question who needed Kimi – and cursing her stupid brain for caring *why* her torturous lesson was ending, when Kimi herself replied, “Has Jaken still not figured out how to run this household? Honestly, Kagome-san,” she huffed in amusement as she walked past the priestess, “you really should make hiring a new steward your first priority after the mating.” She paused in the open doorway, waiting for Aina to stand and replace her shoes. The daiyoukai’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Well, perhaps not the very first thing.”

Kagome’s blush exploded to new levels of red when Kimi winked at her. *Why couldn’t I get a mother-in-law with bad cooking, or a desire to give unwanted fashion advice? No, I get the one who is the feudal equivalent of Dr. Ruth, Kissinger, and Bruce Lee all rolled into one.* The screen was just about to close on her mortification when another blast of youki caught her by surprise, knocking her over again and triggering a startled wave of purification in response.

“Never let down your guard.” The amused reminder sounded suspiciously like a laugh as the screen clicked shut.

ooo

“This news comes from Arashi?” Ryukostokken narrowed his eyes at his administrator, enjoying the hard swallow of fear and the way it caught on the scars in Wei’s throat.

“Yes, my lord. The half-breed instructed one of our scouts in the far West to deliver it. Is it,” Wei swallowed again, and then seemed to find his self-confidence. His shoulders straightened and he folded his hands into his sleeves. “Is the news well-received, denka-ue?”

Ryukostokken fingered the rough, economical paper that had been hastily folded into an interlocked square and sealed with wax. Crumbles of the common yellow candle drippings were scattered on the floor near his feet. Arashi was a disgrace, a stain upon dragon blood, upon the North, but he was unparalleled as a spy. The Saigo Mao let his eyes drift to the map of Japan spread across his table. To the southwest of what remained of Kuren’s shiro was a long, broad valley. He traced it to a place where the surrounding forests thinned and a few villages dotted the landscape. A massive, deep lake cut off all but the narrowest escape route. If the dog would bring his troops north there, Ryukostokken could plan an ambush. The cowardly Killing Perfection would have rough mountains to the east. Natsou and the lucky little bastard of a human bitch could use them as a staging ground for their attack. To the west - flat, open ground and a thick tangle of ancient forests that would be easily scorched from above. At the sniveling pup’s back would be the freezing lake water and a strip of a road that would clog with bodies if he tried to flee, trapping him for an easy kill.

To war, Ryukostokken thought with a smile. Aloud, he said, “send a flyer to Natsou. This One is ready for blood.”

ooo

Sesshomaru silently watched his intended stomp around his dojo. She was muttering under her breath, and her obvious irritation – but not fear or injury – was a reassurance to what he had already told himself. Despite what he knew about Kagome, and his mother’s dedication to training the miko, he had not been able to help leaving his study when he sensed her rather wild explosion of reiki. So he had found her, sweaty and red-faced, grumbling as she put away various training weapons. She looked terrible

and smelled extremely human. Sesshomaru smiled to himself and stepped inside, closing the screen quietly behind him.

“Don’t see why she has to make a point of it,” his miko was saying. “It’s not like I asked. And if I had, and I didn’t, it wouldn’t be to his *mother*. And how would she know what I know anyway?” Kagome huffed indignantly, “I know stuff; stuff she doesn’t know that I know she doesn’t know.” She slammed a wooden bokken into a holder. “Oh, I know *things*!” Sesshomaru did not bother hiding his confused grin at her circular and nonsensical argument. He had never before known a person that found the need to settle their mind by arguing aloud. Alone.

“...letters to the editor? I have! And they can get pretty graphic, let me tell you!”

“Do,” he purposely let the word roll across his tongue. Kagome gasped and jumped, whirling around to face him.

“What?” she screeched. The sound hurt his ears, but he didn’t let that stop him from stalking forward.

“Do tell me,” he clarified. “How graphic are these letters you claim to have read? Perhaps you would care to demonstrate?”

“Why- you-” she spluttered. Sesshomaru chuckled, enjoying her discomposure. It was not often, especially since the Council had begun, that he had the opportunity to tease and bait. In the privacy of his dojo, with his intended blushing and barefoot, he found a modicum of relaxation that he craved. He refused to let it pass quickly.

“Although,” he turned his mouth down in a mock frown, and was surprised to find it difficult to keep the unhappy expression in place, “I believe a bath would be appropriate, before such an exhibition.” Truly, her scent was not unbearable, or even offensive, merely pungent and more muddled than he preferred.

Her mouth gaped open like a fish, but he had only a moment to enjoy it before she turned the tables on him. Her eyes settled half closed and the corner of her mouth quirked, her pink tongue coming out to touch her lips briefly. That was all it took for the game to be over, as far as he was concerned. It had been days since the courting ceremony. Days since he had tasted his miko in a close, dark room and shown her to whom she belonged. Days since he had any opportunity to be alone with her that did not consist of her murmuring sleepily into their futon or snoring softly against his chest. A ‘graphic’ interlude was more than appropriate. *Imperative*, he decided.

“Oh? Perhaps you should run along to the springs then, Sesshomaru. I may still feel like indulging in some show and tell when you’re done. Maybe.”

“Not me, Ka-go-me.” His voice had gone deep and quiet, and he admired the effect it had on her. Her eyes darkened, the pupils widening, and her heart beat in double time. “You are the one in need of a bath. And if I enjoy your show-and-tell,” he had to reach out and hold her arms carefully or risk pulling her tightly against him despite her odor as his imagination conjured images of her slowly removing her clothing. Then his. With her teeth. “If you please me, then I will help you bathe.”

“I think you have this wrong, Sesshomaru,” she said, her own voice husky. “In my time, it is very important for a good boyfr- mate, to make certain he pleases his woman first. So it is you who must please

me, Sesshomaru.” She leaned up on her toes, brushing her lips against his even as the heat of her blush warmed his face. Kagome whispered, “Graphically.”

ooo

Kimi did not speak, she was a patient demon, and Aina would not have summoned her if the news was not of great import. They walked in silence from the dojo, through the gardens, deep into a frosted stand of sculpted hedges to a small hidden pond. The bridge over it was well-maintained, but rarely used. Aina stopped halfway across the little structure and Kimi followed, bringing a subtle barrier into place to protect against spying.

“I met with my contact last night,” the kitsune began without preamble. “The Saigo Mao is getting more creative.” Kimi watched carefully as the shorter female pulled from her obi a small, clay vessel. It looked completely unremarkable in every way. She prodded it gently with her youki, but received only the warm push of kitsune magic in return. Kimi raised an eyebrow in question. “I shielded it,” Aina said simply.

Her lids closed over green eyes and she chanted, just under her breath. A popping sound caused Kimi momentary deafness, and then she was awash with a sickening sensation. A wave of dark, unholy energy rippled out from the vial, lapping against her youki and rubbing her nerves raw. Kimi gasped. It lasted only a short time, the space between heartbeats, and then the power subsided into a faint glow around the vessel.

“I know,” Aina whispered, “I feel nauseated just holding it.”

“What is the purpose of this?” Kimi did not reach for it, but watched it closely, using her other senses to try to gauge its goal and composition while she listened to Aina recount what she had been told. The base of it would have sent a chill down the spine of a lesser youkai. *Blood. Vulture youkai. A mated pair.* The potion was powerful indeed, designed to force a disturbingly strong bond between two individuals. *Unripe, bitter orange.* To suppress the appetite and stimulate energy flow. *Monkshood.* A poison that caused the heart to palpitate and blood to seep into the organs. *Chinese foxglove root.* For treatments of hearing, although the seeds affected the pulse as well. *Ginger.* A stimulant, providing energy – to excess if not used properly – and an aphrodisiac that mixed with other ingredients could cause mania. There were other herbs as well, some of which she ascertained were solely added to cover the scent and taste. They would be effective on a human, but were no match for an inu sense of smell.

The mixture, combined with the aura of unholy power that infused it, made for a concoction unlike any Kimi had encountered before. Ryukostokken’s desire for the miko Kagome had driven him to create something that should not have ever been used. Even one as morally corrupt as the dragon lord should have been able to see the side effects. The elixir would have been dangerous for a youkai to consume; the chances a human would die from the effects were extremely high.

“...witch will know when the cork is removed, and it must be used before the sun rises the next day. It cannot be poured out or fed to an animal. She will know the moment it is ingested by a being of power. If any but a powerful youkai or holy person drinks it, the poison in the herbs will be drawn directly to the heart and kill that person.”

“A being of power?” Kimi interrupted sharply. “That is what your contact said?”

“My lady,” Aina bowed deeply, “I am repeating his words just as they were spoken.”

Kimi’s mind whirled with that information. *Just as they were spoken*, she repeated to herself. “And the name, how did he say it?”

“The name that is spoken will become that person’s whole focus. Their world will narrow to that point, and all things said while they are in the trance of the first hour will become true to them.” Aina’s face twisted, but she continued, “He said, ‘you know he who gives me commands, and whose name this vial is intended for. The imbiber must be told to love, to desire, to cherish, and to defend and heal and obey the name which is spoken - above all other things. Even their own life.’” A shudder ran through the kitsune. “The thought of having that evil...thing...in Lady Kagome’s head. In her heart!”

“You have come to trust her? To desire to defend her?” Kimi questioned. Only recently had she discovered that her heart still beat in her chest, was still capable of the softer emotions of love and joy.

“As I am loyal to you and the West,” Aina swore, straightening her back and looking the Western Lady proudly in the eyes. “I would do anything for her safety.”

“Even if that meant putting yourself in danger? Even if that meant putting someone else you care for at risk? Even if to ensure that she lives and the West is victorious, it means her suffering in the here and now? Perhaps your suffering?” Kimi had been pleased to feel the closeness of pack again. But the new tenderness of her unarmored heart felt the pain of what she must do twice as keenly.

Aina hesitated, clearly thinking over those words and realizing the lady’s intent. Her shoulders sagged and her eyes closed in defeat. “Even then,” she agreed.

“Then you know what must happen,” Kimi stated over the disgust that churned in her stomach. “This potion must be used, exactly as he spoke it.”

ooo

The night was quiet and dark; the servants long since retired to their own chambers. Kagome had gone upstairs after their interlude to a late lunch. Before he had returned to stacks of paper work and a reception room full of audience seekers Sesshomaru had extracted promises from her of waiting to bathe, again, until the next day. After hours of finishing the work he had left undone while he tarried in the hot springs with Kagome, Sesshomaru was finally able to dismiss Kento and turn his path to the family quarters and his bed. He discreetly inhaled the stubborn fragrance of cinnamon spiced flowers and cherry wood that clung to his skin. He was most eager to find if Kagome had done as she was told and remained covered in his own scent. Sesshomaru allowed the corner of his mouth to twitch upward, once more able to set aside his burdens for a short time and think only of his miko. If she had not obeyed, he would simply have to *tell* her again, and *show* her what he desired.

When he reached their rooms, he found his quarry wrapped in furs and seated on the garden porch. It was too cold to stay outdoors long, but he gauged from the easy pose of her body and the steaming pot of tea at her side that she had not been there more than a few minutes. He lowered himself down next to her, enjoying the soothing scent of him on her and the quiet of the night. She smelled softly of worry and confusion, so Sesshomaru remained silent while she sorted out what she undoubtedly wished to

say. A war was nearly upon them; there was a great deal for one as loving and kind-hearted as Kagome to worry over. Certainly, she was also capable of saying a great deal as well. *Or perhaps it would be more accurate that she is incapable of saying little*, Sesshomaru mused, equally entertained and vexed. He would allow her to speak for a time, if it was not too inane and the cold did not become uncomfortable for her, before he carried her to their bed.

“Did you-” she began, and then stopped. Her brow furrowed and sour melon grew heavier in his nose. “Is Kimi still up?”

Sesshomaru felt a twinge of surprise. He was grateful – more than that, there was no word he knew of to describe the feeling of having the Lady Kimi and his intended alone together for the first time and not finding any mess, emotional or physical, to clean up afterward. But his gratitude for the easy comradery, of sorts, that those two females had fallen into did not extend to having private time with his intended interrupted with thoughts of his *mother*. “I can find out,” he said slowly. “Do you wish to speak with her?”

“No, I mean, that’s okay. I just...” The worry faded out again, to be consumed with confusion. Her full lips pursed and she stared hard enough at the stone walls of the garden he wouldn’t have been shocked if they had surrendered and collapsed before her. “I was taking a nap, earlier. After the children were in bed. By the way, Nankae is staying the night with Shippo. Aina dropped him off earlier,” she waylaid her own conversation, and then faded into silence again.

“You were sleeping,” he prompted gently, curious as to what had her in such turmoil.

“Aina helped me tuck them in,” she continued slowly. “She brought me tea and I thought Kimi came in...and then...” She frowned and shook her head, whispering almost to herself, “I’ve been so tired with the longer training sessions. It must have been a dream.” Her volume rose again, “I woke up a few minutes ago here on the porch. And see,” she nodded to the tea tray, “it’s still hot. I must have just dozed off for a minute.” She chuckled, “Clearly I was exhausted.” She leaned into him, her shoulder round under the heavy fur, but her weight welcome against him.

“Ah, yes,” he replied, pressing a kiss into her hair. “Activity is good for you. It will help you sleep deeply.” He smiled, a wide, fang-revealing grin that she couldn’t see. Admitting she had fallen asleep played quite well to his intentions. “No doubt we should ensure you are properly tired now, or you will not be able to sleep after your nap.”

“Sesshomaru,” she said with a laugh, tilting her head back to look into his eyes, “who would have guessed that you are kind of a horn- oh, Ha!” she dissolved into giggles. Sesshomaru narrowed his eyes. He had the suspicion she was amused at his expense, but he was willing to accept that fate as her scent was cleared to make way for happiness.

He was loathe to ruin her mood, but there were other things that needed to be discussed. Issues which he would rather broach with her in private, and such moments were few and far between. War would make them more difficult to come by. “We will need to leave soon, in order to establish our position before Ryukostokken can move his soldiers south.”

“I am ready,” she said quietly, “whenever you are.”

“Kagome,” he began, then stopped. He knew the argument was pointless. It was one they had had many times, one which he was not even certain that he had chosen a side on, but he needed to say it one last time. “You should go to your home. You will be safe there, until I have defeated our enemy.” He wanted her to be secure, far from harm, and paradoxically wanted her by his side – powerful and protective of all that he had sworn to defend.

“Not gonna happen,” she said swiftly. “I’ve already said it,” she paused, “and so have you. *Our* enemy, Sesshomaru.” She sat up and faced him, the fur sliding off of her shoulder to reveal a thin sleeping yukata underneath. He was struck by the dichotomy in her: the fragility of a slender neck and collar-bone contrasting to a stubborn commitment to her responsibilities. “Ours to fight together, right?” She was holding her breath, her blue eyes wide and dark and hopeful. Resolute. Perhaps a bit fearful. He nodded, and she sighed in relief. “Besides, there is no guaranteeing what will happen when it is over. I always thought the well would close completely when the Jewel was finished. If this is what I am meant to fix, then there is no way to know if this might end its magic. If I went home, I might get stuck there.”

His arms tightened automatically around her and a short growl escaped him. As much as he could not allow himself to think upon the possibility that she could be separated from him, he had to force himself to say, “Then there is a chance you could be separated from your family.”

“I know,” she said easily. Her tone was casual, but her scent revealed how painful that decision was for her. “I’ve said good-bye to them many times, and we always knew that each trip could be my last. I have lives in both places. People I love in both places,” her eyes searched his, sweet carnations and citrus flooding his nose. “People I care for,” she added, leaning forward to press her lips chastely against his. “I want both. Want to be able to go on as I have,” she grinned, “with one impossible, amazing life that spans centuries to be with my future family and my past friends.” Her smile faded to nothing more than a ghostly tilt of pink lips, however her voice was strong, even, and determined, “But if I can only choose one, I choose this place. This *time*. Here. With you.”

He kissed her then. Later, he would realize that it was the first time he had done so not out of instinct or desire, but for the pleasure of being with her. It was a kiss that thanked her for being with him. A press of lips that was as much about what he felt for her, what she meant to him, as it was about the softness of her skin and the minty, tangy sweetness of her mouth. In the moment, he thought only that it felt right. To be with her, Kagome.

He was complete.

When he pulled away, her eyes were closed, and her mouth was an open smile. Her bare neck was on display and her breath puffed white into the winter air. Sesshomaru carefully, deliberately poured her a cup of tea. “Drink,” he commanded roughly, “before it gets cold.” Dark lashes fluttered against pale cheeks, tinted pink, and her hands emerged from somewhere deep inside her fur cocoon to grasp the delicate porcelain. She sipped, her eyes fixed on his. Sesshomaru inhaled the fragrance of the tea – tart citrus and ginger and complex other flavors he did not take the time to identify. She turned the cup, pressing it against his mouth so he tasted her lips even as the warm liquid washed across his tongue. It might as well have been plain water, for all that he noticed it. He was drunk on the smell of her. *Satsuma oranges and rich magnolia. Fresh cherry wood and spicy cinnamon. Sweet carnations and thick gardenias.* Her reiki reached out, following that scent, slipping under his skin and along his nerves. Swimming through his blood and seeping into his bones.

His youki responded, just as quietly, as naturally. He could feel her heart pulse from the inside, hear how it quickened as she leaned forward, lips parting, eyes glazing. He felt dizzy, hazy, yet at the same time focused exclusively on the narrow slice of the world that contained Kagome. He pressed his lips to her chin, ran his nose along her jaw to her ear. His tongue darted out, tasting her skin – tasting his own woody musk layered over her.

“Sesshomaru,” he rumbled, teasing her lobe with his fangs. “Say it. Say my name.”

“Kagome,” she responded, ever contrary. “I love how you say it. Growl it. Oh, I-” His teeth found purchase around the muscle on the side of her neck and he bit down, just hard enough to remind her of how dangerous he could be. Never hard enough to injure. Her scent clouded his brain and stirred his instincts. She became his focus, more than ever before, everything to him. She was his world, in that moment, under a snowy sky - his life.

“Sesshomaru,” she moaned, running her blunt nails up the back of his neck to bury them in his hair. The sound of her calling out to him combined with the prickle on his scalp to send desire flooding through his system. His hands had been questing without thought while they kissed, and he finally found entrance under her blanket. Even through the thin material of her yukata, he could feel the softness of her skin. He circled her back with one arm, loosening the fur enough so that it fell to the ground and replacing it with his mokomoko. His other palm skated up her leg, parting her garment as he reached the smooth column of her thigh. He sucked, pulling the flesh of her neck into his mouth and causing her to buck her hips against him. “Yes, oh! Love me! Sesshomaru!”

He had barely touched her, but she was on fire for him. He growled, her words commanding him, driving him. There would be no more waiting, no more teasing. She was his. He would show her how he felt, show her what he had realized she meant to him. *Anything, everything*, his fevered mind promised.

“Give yourself to me, Ka-go-me,” he growled, the words so low they were almost inaudible to human ears. “You are mine, wholly, forever. Mine,” he snarled. His knuckles brushed against her core and he found her hot and wet – ready for him. Her back arched and he pressed forward again, with intent.

“Yes, yours! Mine, mine too! Sessho-maru!”

She was close, already so close to the precipice and Sesshomaru was stunned – somewhere far in the recesses of his mind that he paid little attention to – that he was nearly there as well. He scooped her up, standing swiftly and moving into their private room. The screens closed behind him, his barrier went up, and he divested them both of their clothing – leaving long tears and tattered silks scattered on the floor. Blood dripped from a small wound, already closing, on his finger where he had bitten off his claws too hastily. The entire time, his mouth remained on some part of her, words still pouring out for her ears alone. Words in his own language: *Mine. My Mate. My Kagome. One of my heart. One for my body. Mine. Mine to pup, mine to protect. Always you will be at my side. My equal.* On and on he went, growling and nipping at her, testing her flesh.

He found all of the sensitive spots again that he had discovered in the past months. He drew every cry from her mouth, wrested promises from red lips wet from her tongue. Promises he held close: Always. With you. My husband. My mate. Sesshomaru. Love you. Want you. Need you. Forever.

She knew what tested his limits as well. Her legs slid against his, her toes pressing into his calves, the muscles of his thighs, kneading, driving. One hand threaded through his hair, tugging, scraping lightly

– and sometimes roughly – against his scalp, sending a tremor of need down his spine. Her other hand followed that tremor; her palm was cool compared to his heat, the silken slide of her fingers down the valley of his spine to grasp at the muscle of his backside was welcome. Desired. Needed. Urged.

He had intended to take more time with her, to prepare her, but her slickness coated his fingers and he slipped into her entrance past his knuckle unimpeded. She uttered a mewling sound that did him in and he pumped within her, once. Twice. Added another finger and hooked them both high inside until she arched off of the bedding and cried out his name.

There was no further speaking after that. No words, in any language, that could compare to the taste of her, the feel of her around him. The feel of her reiki inside him encouraging and inciting him. His own youki wrapping around the wellspring of light and heat and everything that was Kagome. He settled between her thighs and took her mouth as he pushed in to her. She stiffened, not in pain, but in a shock that quickly wore off and became a squirming, deliciously painful mock thrust up to him. He gave her what she sought – what they were both seeking. Shallowly at first, but soon deeper at her forceful sounds. He pressed inside her until they were entwined with one another so deeply he was not certain they could ever be separate again. Did not want to be. She was his. He had promised her everything. His forever.

Youki and reiki clashed and melded, swirling and sparking in a maelstrom of power over their heads and inside them. When she came, it was with his name on her lips and a pink glow in her eyes that seemed to sear him. When he found release in the next moment, it was to a crescendo of power, the thunder of blood and energy in his ears, and her name – whispered.

ooo

Kimi paused just outside the gate that would lead her to the meadows and forests surrounding the Western shiro. She need to hunt, needed to let the drive of her instincts, the pounding chase of quick prey, and the taste of hot blood in her mouth soothe the disturbance in her mind and heart. To lead was to make difficult choices. Often, it was to take choices away from others. The balance between a life worth living, a free life, and any life at all was precarious. More so for one who had the power to bend others to their will – to decide who shall die, who shall live, and who shall live under the command of another. *The thrall of another*, Kimi thought with a bitter frown. It was a burden she had long borne well, since the day she had decided to mate Toga.

The war with the North, the battle lines and first blood drawn by Ryukostokken, had made her feel that responsibility heavily. She had chided Sesshomaru for his indecision in rescuing the priestess when she was taken. She had lectured her only pup on responsibility, difficult choices, and instinct. When presented with a similar choice, she had hesitated. It was only for a moment, and her reluctance was known only to her, but Kimi still felt it acutely. She could not forego an opportunity to weaken the enemy, to trade upon what Ryukostokken perceived as an asset and turn it into a liability for him. It was a sacrifice the West had to make. Still, she had not taken the most obvious solution, but had tried to find that delicate balance – to salvage what could be salvaged and to do as little harm to her own as possible. It was the right decision.

Kimi was not proud of it. Not shamed, she would never allow that emotion within herself, but not proud either.

The unnatural stillness that had caused her to hesitate at the threshold to the castle was broken by a burst of possessive youki. It was quickly stifled, but the strength of it ruffled fur and feathers of the occupants of the Western stronghold. Kimi let out a breath – slowly, evenly. *It is done.* She turned then, back towards the vast wilderness outside the walls and away from a decision made. Away from any opportunity for regret or vacillation. Her own power surged under her skin, shedding the mask she wore and reforming her into what she truly was. A killer. A protector. An inudaiyoukai. Her great white form leaped into the sky, seeking prey. The breeze in her wake stirred fat flakes of snow and smelled of the sweet, woody fragrance of amber and lavender.

Chapter 58: Check

Sesshomaru considered his unresponsive captain in silence, which was less effective than he usually found it to be in prompting answers to his queries. Hisao knelt before him, perfectly straight and motionless, his eyes focused somewhere on the wall behind the Saidai Mao's head. The black markings on his jaw stood out sharply – the tense muscles underneath all but screaming that the inu had news which he did not wish to share. News which, in fact, he had *refused* to share – insisting that they must wait for Kimi to arrive. The daiyoukai would not have been opposed to such a course of action; Kimi was in constant contact with a vast spy network. That knowledge, combined with her political experience, made her an excellent counsel during discussions of the war. However, he had rarely been told that he *must* have his mother present for any official business – and such situations did not end well. More rarely had one of his vassals refused a command. Such actions also had not ended well.

He could feel Kagome's tension beside him, which prickled along his nerves. Their recent intimacy had made his youki more aware of her presence, and she sat close enough that the slightest movement would cause their sleeves to brush against one another. The proximity was pleasing, the soft scent of her was a paradoxical source of calm and tension that he was unwilling to do without. However, the quickness of the emotions flitting through her scent and sending ripples through her tightly controlled reiki was distracting. At a time when his captain was withholding information and his mother was involved, distraction could prove disastrous. Not that he would consider sending Kagome away because of it. He was honest with himself; acknowledging such a potential weakness would allow him to recognize and avoid it. It also afforded him the opportunity to recall the previous evening. Her sighs. Her moaning of his name. The grasping clench of smooth muscles around him and the press of full lips against his skin. His youki stirred at the remembered sensation of a warm ocean breeze of power washing across his senses.

She sighed and shifted. Kagome was uncomfortable, he was certain. Although he was concerned for her wellbeing, he could not help a sense of deserved pride over her state. Instinct or desire, or perhaps his newly recognized love, for his human intended had driven him to take what he had sworn he would patiently wait for. *Repeatedly taken*. She had enjoyed it at the time, even cajoled and commanded him to do so in ways he had not thought her capable of, but her body was not used to such activity. He wondered briefly if her heart and mind would need an equal or longer time to become accustomed to their new intimacy. Kagome had seemed as shyly surprised when she had woken that morning as he had been smugly content. The unexpected timing of their actions did not, upon reflection, make him less certain or less inclined to repeat them. His youki sparked and she sighed, unconsciously he was sure, leaning closer to him.

Sesshomaru contained those thoughts, pushing them to the back of his mind to be examined and considered in a more appropriate and private setting. Instead of considering why both he and Kagome had acted so suddenly, so passionately, instead of plotting ways to repeat the experiences, he knew he needed to focus his considerable intellect upon the problem at hand.

Hisao had surely sensed the sudden rise in the daiyoukai's energy, but he did not even blink. Sesshomaru inhaled and sorted through the scents of his captain. His usual musk and anise scent was tinted with the tightly controlled bitter wormwood that Sesshomaru associated with failure or self-loathing. It was the flavor of Hisao when he believed he had not lived up to his own expectations or those of his lord. There were few tasks that Sesshomaru had ever assigned his captain that Hisao had failed at, in his estimation, but he was still impatient to find the cause for Hisao's distress.

Kento had begun making obvious noise at his desk – shifting papers unnecessarily and clicking brushes together – to break the silence when Sesshomaru finally sensed Kimi’s approach. She took her time walking to his study. *She does love the anticipation*, Sesshomaru thought to himself, glowering. When the screens slid open, he was surprised to see that she had chosen to don her formal court apparel. Her rich outer kimono was dyed purple and white with intricate butterflies dancing across the sleeves. Aki’s needle-work was evident; the wings were so realistic they seemed ready to take flight at any moment. Her mokomoko was drawn tightly around her shoulders and waist, leaving nothing to trail on the ground. Her scent and expression hinted at no weighty discussions forthcoming, but that would have been completely out of character for his mother. Never had he seen her display any emotion that she did not purposefully express – and usually with intent to manipulate others and conceal her true feelings. A tiny frown tilted down the corner of his mouth. Whatever matter the dowager Western Lady had to discuss, he was certain he would not be pleased.

“Saidai Mao,” she greeted him, with an appropriately deep bow. Sesshomaru had to suppress the desire to bear his teeth. Kimi did not grant displays of respect without intent. His mother had not bowed to him in anything but mild mockery since the day he had taken his title as Lord. “Kagome-san,” she continued, but did not greet Kento or Hisao with more than a cool glance. That was telling as well. Rarely did the demoness that had raised him neglect an opportunity to tease or poke at his two closest advisors – the comrades of his youth.

“Speak,” he said shortly. His nostrils flared in irritation and he did not bother to conceal it. Kagome’s reiki and scent ruffled at his side and she reached one small hand out, touching his elbow lightly with her fingertips. Warm, soothing power trickled into him even as her concern reached his ears and nose.

“Sesshomaru?” Her question was quiet, and he did not need to answer it.

“There has been an attempt to infiltrate the shiro and poison the body and mind of the Miko no Mao,” Kimi stated without preamble.

Immediately, Sesshomaru felt his hackles rise. Youki swelled within him and his claws clenched, as though to seize the hilt of a sword - which he did not wear in his private study. Kagome sucked in air, her fingers clenching on his arm. Kento let out a surprised noise. Sesshomaru had thought the immediate threat to Kagome had been dealt with. He did not enjoy being proven wrong. Hisao was notably unmoved. Presumptions and conclusions, possibilities, began to swirl in the daiyoukai’s mind – each more disturbing, more enraging, than the last. “Explain,” he ground out.

In concise, cool tones, Kimi explained that one of her spies within the castle had been approached to meet with a representative of Ryukostokken. Green fury pulsed in his veins as he listened to her description of the potion and its intent. Kagome was practically plastered against his side, the dry mace scent of her fear burning with togarshi flavored hate. It was important that his miko hear any intelligence, no matter how painful or frightening for her, but her reaction amplified his own response - making it a colossal effort to control himself. Hisao’s increasing tension drew his focus from Kimi’s retelling. The captain had played some part – or taken upon himself some failure to protect the West from this threat. Sesshomaru’s lungs cramped painfully in his chest. *Failure*, the thought was like an icy wind on bare skin, *how far did this plot progress?*

“-must be prepared in a tea-” Kimi was saying. Cold iron wrapped around the lord’s spine. A potion intended for Kagome. An elixir that must be prepared in tea, and would drive the priestess to complete devotion. Concern. Desire for the name that was spoken in her ear. The perfect recall of a daiyoukai

burned images of the previous night into his mind. Kagome, drinking the orange and ginger scented tea. Kagome, smelling of desire. The compulsion he had felt as well, after sharing her cup, to take her, protect her, give her himself. Kimi had been visiting his miko when the tea was delivered.

Sesshomaru opened his mouth on a snarl, but Kagome's thought must have mirrored his own and she managed to speak first, "No, Kimi!" Her whisper echoed with horror and hurt. "You gave it to me?" Kimi frowned and Hisao flinched. Kento half stood at his desk, youki ready to defend the miko to whom he owed everything. Sesshomaru sank his claws into the tatami mat at his side to prevent himself from taking action against his own mother. *Poison. The bitch poisoned my mate.* Kagome continued, "Why didn't you tell me? I would have."

"That," Kimi interrupted, "is exactly why This One did not. You. Would. Have." She stressed each word carefully. "Such a sacrifice could not be made by you. This One would not allow it."

Silence reigned. Kento sank slowly back to his cushion. Sesshomaru was distantly aware of the uncomfortable tingle of his acid, unreleased and reabsorbing back into his body. Hisao's posture stiffened further, his youki drawn up inside him like a wounded animal. Kimi's barrier hardened, nearly goading him to test her resolve. Information, images, scents and traces of power coalesced in his mind – stunning the Western Lord with a shocking conclusion. *Sacrifice*, the word resounded in his mind.

"But...you used it," Kagome said quietly, still pressed against his side. "You said you had, so who...?"

"The agent working in secret for This One. She sacrificed her own freedom, her choice, in order to give the West this advantage against the enemy. She wished to protect Kagome-san – her future lady." Kimi spoke to Kagome, but her eyes were on Sesshomaru's. Her expression and tone did not change, but Sesshomaru knew what that decision had cost her. He was aware, as no other could be, the weight of responsibility. It was a decision that Sesshomaru would have made himself, in the same circumstances.

He should have made it, under those particular circumstances. "It was not the place of That One." His voice was deep, with an edge that made it clear Kimi was not forgiven, her overstepping not forgotten.

"You would have done the same," Kimi broke off her formal speech. Sesshomaru wondered if her own emotions were closer to the surface after recent days. "I took this burden – my right as she is my vassal." She drew herself up, restrained power making her slender form almost intimidating to the lord. "It is still my right to protect the West. I am its Lady."

"Not for much longer," Sesshomaru growled, his aggravation mounting.

"Not ever," Kimi shot back, eyes flashing, anger and frustration leaking out of her barrier, "not if you continue to assume every burden upon yourself. This war cannot be won without the Saidai Mao and the Shikon Miko fighting, together – clear of mind and will!"

"Who," Kagome spoke over the growing threat of youki simmering in the room, "took the potion?"

"Aina-san," Hisao said lowly. Uttering her name seemed to take the will out of him, and he deflated before Sesshomaru's gaze. His pose did not alter, but the defiant acceptance melted off of his face to reveal a naked shame and bewilderment.

“What?” Kagome pulled away from his side, and Sesshomaru was extremely conscious of the loss of her weight. Her voice was crisp and commanding, “Someone explain this to me. Now.”

When neither Kimi nor Hisao seemed eager to respond, Sesshomaru answered, his eyes considering both parties kneeling before him. “The kitsune tutor is a spy for This One’s *exalted*,” he spoke flatly, and he heard more than saw Kento’s flinch, “mother. She was from the very beginning. And was in contact with the North before her arrival.” He raised a brow at Kimi, who nodded slightly, confirming his suspicions. “She brought news of the plot to That One, and the kitsune consumed the potion as well. To whom she should be shackled – there was only one choice. A youki of absolute loyalty who could be assured would not take advantage of such power over another.” He looked to his captain again. The decision had been made without him, which was intolerable, but the choice had been correct. The outcome - beneficial.

“Oh, Hisao,” Kagome whispered. Sympathetic tears welled in her eyes, filling his nose with camphor and salt. “I am so sorry. Are you okay?” Hisao blinked, his startled expression matched Sesshomaru’s thoughts perfectly. He had assumed his miko would have concerns first for the female that had so willingly sacrificed herself.

“Yes, Kagome-sama,” he answered slowly. Then, quickly, “Yes, I will be unhindered on the battlefield. Aina-san,” he swallowed, his darker skin looking sallow, “she is aware that she is under a spell, and why, but the knowledge does not affect the pull of her...compulsion.”

“She is at your home?” At Hisao’s confused nod, Kagome continued, “You should bring her here as soon as possible. She’ll do better with others around her. I know a thing or two about being under a spell; I think I can help her control the,” she blushed lightly, “ah, urges.” Sesshomaru found himself in the unexpected position of sharing a substantial look with his mother. His miko was ever revealing new depths of compassion within herself, new strength and new ways to surprise him. Her attention turned to Sesshomaru, “She can still take the children to Edo, as we discussed?”

“Unlikely,” Kimi shook her head, easily adapting the shift in conversation even while Sesshomaru was still considering the consequences. “The kitsune can be apart from Hisao, but such a distance would cause her extreme agitation, possibly even pain.”

“So Edo is out, then,” Kagome agreed easily. She turned her face up to Sesshomaru, and he spent a moment admiring the blue of her eyes. A pretty face was the least of his intended’s attributes. “I know I was opposed to Inawashiro as a safe haven when you brought it up before, but the new shrine there might be the best alternative. I know it survives. I’ve been- eh,” she cleared her throat. “What do you think, Sesshomaru?”

He blinked. “Hn.”

“Good,” she clapped her hands with finality. “I assume training is excused for today while everyone prepares to leave?” The miko did not wait for a response from Kimi, but continued, “Great. What else do we need to discuss?” She looked around with expectant blue eyes. And Sesshomaru could think of nothing in that moment but admiration. And perhaps, also, the tiniest amount of relief that what had happened between them had been entirely of their own making and not the product of dark magic.

Kagome did her best to breathe evenly through her nose. She was certain she was only hearing about twenty-five percent of the discussion, but she was also aware that her input was not vital to the war strategy. Although she wanted to be included, hated the idea that Sesshomaru might try to leave her behind or shelter her when she could be of use, she didn't delude herself into believing that she had much valuable insight when it came to the plans of attack for an entire army. With Kimi and Hisao present, Sesshomaru had more than enough ideas and suggestions to supplement his own experience. Which was a good thing, because it was all she could do to keep from letting her emotions overwhelm her.

Compartmentalization is a good thing, she reminded herself. It was something she had read about after she had been in the feudal era for a few months. Kagome had a quick temper – although she couldn't always control it, she was aware of it. She also had a soft heart; it got her into trouble almost as often as it was a benefit. Neither of those things would have been worth researching counseling techniques or psychological therapies if she had lived a normal life in the time she was born during. However, seeing death, living with the threat of debilitating or mortal injury, every day made having her emotions at the surface a liability. Not only could it end up getting her killed if it distracted her during a battle for a shard, it was horribly embarrassing to break down and cry or throw a temper tantrum in front of her friends because her feelings were raw.

Her mother had been incredibly helpful in working through exercises with her for the first few times. She said it was a sign that Kagome was growing up. Of course, Kagome wouldn't have chosen to manufacture breakdowns in front of her mother if it hadn't been completely out of the question to seek professional help. She didn't relish the idea of ending up committed somewhere, though, which she was sure would happen if she told any counselor why she was dealing with mild-PTSD on a near constant basis.

The mental exercises were put to good use in Sesshomaru's study as she sat and listened with one ear while they outlined the strategy to be used against Ryukostokken. *Breathe. Imagine a room, filled with books and pictures of the things that are upsetting you.* Kagome pictured Aina's mischievous smile and Ryukostokken's sick grin. She put books on a shelf titled, *Loss of Power, Helpless, and Tricked*. Photos of Hisao, Kimi, and the kitsune were tossed onto a mental table. In that room she put all of the fear and shame she had felt in the moment that she thought Kimi had given her the potion. When she thought that the previous night was a product of magic rather than desire and love. She pushed it all inside, then closed the door, locking it tight.

It took several more minutes of deep breathing before she was ready to refocus, and Kagome knew she would have to pull everything out again later, when she was alone, and deal with it. She wasn't looking forward to it, or dealing with everything else horrible that had happened in recent weeks which she had shoved down just to be able to function.

"...with that Houshi," Kimi was saying. "If the human is as reported, This One will have no difficulty." Kagome blinked, wondering how much of the conversation she had missed out on.

"Here, then," Hisao pointed to a forest inked in detail on the map spread across Sesshomaru's desk. "If you wait under the cover of these trees, my lady, if you can shield the others from detection."

"If?" Kimi raised one brow, a small smile playing at her mouth.

Hisao did not take the bait, but remained coolly professional towards her. “I do not question your ability, Kimi-sama, only the guile of the enemy.”

“Niji-san will have arrived at the Eel Valley, at least three days ago, with the message for Inuyasha,” Hisao cut off any burgeoning argument. “It will be challenging for him to meet the schedule that is necessary.”

“He will arrive on time,” Sesshomaru asserted evenly. Kagome traced up the magenta slash marking his cheekbone, then followed his golden gaze down to the map. The plateau where Inawashiro was located was many miles wide and had two other villages noted on it, but Inawashiro was the closest to the place chosen for battle. Open fields and shallow canals spread out from the small town, leading to broad pastures and meadows. Sesshomaru and Hisao had carefully selected the place that would afford the most benefit to allies while providing the fewest non-combative targets. Kagome tried to recall the actual lay of the land, from her one short vacation there, but quickly gave up. Too much of the country side had been paved over in the future, leaving her with only the impression of gentle hills that descended to a massive lake. The water there was extremely deep, and cold from mountain-fed streams. She did recall that there were even diving excursions offered in the lake, due to its exceptional size and some underwater sights that she hadn’t been very interested in at the time. She wished now she had paid more attention.

Hisao dragged the smooth back of one claw up from the lake and circled the flat, farmed area. “We will stage here, and leave wide avenues between encampments for troop movements from the rear.” He pointed to the forest. “Kimi-sama will lie in wait to the west. Inuyasha-san will be already in place in the east by the time we arrive.” He tapped the precarious mountains and dangerous cliffs that bordered the other side of the plateau. “There is only one manner of approach for the dragons.” Kagome’s eyes drifted to the easy slope of multiple paths that lead north. *Looks like more than one approach to me*, she thought, but kept silent.

“It is done, then,” Sesshomaru declared. Kento hummed and scribbled down a few notes. Hisao began to roll up the map.

“We should use me,” Kagome blurted, then blanched when all eyes turned on her. “I, ah, I mean, he thinks I took the potion, right?” She didn’t have to say it, thankfully. They all knew who *he* was. “So he’ll be, er, excited...” She swallowed hard to push down all of the trails of thought that brought up. “To see me – out there? If he thinks I am coming to him, then-”

“No,” Sesshomaru bit off with narrowed eyes at the same time Kimi said,

“If timed correctly-” A warning growl from the Saidai Mao interrupted her. “Oh,” she rolled her eyes, and Kagome was surprised to hear her drop formalities again, “be reasonable, Sesshomaru. The advantage has been offered to you by your enemy. Take it and-”

“This One was informed she was not ready for direct combat.” His words were barely intelligible through clenched teeth and followed by something that sounded to Kagome like a series of low rumbles. Kimi immediately bit back with a higher-pitched, but no less threatening sound. Kento leaned far back from the table, exposing his throat, while Hisao tensed as if ready to jump into action. “So either the weapons instructor for This One’s miko lied,” his lip curled although the rest of his expression remained cold, “or it is being suggested that her life means nothing. Choose and-”

"I'm right here," Kagome tried to interrupt calmly.

"Nothing? No, everything," Kimi stressed. "Your little human could turn the tide, Ha!" She barked out a laugh that was as genuine as it was cutting, "She has already given you the means to do so."

"She stays at This One's side," he commanded.

"Hell-o," Kagome felt her own lip curling into a snarl. She could hear them, *dammit*, and she had the right to risk her life, if that is what she wanted to do. None of them seemed to be paying any attention to her; their heads were raised and their eyes unfocused. It made her want to boil over. "*I think-*" Raised voices in the hall and quick footsteps finally became audible to her as well. *Goddamn dog ears*, she swore to herself.

"Enter." Sesshomaru's deep voice did not wait for the servant outside to request entrance, and the irritated curl of youki that followed was completely unnecessary and misdirected, in Kagome's opinion. She let him know by poking him sharply in the thigh and frowning when he looked her way. If he was mad at his mother, he could pick a fight with her instead of frightening the poor youkai responsible for announcing visitors.

When the screen slid open, Kagome caught sight of a furry-eared head bent low to the ground and a tail so tucked in that only the very base where it protruded from a blue kimono was visible. "Honored guest of the Saidai Mao, D-d-demon slayer Sango-san, requests-"

"Yes, yes," Kento hurried to the door and helped the servant to stand. "That will be fine. Most appropriate for my lord, yes." Even as he shoed the frightened servant away, Sango appeared in the doorway with a tiny Kirara in her arms, looking chagrined. She obviously hadn't thought that her appearance might frighten the local youkai, and she wasn't aware of how Sesshomaru's bad mood had influenced the situation.

Kagome did her best to smile and welcome her friend, grateful that she was whole and unharmed. She also felt a little guilty that she was so happy to have Sango available to chat with. It took a few minutes for Kento to sort out the situation – relieving the servant of his duties and ordering tea, seeing that the guards in the outer chamber were prepared to turn away any other guests, and placing a cushion for the slayer between himself and Hisao. Kagome's ire over their previous discussion had dulled to a warm simmer, and Sesshomaru's irritated green energy was once again restrained by the time the screens were closed and tea poured for all present. Formal greetings were made and then Sango launched into her reason for arriving so recently after her last visit.

"Inuyasha sent me," she said seriously, glancing at Kagome with an unreadable expression before turning her eyes to Sesshomaru. "He means to kill Natsou."

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Inuyasha stood quietly with a small knot of youkai. His arms crossed over his chest, the end of a wooden bokken sticking out of his fist, high above his head. A ragged blue cloth tied to the end fluttered in a chill breeze. He was seemingly instructing them on the proper way to grapple with an opponent. In reality, his senses were focused entirely on the dragon camp before him. After two days and three nights of freezing weather and inexplicable misunderstandings and accidents, Natsou was in the midst of a spectacular meltdown. Since dawn had broken - nearly an hour, the dragon captain had been

practically foaming at the mouth while he terrorized his own soldiers. Inuyasha wondered in the back of his mind, even as he shook out his muscles and prepared himself, if it had been the weevils destroying half the Northern rice stores or the poison ivy oil that had been soaked into Natsou's clothing that had pushed him over the edge. Not that it really mattered, but Inuyasha supposed that Shippo would be interested to know.

"-lazy, spineless worms! I should skin you and wrap human women in your scales – at least they would be obedient soldiers! Your mothers' slick-"

One dragon soldier, Inuyasha noted that he still bore faint silvery scars where Natsou had laid open his cheek two days earlier for missing a guard shift, opened his mouth as the captain screamed at his troops. He muttered, but Inuyasha still heard him clearly, "No pay is worth this."

His lips had not even sealed shut again before Natsou was upon him. He did not draw his sword, but seized the soldier by one wrist and yanked him out of line. The blue-skinned youkai stumbled, but caught his balance before he fell, turning his momentum into a rolling kick that brought him around to face his captain. It was a move that telegraphed the intent to fight back – but it was precious seconds too late. Natsou's great sword met outstretched thigh and hacked clean through the heavy bone. The dragon captain roared, his spittle flying from his mouth to land on the stunned soldier. There was a moment of silence, then he screamed. He threw back his head as he fell, and Inuyasha's stomach turned to see dark blue lips stretched wide around an unholy sound of agony. He hit the frozen ground like a bag of yams, thumping and settling with the faintest squish of liquid as though one root vegetable had been bruised. It was not ruined produce that ran across the dirt, but dark blood that gushed with the rapid pulse of a frightened heart and raw nerves.

"Not fit to fight for the Great Denka!" Natsou yelled, "Better those who are cowardly incompetents die here rather than stain my honor with your weak blood on the battlefield!" A few dragons near the front nodded, agreeing, but one muscle bound soldier with copper-colored scales across his forehead moved toward the injured male. "Leave him!" Natsou commanded.

"I will not."

Inuyasha pulled a length of twine from his sleeve and tied back his hair.

Natsou leaped forward, thrusting his face into his subordinate's. "Leave him," he snarled, "or die beside him." Inuyasha uncrossed his arms, letting the practice bokken dangle from his fingertips. Three more soldiers - which the dog hanyou recognized as some that had avoided their captain or muttered under their breath as he stomped around camp – stepped up behind the copper one. Their hands were loose at their sides, their feet braced wide for a fight.

"I. Will. Not."

Inuyasha dropped the bokken. The clatter of wood on stone was masked by the clash of weapons as the dragons attacked one another. Natsou struck first, his claws sinking deep into the gut of the soldier that had spoken up. Blows were freely exchanged after that. It would have been chaos, a screaming, snarling knot of blood and fangs, and steel – if Inuyasha had not prepared for, planned for, that exact result.

Archers fired carefully into the northern camp. They set fire to the tent of the scribe and messenger that was usually by Natsou's side. Other targets, pinpointed and tracked for days, were struck down even as they raised their weapons. Not many were killed by Inuyasha's side, but enough, the right soldiers, to make a difference. Soldiers that were the strongest supporters of the captain. The loudest to taunt the cranes. The first to claim that they would feast on the flesh of their enemies as soon as Ryukostokken gave the order.

Then Inuyasha made his move. He drew Tessiaga and howled. He hadn't planned to make the sound, but the instinct to claim the battlefield had overcome him suddenly, just as his youki exploded and washed over the valley. He bent his knees and sprang forward, already feeling the gloriously painful tightness in his belly and sharpness in his mind as he descended into battle. He cut down two dragons before he made it to his quarry; the first met the razor edge of his sword with a chest poorly protected by intricately linked plates of steel. Tessiaga sang as it licked through the metal and melted flesh and bone like fat before a flame. The second he caught around the neck when the blood-eyed dragon tried to charge him. Inuyasha squeezed, already losing interest in the purpling face and the claws that scrambled ineffectually at the sleeve of the fire rat even before the enemy died. He held tight, stalking toward his target while dragging the suffocating youkai beside him.

The moment the wet blade of his sword dripped against the exposed neck of the dragon captain, his rampage stopped. Eyes red with battle lust rolled toward the hanyou as Natsou turned his head to look over his shoulder. The dragon was trapped, and they both knew it. Tessagia did not need a mighty swing to sever the knobby, hard bones that held up Natsou's head. Both youkai could feel the power of the blade pulsing with righteousness. One swift downward blow would be all that was necessary to part mind from body. The size and weight of Natsou's sword worked against him in such close quarters. Even with his exceptional strength, there was no possibility he could bring it around to attack Inuyasha before the hanyou completed a killing strike.

Inuyasha belatedly dropped the corpse from his hand to slump at Natsou's feet. Slowly, the fighting around them ground to a halt. The crane army stood stiff and ready at Inuyasha's back, just as he had instructed. They did not interfere, but were ready if the internal struggle in the dragon camp could not be resolved as planned.

"I should have followed my instinct not to trust a filthy bitch-born half-breed like you," Natsou snarled. He spat over his shoulder, the thick fluid making surprisingly good distance to land on Inuyasha's collar.

Youki was cresting inside the hanyou – red and sharp, eager and powerful. He wanted to unleash that fury; Inuyasha itched to toss Tessiaga down and leap upon the dragon. Pin him down with his paws and snap his jaws around the scaly enemy's neck. Taste the squirt of bitter blood in his mouth and make the dragon soldiers cower under the sound of his bark. He gripped the hilt harder, forcing the power instead to channel as he desired, as he willed it. Tessagia, transformed and gleaming wetly with blood, began to glow. A red, hot enough to burn white at the center, lit the cold morning shadows of the valley.

"Surrender." The word was nearly a growl, but loud enough that every dragon could hear him. Inuyasha kept his eyes on the captain, but spoke to the northern soldiers, "Surrender and fight for me, by my side, and you will have respect and rewards due an honorable youkai. Fight, and die. Flee," he bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile. Pink holy energy exploded further down the valley, causing the dragons closest to the epicenter to cry out in alarm. "Flee and you will know no peace. Not here. Not in death." The tension in the crowd was palatable, crawling over Inuyasha's youki like a thousand cen-

tapedes. Eyes shifted between his face and that of Natsou. They were testing his measure, Inuyasha knew. He extended the fingers of his free hand, feeling his claws lengthen in a way they had never done before except in his crazed full-demon form. Heat pulsed in his open palm. He felt like he was on a precipice, so much weighed on the outcome of this one action. So many lives were at stake. His focus was narrowed to a blade-width, ready for action, but he felt he could still hear the gentle shift of a crane's feathers behind him. Could still hear the strain of a bow high above the valley floor.

"Surrender," he repeated. Even as his mouth opened, he knew the outcome. Natsou's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. His youki coiled like a spring; the glint of light off of his monstrous sword reflected a degree higher. Tessaiga slashed down.

Eight dragons died at the hands of the allies of the West. Far more were killed by their own companions. Those that lived were cautious to pledge allegiance to Sesshomaru, but eager to declare their loyalty to Inuyasha. As Sango had predicted, youkai that were raised to be warriors respected strength and leadership. Inuyasha had displayed both, as best he could. They refused to bury the corpse of their former captain, but by mid-afternoon Inuyasha was sick of looking at the severed head, lolling in the dirt, every time he walked past. The wolf courier, so close to his animal cousins, was happy enough to bury it once Inuyasha stopped trying to keep it from carrying off a hand to gnaw on.

As sunset neared, he settled on the ground below a large tree and accepted a bowl of rice and meat from Tomago. He was starving, he realized, even as the sight of the rare pork made his cheeks water it also made his stomach clench. The killing had been necessary, and completely unnecessary at the same time. "Stupid fuckin' dragons," he muttered to himself, resolutely shoving a large heaping of food into his mouth. At least he didn't have to stand around pretending to be an idiot any more. He snorted, almost sucking a grain of rice up his nose. *Now I can just act like the idiot I really am*, he thought dryly.

"Stupid, yes," a sultry voice pulled him out of his personal joke. Inuyasha would have known that voice anywhere. Even when she was trying to be respectful, Niji couldn't help but drip intimation.

"What took ya so long?" He said gruffly around the sticky rice, without looking up. He sniffed and sorted through her mild, watered-down scent. Pheromones, though less than usual. "Ice Pri- eh, hm, Sesshomaru too busy to see you first thing?" He chewed and considered. *Dust. sweat. Anxiety. Fear. Pain.* Inuyasha frowned and looked up as he swallowed. *Blood.* His eyes widened. "What the hell?"

"I apologize for my tardiness, Inuyasha-sama. I encountered a rather curious youkai on the Western border. He and his companions were most eager to learn why I was leaving the West so intently." A bruise, eggplant purple and streaked with still-healing scratches, covered half of her face and swelled one eye shut. Her left arm hung awkwardly from a rough sling. The material had clearly been torn from her kimono.

He jumped up, upending the contents of his bowl. *Fuck, I should have sent someone else, should have-*

"They are no longer curious," she said casually. She picked up a lock of red hair and studied the ends with practiced ennui. "Such forward behavior," she glanced up, and caught Inuyasha with a wicked smile, "asking an unfamiliar female personal questions. I was properly affronted." She dropped her hair and raised one hand to cover her open mouth, widening her one good eye in mock horror. The inu hanyou could clearly make out the traces of blood in her claws. None of it smelled like her.

"Keh," he relaxed fractionally. Niji had obviously given better than she got. "Not curious, eh?"

“No,” she responded lightly, sinking down to her knees before his small fire. He resumed his seat as well and waved Tomago over to bring two more bowls of food. “They won’t ever be again, I am quite certain. But it did delay my journey significantly.” She glanced over her shoulder, and Inuyasha followed her gaze to the small party of youkai that were admiring a lesser wolf demon and his dragon-hand chew toy. “It seems I have missed some excitement.”

“Makes it sound like anybody with half a brain would have *wanted* to be here,” Inuyasha grumbled. He leaned back against the tree trunk, suddenly exhausted. There was still so much to do, and he had been tense for days. The fight had sapped him unusually, too. Maybe it was the cold, or the audience, or the weight of responsibility, *or maybe the new fuckin’ youki, idiot*, he mentally rolled his eyes. Regardless, his energy was significantly strained.

“Hm, perhaps not. But it does make my arrival seem somewhat...underwhelming, perhaps? Or superfluous, maybe.”

“How’s that?” Inuyasha closed his eyes, too tired to banter when he just wanted the rain youkai to spit out whatever it was that Sesshomaru had told her so he could get some sleep.

“The Saidai Mao requested that you bring Natsou’s contingent to Maruyama, east of Inawashiro. He will have an emissary meet you at Kawageta on the night of the new moon, to brief you on the battle strategy.” Inuyasha’s eyes flew open. The new moon was less than a week away. Maruyama was at least a day and a night’s run for him, alone, at his full strength.

“Fuck,” he swore. If they marched at a steady pace, dawn til dusk, it would take six days. The schedule would have been tight even if Niji hadn’t been delayed. Now, he had to get his entire army and what was left of the dragons to move over 100 ri in *four* days. “Egg,” he barked, and the gangly crane dropped the bowls of dinner and came flapping.

“And he would like you to bring Natsou with you,” she continued, as though he wasn’t ready to snap at the next thing to draw his attention. *Four fuckin’ days. Fuck. And the captain fucker too*, he thought sarcastically, *no fuckin’ problem*. He stomped away from his fire and the rain youkai, seething.

“Get the lieutenant, and have the monks start packin’,” he ordered the hatchling. *Fuck*. The curse kept ringing through his mind, interspersing the hundreds of things that needed to be taken care of to get the large group moving, as undetected as possible through territory chock full of spies and thieves, and then make them run. It made getting Kagome to leave her squishy bed and hot water in her time seem like a goddamn *festival*.

Niji’s smoky voice was tinted with an almost unnoticeable grain of laughter as Inuyasha bent down, punched the wolf youki in the head and retrieved the slobbery, half-eaten hand of the former dragon captain. “Alive.” Her words drifted easily to his sensitive ears. “For questioning,” she clarified, finally letting a single chuckle escape.

“He can investigate this when I shove it up his ass,” Inuyasha muttered. He tossed the hand to Tomago. “Keep that safe,” he ordered, then raised his voice, “Move out at moonrise. If you ain’t runnin’ or flyin’ with me, you’ll be meeting my fist – with your face.”

“She will be fine,” Sesshomaru said quietly into her hair. Kagome nodded from her place on his chest, not questioning how he knew what she was thinking. After the strategy session had concluded, she had gone to the springs with Sango and then spent an hour closeted with the slayer in the guest room set aside for her. Her priority had been to examine her friend and make certain she was taking the prescription Kagome had ordered to help with the pregnancy. Feudal herbs weren’t as good as modern prenatal vitamins, but she was using the best available to her. Although physically, Sango was fine, Kagome still worried for her future – for the future of them all. It was a paradox, both in actuality and in her own conflicted mind, but the more correlations she found between her time and the past, the more anxious she was that things would end badly.

“I know. The shrine is safe. It is a good spot for Sango, Aina, and the children to wait. It is safe,” she repeated. “I’ve seen it.” She was reminding herself as much as him, but it was his warm palm rubbing circles on her back that did the most to soothe her. “But that was before I agreed she should go there, before we set the place for the battle. If I went home next week, it might not-”

“You stated you would not.” His hand stilled and Kagome was acutely aware of how carefully he was holding her, of the absence of any emotion in his voice. “Have you changed your mind, and now believe you would be able to return?”

“No, Sesshomaru, no,” she lifted her head and looked into his eyes. They were full of shadows; their sleeping room was lit only by a single lantern. “I’m staying with you,” she enunciated carefully, trying to will him to believe her – to agree with her. “I just wish – I just-” she let out a sigh and settled down again, her cheek pressed against his sternum. “I just want everyone to be safe.”

He was quiet for a long moment before his hand took up rubbing her spine again. The slide of the silk of her yukata between them sounded loud in the waiting silence. “I cannot promise you that all you love will remain unharmed,” he said slowly. Her eyes snapped from the pale column of his throat to the dark slits of his eyes. “Everything that is within my power, all that I can do, while still performing my duty, I have done. I will do,” he amended solemnly, “all that is within my power, all that I must seek power for, to protect what you hold close. To protect you.”

“Oh,” she sighed. Her chest felt both pleasantly and painfully tight. Worry and love tangled up together as she leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his chin. “I know, Sesshomaru. Don’t- just don’t take responsibility for more than you have to, okay? We can all look after ourselves. Besides,” she forced a smile that became easier as his own face relaxed a bit in response, “I hold you close, don’t I?” She squeezed gently, pressing her body more fully against his.

His voice was rough, “That is evident. And encouraged.”

“Good. Then make sure you protect yourself, Saidai Mao.” She could feel tears pricking at the backs of her eyes, but she couldn’t help but grin when he surged forward to seal his mouth against hers. The heat of him was delicious, washing away the chill of anxiety that had been creeping up on her since the council had made the declaration of war. The hardness of his body was reliable and a welcome reminder of how strong Sesshomaru was, how capable, how fearless and formidable a daiyoukai of his caliber would be on the battlefield. His tongue tangled with hers and she tasted the mellow bitterness of the tea they had shared and the heavy, electric tang of his youki flooding through her. His tongue

chased hers and she was soon gasping for air. When he allowed her space, she found herself with her back pressed against the futon, her yukata gaping open to the waist, and her legs tangled in blankets and mokomoko and stretched over his hip.

He loomed over her. “I will – we,” he amended, surprising another smile out of Kagome, “will be victorious. Our allies have taken to their roles easily, and Kento has received word that all will be in place when the time comes. Hisao leads the most skilled youkai army this world has ever seen. Kimi-”

“Is the deadliest youkai this world has ever seen,” Kagome interrupted. She couldn’t help the feeling of mirth, even speaking of how her future-mother-in-law could no doubt decimate enemy troops with less effort than she took to arrange her hair.

He acknowledged her with a nod. “With the monk and the wolf cub at her side, the enemy will tremble at the sight.” He dipped his head and ran his nose along her cheek. Upon reaching her ear, his tongue flicked out and caught the shell, tracing it lightly enough to make her shudder.

“And Inuyasha?” she managed to ask. Kagome couldn’t help the way she worried for the hanyou. They had been friends for years, and she had seen him mature and grow – not just in raw power and martial skills but in mind and spirit as well – but she still felt responsible for his safety. From himself, and the world. Sesshomaru pulled back, frowning.

“I have told you not to speak of my half-brother while we are together like this.”

“In bed, you mean?” She laughed, even as she tried to bat her eyes flirtatiously. She pressed her bare foot against his calf and dragged it upwards. “Why not? We are discussing the battle and those we both know and care for. Your brother,” she enunciated. Her palm slid from his shoulder, across his chest, to find the faint trail of hair low on his stomach. “Inu-yash-ah?” As expected, he knocked her hand away and growled, pressing her into the bedding.

He made sounds that were familiar, but she could not place them, before speaking, “I will have to ensure you cannot remember any but This Sesshomaru, if you refuse to obey.” He gripped her bare foot, swiftly pulling it free from the blankets and using it to yank her hard against him. She gasped as her pelvis made full contact with his. Duties had kept them both busy – far too busy to enjoy the newest dimension to their relationship – and Kagome was more than eager to let him help her forget everything but their bed and what happened in it. Mokomoko took over for his hand, wrapping around her ankle in a soft, furry manacle and securing her against him. Once free, his palm slid up her leg, parting her completely useless yukata along the way. When he reached the crease between her hip and thigh, his fingers pivoted to grip on globe of her bottom. His mouth found the tender spot on her neck, just above the joint with her shoulder, and he sucked. Kagome nearly blacked out at the rush of liquid heat between her legs.

Any anxiety had all but disappeared when he sniffed against her skin and murmured, “Do not worry, my miko. Tomorrow, we will leave. Tonight, there is only us.”

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“He’s ready then?”

Sou did not startle at the sudden words, although Arashi knew he had surprised the captain. He waited in silence in the shadows behind the taller dragon, both considering the forces spread across the plain before them. “The Saigo Mao had determined it is time to confront the enemy openly,” he finally responded. It was an answer – without answering. Arashi was well aware of the distinction.

His black eyes left the disciplined ranks of soldiers to study the side of Sou’s face. Dull bronze skin seemed to absorb the light around it; his black hair was pulled back into a tail that had been wrapped tightly with cord. He held his body easily, heavy musculature relaxed, but capable of violent action without a moment’s thought. *A killer*, Arashi observed.

“Is he ready?” It was not often that the spy asked such bald questions, but the game was nearly over and he found that he desired an equally open response from one whom he respected.

“Are you?” The captain countered. He did not turn, nor even wait for a response, but lifted a helmet onto his head. “The fate of the North will be decided on the battlefield – but only by one who seizes the opportunity can it be a fate worth living. Or dying.” Sou marched away, barking orders at soldiers as he passed into their ranks. Arashi watched their interactions with great attention until he was forced to pull himself away and attend to his own duties.

“Check,” he murmured into the shadows. “How will you attempt to maneuver out of this?”

Chapter 59: Battle Lines

Kimi kept her scent and youki carefully masked as she neared the camp of the Western allies. Of course, she was aware of many details regarding the two that were leading the forces hidden deep in the mountains, but she preferred to gain a first impression before they were aware of her presence. It made for more accurate assessments. And it was particularly amusing to sneak up on young males and watch as they scrambled after their masculinity. For some inexplicable reason, they always were more embarrassed that a female had out maneuvered them. Kimi considered it to be an important lessons for the youths: they needed to recognize that they could be eclipsed. Kimi brazenly admitted that she also enjoyed how it stroked her ego to upstage another.

Practically infants, she thought, looking upon the leaders. The wolf youkai was barely older than Inuyasha. His youki had not yet matured and grown enough to allow him to completely conceal his true form. *That*, she considered, *or the brash pup wishes to flaunt his heritage among humans*. She could understand the impetus; after all, Kimi was perfectly capable of restraining her own energy sufficiently to make her mokomoko disappear. But it was so much more fun to let others see the tangible display of her power and wonder. It also looked magnificent. She admired his muscular form and rugged appeal with the eye of an artisan. Kimi appreciated beauty – although she could have done without the strong musk mixed with old kills and dens.

The monk was another matter entirely; similar, and yet vastly different. Her spies had traded her intriguing tales of his antics. A male that appeared to be consumed with desire and the instinct to breed, but whom never forced his attentions on another. In fact, Kimi strongly suspected that many of his exploits – those involving lips and naked flesh – were actually the work of a tanuki that had been his companion. It was not impossible to imagine that such a human would have found more pleasure in the submission to a single female. It was not unheard of among even youkai, so it was not strange to her that the slayer – a female of admirable skill and spirit – would have dominated the monk to his enjoyment.

Kimi cocked her head slightly. Although she could see the physical appeal, even under his loose robes, she was more intrigued by the spark of intelligence in his eyes. The monk had often been the diplomat for the Shikon group during the hunt for the shards, and was an accomplished spiritual force as well. Kimi realized, as she observed him interacting with the wolf prince and several wilder youkai, that his easy, pleasure-seeking persona was a mask for a sharp mind. Cunning. Devious. Kimi smiled widely. She would enjoy working alongside that one.

She stepped silently from the sparse undergrowth and shadows of twisted pine trees. A ripple of stillness moved across the camp; Kimi waited until all eyes were on her, cautious, admiring, and fearful. Then she spoke, “You are honored by the presence of This One.” Her gaze narrowed in on Kouga, then the monk. Where the young youkai had quickly covered his shock with a stern countenance, the human had bowed low and used the motion to conceal his expression. When he rose, his face had smoothed into a gracious smile of welcome and respect. *Cunning indeed*, Kimi thought with relish. She quirked one brow, “Do impress.”

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Kagome took one last look out over the still, deep waters of the lake before turning with the rock brothers back to the camp. It was an impressive sight, but it didn’t stop her heart from worrying over all of those who were in even greater danger than before. Sesshomaru had led his forces to the plain where

the battle would take place, and they had arrived in advance of the Northern army – as the Saidai Mao had planned. The bustle and tension of moving the soldiers and preparing the field had given way to the lull before battle. Kagome had no weapons to sharpen or training drills to keep her thoughts from wandering into an ever tightening spiral of anxiety. Aina and Sango had travelled separate from the army, in order to further conceal their arrival at the Inawashiro shrine. The children would be safe there, with accomplished monks, the slayer, and a five-tail to guard them. *Still*, Kagome bit her lip as she walked, unseeing, through the camp.

Aina had been fervent in her pledge to protect the four children with her life. It was a promise Kagome knew the kitsune would have made regardless, as she truly cared for them. However, the knowledge of the potion's hold on her tainted her behavior. Kagome felt guilty and shamed for detecting even a hint of disingenuousness in Aina's actions, but too it was impossible not to feel that way. Not after the red-head had looked to Hisao before answering each question. Not after the way she whined a little - high-pitched and chilling - in the back of her throat when the captain stepped away from her attempted embrace. Not after the kitsune had slumped with devastated longing when the inu youkai that she had given her will to had turned on his heel and left to command his soldiers.

It was a terrible thing, to realize that she was grateful for the sacrifice of someone else. Aina was suffering, although she wouldn't say so while she was under the effects of the potion. Kagome was nearly overwhelmed by the guilt that ate at her for her reaction: relief that it was the kitsune and not herself that was enslaved to a single name and guilt that she did not entirely trust Aina to put the children's lives before her own if the compulsion of the potion was tested.

The guilt mixed with worry for her adopted son and Rin, as well as the younger inus. Shippo had been so brave and serious under Sesshomaru's gaze when the Western Lord informed him that he must assist Aina in hiding them – and be on guard for the dark magic to overwhelm the five-tales. It was such a responsibility for one as young as him, and Kagome was proud of his maturity. Not surprised - she couldn't have been surprised since she knew, first hand, all that Shippo had lived through - but proud and still scared for him. Rin too had taken the gravity of the situation well. She was the heir to the West, and on the eve of war it could not be denied that there was the possibility that she might actually have to take her adopted father's place if Ryukostokken succeeded. Sesshomaru had gifted the girl with her own weapon, forged from one of his fangs, before they departed. It should have been done at a grand festival, in celebration of Rin's coming-of-age, but the sentiment was the same, and the girl accepted it with reverence and respect. Kagome's eyes had teared up, and then spilled over when Sesshomaru pulled Rin into a public embrace.

Worry. Anxiety. Dread. Sesshomaru had personally travelled to Maruyama to meet with Inuyasha. He would be fastest by himself, and the meeting less likely to be discovered if the brothers were the only ones present. Hirimoto had arrived in his absence, and although Kagome had no doubt of the bear's loyalty, his grief was an ominous dark cloud. It settled across his entire encampment and was equaled only by the stoic vengeance that every Southern soldier had sworn by their honor. They would bleed justice from the dragons or die in the attempt.

Kagome glanced up at the sky and judged the time. The Western Lord would be returning at any moment, and every second past noon that he was not close enough for her to sense tied another knot in her intestines. Waiting, waiting. It pulled on her like unskilled fingers on a guitar string, twanging a flat note. Eiji and Eiichi were silent guards on either side of her, leaving her to stew in the uncomfortable sludge of her own thoughts.

Ironically, given his distaste for humans in general and his specific dismissal of Kagome beyond her position at Sesshomaru's side, it was Tsukahara that offered her a moment of respite.

"Come, Miko-sama, and deal with these fools before I end this alliance with human blood on my claws." His lip curled and the deep crimson of his cloak rippled with his frustrated movements. Kagome blinked in surprise to see the eagle youkai closing in on her, and quickly realized she had deviated from her intended course and ended up walking between the tents of their human allies and the small, scattered fires of the birds of prey. *Regret is always sharper than foresight, but accomplishes less*, she reminded herself with an inward wince. She opened her mouth to greet him, but was interrupted by another voice.

"Fools?" Date spluttered. "It was not fools that the Killing Perfection sought as allies. And it won't be fools that send your blackened soul to the underworld if you don't apologize!" The warlord stalked in Tsukahara's wake, turning his narrowed eyes on Kagome, "Priestess, I demand that you resolve this issue! By purification, if necessary!" A small crowd gathered a respectful distance away as the two males came to stop before her, bowing shallowly.

Respectful, or out of weapons range, Kagome wondered to herself. "Gentlemen," she began, and immediately Date bristled. She reminded herself that he was a lord. Self-made, certainly, but history would remember him as nobility. "Lord Date," she corrected herself. "Tsukahara-san. Please, what is the problem?"

"This *demon*..."

Date's complaints about the eagles turned out to be fairly petty, in Kagome's estimation, but entirely correct. The youkai were taunting the humans, and Tsukahara was turning a blind eye. After nearly an hour of listening to bickering that began to border on a real fight, Kagome had had enough. She ordered that each side turn over five soldiers to serve her personally. Neither could refuse her the demand – which was really an honor for them to contribute to the guard of the future Western Lady, and both were very aware that every youkai eye would see the combined force as a testament to their agreement. They weren't happy, but they weren't unhappy either. *A true compromise*, Kagome thought without mirth, *no one wins*. Unfortunately, it meant that she had to deal with an increased defense around herself, when she didn't really want any at all. Except Sesshomaru, of course. At least he had recognized, however begrudgingly, that she could defend herself. As she continued through the camp to the tent where Sesshomaru had ordered their shared futon and a table for battle maps to be placed, she was ringed by alternating eagles in deep red robes that did nothing to soften the sharpness of their eyes and teeth, and ninjas in shadowy black whom were nearly as skilled as Sango. That was in addition to the two rock brothers, who stuck closer to her than ever.

It was little wonder then, that when, not ten yards from her destination, Hitashimashita eased into her path, she had to bite her lip to avoid snarling at the tree youkai. Over the months that she had been in the West, she had found Sesshomaru's feelings towards court a bit over the top, but increasingly understandable. The tree began his usual long-winded, creaking greeting, and Kagome found herself channeling her absent fiancée as the desire to blast her way to peace with reiki nearly overwhelmed her. She was tense to begin with, having to coordinate so many things in Sesshomaru's absence did not help matters.

“...priestess of the Shikon. Scion of-” Kento stepped out of her tent, caught sight of her predicament, and moved more swiftly than the tree could speak to reach her side. The miko could have kissed the secretary in relief. “...so it is with the honor of a thousand blossoms-”

“Kagome-sama,” Kento interrupted, bowing swiftly. Hitashimashita’s voice ground to a halt and he blinked without having taken any obvious offense to the disruption.

“Kento,” she replied warmly. She could feel a headache coming on and was eager for almost anything that could get her out of the cold wind and harsh sunlight and away from the thousands of soldiers that stared at her as she passed. Or worse, the nobles that wanted to talk.

“It is excellent that Hitashimashita-san has found you. May I presume that you have agreed with his suggestion to send an update to Bokuseno-sama?” The stripes on his forehead remained unwrinkled as he calmly waited for her response. Kagome wasted a few precious seconds trying to remember if Hitashimashita had actually said anything about it, before deciding that it didn’t matter. Bokuseno did need an update, the tree youkai was the best option to arrange it, and a detailed explanation would only make her head pound more. She had enough physical turmoil between her knotted stomach and her nervous heart without bringing her mind into the mix.

“Yes, of course. Great idea Hitashimashita-san. Go ahead however you and Kento see fit.” She smiled tightly and offered him a little bow, feeling guilty for not wanting to listen to his sincere words. His slow, sincere, *wordy* words. The weight of that guilt was only slightly mollified by her relief to escape another discussion, at least for a short time. Eiichi gave orders to the new guards to ring the tent while Eiji escorted her inside. He searched the small quarters, even pulling back the curtain that divided the meeting area in the front from the sleeping area in his effort to secure the space.

Once he gave her a nod of acceptance and bowed, she removed her shoes and slipped the curtain closed. It wasn’t until she sat down on the mat next to the folded bedclothes, waiting for her lunch to be delivered, that she realized her mistake. Without Tsukahara, or Date, or Hitashimashita to occupy her thoughts she was left alone with the anxiety and remorse that had been her closest companions since Sesshomaru had left. The pounding in her head surged with a vengeance.

The waiting was worse than it had ever been during the quest for the Shikon. Perhaps it was because more lives were so immediately at stake. Perhaps it was simply that she was older and at least a little wiser. Wiser to the risks they all took, to the danger posed by the enemy. She wondered how Sesshomaru had managed, over the centuries since his father had died, to bear so much responsibility alone. That, in turn, only made her feel worse for her frustration with the daily command of the camp. Work of which the majority had actually been performed by Kento and Hisao. They only involved her when a final decision was absolutely necessary, or when one of their allies came directly to her. She was ashamed that she hadn’t lived up to the expectations she had for herself, what she was sure Sesshomaru had for her.

Blood pounded in her head and thundered across the inside of her skull like the tide of an ocean, captured in a too small bottle. She closed her eyes and laid her head down on the folded futon, not even bothering to lay it out. Just for a moment, she would breathe deep and try not to think about anything but the faint scent of cloves on the bedding and the imagined sensation of silky hair brushing across her cheek.

“It is time,” Ryukostokken spoke in a low voice, knowing that it would carry to Sou’s ears. His captain nodded and snapped a quick bow before turning to give orders to the army. The Northern Lord stood still on a narrow outcropping of barren rock, facing south. A dragon’s eyes were keen enough to spot prey from the sky and pounce; Ryukostokken had no difficulty making out the broad, white plain in the distance where the forest and rocky terrain broke to allow for fields and pastures, meadows and open spaces. At that distance, not even he could see the villages that he knew were scattered along the edge, but he imagined that the haze along the horizon was the steam rising from the lake at Inawashiro. *Not soon enough*, he thought with a desire to bare his teeth and grin.

“Inuyasha and his followers are behind schedule.” The deep, quiet words of Arashi startled him, although the lord covered his surprise well with a snarling frown. Silently, the spy had arrived at his side, just out of arm’s reach of Ryukostokken. The lengthening shadows under ancient pines and barren maple trees concealed more than the cold winter sun revealed. Ryukostokken could make out little but the soft darkness of Arashi’s robes and the glint of his black eyes under the edge of his hood.

“You will be held responsible, as will Natsou, if the half-breed does not play his part,” Ryukostokken snapped. A subservient bow in response did not quell his unease as it usually did. “Blood will run,” he snarled to remind the whelp of the consequences of failure.

“I do not doubt that, *denka-ue*,” Arashi stated. Ryukostokken flicked out his tongue but could taste nothing but sincerity on his spy. “If Inuyasha does not fulfill the role that has been given him, my future will be forfeit. Inuyasha’s actions determined Natsou’s fate.”

The truth was inescapable, but it still made the short hair on the back of the lord’s neck prickle. He did not like the calm expression that smoothed Arashi’s shadowed grey skin or the impassive gaze that stared out at him. He had never trusted the spy – only a fool would put his trust in dirty blood and skilled lies – but his *youki* was stirring with awareness of some unnamed threat. With a snap of his teeth, Ryukostokken issued new orders, “You will stay at This One’s left during the battle.” The dragon lord favored his left hand, and placing Shianma between himself and Arashi smoothed his unsettled suspicions. “Do not fail the North,” he threatened.

Ryukostokken waited only long enough to ensure that the spy bowed in obedience before turning away to summon the wind demoness and take his place supervising the troop movements. He had a thick length of pale hair wrapped around his fist and the crackle of *youki*-born leaf under his feet when he sensed the half-breed’s eyes on him. Ryukostokken blamed the wind for the chill that settled on his spine.

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“My miko,” Sesshomaru spoke quietly, so as not to startle her, but his intended was a deep sleeper. The rustle and muffled voices outside the tent only caused her to snuggle deeper into the awkward hold she had on their bedding. He would have given her more time, if he had it to give, but that luxury had passed by. He had taken far longer than expected at Maruyama, and his return coincided with the first sightings of the enemy. “Kagome,” he said louder, and placed a firm hand on her shoulder. The thick blue material of her outer kimono was soft under his palm, the simple white embroidery pressed into his skin as he shook her once.

"Hmm," she murmured sleepily. Dark lashes fluttered against her cheeks, the faint purple smudges under her eyes a testament to the strain of the past few days. Her gaze finally focused on him, and he felt his youki swell and his heart stutter under the twin onslaught of her soft smile and the familiar caress of reiki. He had not seen her since the previous morning, and there was nothing he desired more than to return her smile, to settle beside her and wrap her in his fur. There was no time. The state of matters had changed his plans, and war was upon them. *Never enough time.*

"Kagome," he repeated, sliding his hand down her arm to find hers. She weaved together her delicate human fingers and his deadly claws without hesitation. "You must rise." He watched her face carefully, savoring the welcoming brush of her power. "Ryukostokken approaches."

He had always been left wondering at the fast and ever-changing pace of her emotions, but the ripple of her aura was as swift as it was expected. After months in her company, he could easily scent the most dominate of her emotions. Worry. Trust. Hatred. And the undercurrent of dry mace that was her fear. "You can go to the shrine, protect the pups," he offered one last time, knowing she would refuse, not sure any longer if he wanted her to give in.

"Just let me get my bow," she answered, and with her words her expression and scent became resolute. His patience was not necessary, as she had her weapons and shoes laid out and ready for quick retrieval. The braid that imprisoned her hair was slipping loose at the back of her neck, but she merely pulled on a knitted blue wool cap that flattened her hair and covered her ears from the cold. The future garment strangely added to her appearance in a positive way. She was more than any woman or miko that had come before her, and the head covering combined with the fine winter kimono that brushed her knees, the tight, thick leggings that she insisted were not at all scandalous in the future, and the sturdy leather boots he had purchased for her to make her appearance reflect her person. Powerful, in title and ability, beautiful, in form and spirit.

Her weapons were strapped to her back and she nodded, signaling that she was ready to depart. It was Sesshomaru who hesitated at the entrance to the tent, earning a puzzled glance from the female at his side. He glanced down at her face, her pink lips parted on a question, and gave in to the compulsion to reassure them both.

"We will succeed," he stated.

She quirked a brow and the corner of her mouth tilted up, "Did the Killing Perfection ever doubt it?"

He brushed aside her attempt at levity and cupped her jaw in his hand. She was so delicate. A porcelain cup – filled with lethal fire. He would not allow failure on this day, refused for that fire to be doused. "You will defend yourself," he commanded.

"I will do whatever is necessary," she agreed. He nodded, but then she amended, "to protect the West."

"Kagome-" he began, frustrated with her prevarication. Sesshomaru was not certain what he intended to say, only that *she* was the West to him. All that he was, all that he intended to save, it was her and he refused to have one without the other. His mind could not conceive of it. His body would not allow it. He would not otherwise survive.

"Your responsibility is mine, Sesshomaru," she said steadily. "I would do this, even if it weren't. But it is, and we are, so - together then, right?" She spoke nonsense, disjointed words that would have no

meaning to anyone else. To him they were right and true. She was a part of him now, even if the mating ceremony was yet to come. She shared his responsibilities, his triumphs and losses – and he hers. Her cool touch on the back of his hand had a trace of power in it, and he savored the pink energy as it sank under his skin – wrapping it tightly in youki as he wished he could do to the woman herself. Keeping it safe and close to his heart.

“Hn.” There was no more time to speak, to say all that he suspected she should hear, all that he wanted to say. Still she smiled and squeezed his fingers, drawing his hand to hang between them and turning to face the entrance. An unnatural quiet had fallen over the camp, in absence of the army that had so recently been waiting there. They had moved out to meet the enemy, as their Saidai Mao had ordered. Sesshomaru could feel his youki rising, his instincts stirring and urging him to refocus on the battle ahead. He gripped the hilt of Bakusaiga with one hand and returned Kagome’s gentle pressure with the other. “We go.”

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It was chaos.

The frozen ground had been churned by a thousand boots - a thousand more claws and talons and powerful limbs of hair and scales and anything else that had ever been seen on earth. The sounds of growls, shouts, screams, and snarls blended with the screech of steel sliding on steel and the meaty, moist sound of flesh hitting flesh into a cacophony that was deafening. At first it had made her ears ache, but the noise had become horrific background music that had to be ignored along with the sights and smells of violence and death so that she could focus on a single instant, a single action. And then another. And another. Kagome fired a glittering pink arrow into a brief break in the maelstrom around her. One more dragon turned to ash. Surrounding her, the mixed-guard of eagle youkai and human ninja pivoted and turned, keeping the fighting from reaching her. They occasionally broke to allow an ally to enter.

“Miko-sama,” called a green-skinned youkai. Kagome’s attention snapped to the voice, barely audible above the sound of hundreds of attacks. She half-carried one of Hirimoto’s soldiers who had been injured mid-transformation. Although his body was upright and his features more humanoid, dark brown fur covered his thick skin and paws the size of dinner plates were draped across the female’s shoulders. She carefully lowered him to the dirty snow at Kagome’s feet. “A spear,” she explained shortly, pointing to the wound high on his ribs that was pumping blood onto the ground. “Poisoned, like the others. He broke off the shaft, but the barbed head is still in there.”

“Thank you,” Kagome murmured absently while she knelt to examine the wound. She set her bow aside and awkwardly shifted the staff strapped on her back out of the way. The bear snarled as her reiki-drenched fingers drew close. The green youki growled back at him in warning. Kagome smoothed her hands across the fur, ignoring the reflexive grip and twitch of three inch long claws.

“He is not in his right mind, my lady,” the female said apologetically. “Please do not take offense.”

“No, none taken.” Kagome flashed a brief smile, because she knew that the youkai needed to see it. There, on the battlefield, she was the Miko no Mao. She fought for the West – and she was second to no one save Sesshomaru. The soldiers needed to know that she sided with them, embraced them, supported them. They needed to see that she was not afraid of the consequences of the bloodshed – to see that she believed they would win. The green youki bowed, and Kagome’s brain flew away in another direction. Half of her was brushing back fur, probing for the metal spear head she knew she would find

and the poison she had encountered many times. It was the same compound that Wei had used to test her skills during her captivity: an anti-coagulant and some combination of herbs or energy that combated the natural reflex of youki to heal wounds.

The other half of her was internally sobbing. Two ninja and an eagle from her guard had gone down nearly an hour previous. Three of the last five youkai that had come to her for healing had barely survived long enough for her to close their wounds - and then still had to be sent to the rear rather than returning to the fight. One had died despite her attempts to help. There were others she knew - Hirimoto's physician and a human monk - whom were placed among the troops as she was. Kagome could not see them, but she knew they were fighting the same frantic battle against death that she was. As the Western forces had pushed forward or lost ground, she had moved with them, behind the front line. Once, she had dropped an arrow before she could shoot. When she bent down to grab it, she found herself standing not on an uneven hillock of snow and mud, but on the severed hand of some unfortunate soldier. She had swallowed the bile that rose in her mouth, refusing to show such weakness, but the sight haunted her. Would haunt her, she knew, for months. Perhaps years.

Her fingers found the jagged hole under thick fur and brushed across the splintered shaft of the spear. The bear youkai made a barking, screaming sound and his eyes burned red.

"I will hold him, Miko-sama."

Kagome looked up in surprise to see the green-skinned youkai still within her circle of guards. The female's thick fur kimono was stained in red and brown streaks from the blood of her allies. Or her enemies. There was no way to tell what color it might have once been. The slender youkai easily looped one arm under the bear's elbows, locking his arms behind his back and drawing another snarl from his lips, quickly becoming coated with foam. *So sorry, so sorry*, Kagome whispered in her head. She sucked in air through her mouth and plunged her fingers into the wound. The bear screamed and bucked, thrusting the broken wood into her palm. The steel was slippery, but Kagome grasped it tightly, sliding it out and leaving a thick syrup of reiki in her wake. She didn't have time to tailor her power to the individual youkai, and there were too many others who would need her assistance soon for her to waste even a drop of energy. The hiss of purification was accompanied by the smell of burnt hair. For a moment, it overwhelmed even the rotten blood-wet grass smell around her. The bear jackknifed, throwing Kagome to the side, but the green youki did not budge.

Kagome was suddenly aware how dry her own mouth was. She reached for her water skin, before remembering it was empty, and her hands too slick with blood to open it. "Here." A green hand, smeared with mud and fluid, held a full water container out. Kagome took it and drank, distantly grateful. "I'll take him back out. By the time we get to his unit, he'll be ready to fight, yes?" The youkai was taller than Kagome, but could not have weighed much more than her. Still, she raised an eyebrow at the miko and shifted, putting one heavy bear arm around her shoulders and pulling him to stand without even a deep breath.

"He should be," was all Kagome replied. She held out the water skin, but the youkai shook her head.

"Keep it, my lady, you need it more."

Kagome wasn't sure how long she sat in the freezing snow, but it was the high-pitched sing of arrows flying that drew her attention. The bright light of the winter sun was temporarily blocked out by a cloud

of deadly missiles. *Is it irony*, she wondered stupidly, *for an archer to be killed by an arrow? Or maybe just really unlucky?*

“Ranged attack!” The shout came from several voices around her. Those youkai that could lift shields to protect themselves. Others turned hard hides to the sky, or dashed away from the targeted area. Her own guard closed ranks, the eagles providing cover with red-painted disks of metal that shone dully but repelled weapons with little effort. She had heard her own arrows hit metal before; they made a sharp *ping* sound that echoed in the quiet of the forest. The discord of hundreds of heavy iron heads slamming into armor, of wooden shafts splintering and demon-made fletching screaming as it cut through the air was terrible and so much more real. To the future-born priestess, the sound seemed more of a reflection of how far she was from the comfortable peace of her own time than even the blood on her hands. It seemed like hours, but was probably only a minute or two, before the storm was over. Her guard stepped away, and Kagome took in the sight of a ring of bodies around her little group. Some were getting to their feet, and drawing blades against their rising enemy. Many more would never get up again. The strangled moans of the dying, Western allies and dragons alike, made her stomach churn. Kagome didn’t even try to hold back, but turned her head to vomit away from the soldier nearest to her.

“Miko-sama,” one of the ninja called worriedly, stepping out of formation and towards her. His absence was smoothly covered by the eagle on either side of him, sliding over to close the gap.

“It’s fine,” Kagome mumbled, wiping her mouth on the edge of her sleeve. She squeezed a small amount of water past her lips and spat, waving away his concern. “Help me up, please, we have work to do.” With one hand she tucked the skin into her obi while she held out the other.

“Lady,” he hesitated, and Kagome looked up. His face was masked, save thick-lashed brown eyes which were staring at her outstretched limb. Blood dripped off of the edge of her palm and traced down her wrist to disappear into her sleeve. The metal head of a spear jutted out of her skin, affixed there by the sharp bits of wood that had been jammed through her hand. Seeing it made her realize she was injured, and the haze of numbness born of a single-minded determination and the drone of battle fell away.

“Fuck,” she breathed out. A scream was trapped in her throat, unable to move past the shockingly sudden agony. The world seemed to stop for a moment and Kagome’s entire being centered on the torture that was consuming her hand. She couldn’t think, couldn’t react, but for a split second was nothing but raw nerve endings and pain. It was over so quickly she didn’t flinch until the ninja had bowed in apology, the broken weapon on the ground between them and her blood smeared across his gloves.

“Forgive me, Miko-sama,” he said earnestly. “Such a thing must be done swiftly or-”

“Fine,” she squeaked, then managed to clear her throat. “It’s fine.” For some reason it struck Kagome as grimly funny that she kept repeating that phrase – *it’s fine*. Nothing was fine. Not even close. But there was nothing to do but continue. She struggled to her knees, then her feet, keeping her throbbing hand cradled against her chest. “Thanks,” she said, belatedly. She even managed to catch his eye and part her lips in a semblance of a smile. “Let’s get to work.” The man returned to his position and her protective circle rotated again, slowly moving her across the battlefield and back into the relative safety of the main body of the army. Kagome pulled a bandage from the bag over her shoulder and awkwardly tied it around her palm. *Definitely not ironic*, she thought with a grimace, thinking about death-by-arrow. *Bad luck with a side of idiocy is more like it.*

A flap of wings far too large to belong to a bird stirred snow into the air, stinging her exposed face. She glanced up at purple scales and razor sharp claws just as one of her guards yelled, "Get down!"

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Sesshomaru darted down to the ground again, slicing through the enemy ranks with ease. His frustration was mounting. The first wave of dragons were young and inexperienced, barely capable enough to carry the title of soldier. One on one, or even two against one, they were no match for the rigorous drilling and expert weapon mastery of the West and his allies. However, their numbers were far greater than Sesshomaru had anticipated. Even utilizing the largest of the reports he had received and allowing a liberal margin of error had not given him an accurate estimate. There were five dragons for each one youkai he had on the field – and he could see a line of dragons that had yet to take the field. He could also sense a mass of teeming youki, just out of sight that would make up a third wave of attack. The whelps that vaulted naively into combat against seasoned soldiers were cheap ranged attacks – treated by Ryukostokken as little better than spears to be thrown in Sesshomaru's general direction and then forgotten. Although the dragons were unskilled, their sheer numbers and ferocity were causing problems for his ground forces.

With an elegant spin he flicked the blood from his blade and vaulted into the sky again. There he met another dragon that thought to take advantage of the opening he had left behind. The leathery skin and thick sinew of its left wing was no more an obstacle to Bakusaiga than a particularly thick scroll. A blast of fire erupted from its mouth as the demon fell, spiraling back to the earth in a spray of blood and soot and shrieks of pain. Sesshomaru did not take the time to watch where it landed, as two more dragons were diving toward him. He bit back a snarl of his own.

It was a diversion, a waiting tactic intended to tire his forces and thin them before the actual assault. Sesshomaru was angry, not only with the cowardice of his enemy in using whelps barely out of the nest as a living shield, but at himself. He should have examined the reports more closely. There must have been a hint, somewhere, from some source, that reflected the true size of the Northern army. Ryukostokken must have been forcing reproduction among his subjects to achieve such numbers. And if the dragons had suffered from the same fertility issues as other youkai, and there was no reason to believe they had not, then it would have taken a systematic, large-scale breeding program that would have required the near enslavement of every female dragon of the proper age. That, or the Saigo Mao had been importing dragons. Perhaps both.

A silvery-blue dragon let loose a blast of smoke and heat as it fainted, soaring away before Sesshomaru could bring his sword to bear. Another dragon, a match for the first, was not so lucky. The tip of Bakusaiga caught him just under the jaw. Billows of smoke and embers cascaded down through a fountain of blood as the metallic scales split open under the pressure of Sesshomaru's blade. There were shouts from below as the dragon fell. The Saidai Mao turned to face his first opponent and met a reckless charge of fire and obscenities – screamed in a foreign tongue. The daiyoukai easily summoned a shield of his youki to protect him from the flame, and considered the words. *Joseon*, he thought with disgust. *Too long and far has Ryukostokken reached in his attempt to take Japan.* It might mean more bloodshed, more war, even after the dragons of the Northern lands were put down, to ensure that the peace was lasting. At the very least, it would require travel and diplomatic discussions.

Sesshomaru hated diplomacy.

A frown pulled down the corner of his mouth, and he did not bother to conceal his emotion. As the open mouth of the dragon drew closer, Sesshomaru reshaped his youki into a cone. The tip twisted and sharpened, narrowing to a point that met the dragon's outstretched tongue mere yards away from the lord. A ballista could not have done a cleaner job of spitting the reptilian demon. There was a moment of shock for his enemy, when Sesshomaru looked into a surprised blue gaze, before the daiyoukai withdrew his energy and flew away, avoiding the spray of blood that might have stained his clothing.

He faced north again, searching for an opening so that he could sweep through the lines and cut at the heart of the enemy. Ryukostokken was a dishonorable creature whose presence in hell would be an unjust punishment to those already in that place – but he was a skilled strategist. Before Sesshomaru could move more than a few feet, he was forced to change directions to meet another suicidal dragon. The dark green youkai was determined to end its life before it even entered combat, wings beating furiously to speed its way to the Western Lord. Even as Sesshomaru prepared to engage, his attention was pulled elsewhere. From his vantage, hundreds of feet above the battlefield, he could make out the pools of calm around each of his healers. His youki reached out to the one on his left and found Kagome. Her reiki was still strong, but over such distance he could only determine that she was alive and utilizing her powers. Her guard – a thing Sesshomaru had pushed her to accept and she had refused, only for him to find she had acquired one on her own – circled her protectively. He counted their number and found that some had fallen, but their defense was still acceptable.

Her position was a compromise for them both. She was close to the front lines – closer than he preferred, but not part of the leading edge of fighters. No few weeks of training, even under a youkai as skilled as Kimi, could prepare a human to meet demons in hand-to-hand combat. However, she was deadly accurate with ranged weapons, far more so than she had been when they defeated Naraku. Her healing abilities too were an important advantage to his forces. It was Kagome, and the other two healers, that were keeping his soldiers able to return to the fight even as the North sent fresh troops to be slaughtered.

Kagome was well enough, and his concern for her would not be entirely eased until Ryukostokken was dead and they were safely returned to his shiro. Still, his senses prickled with an unknown tension. Dark green scales flew past him, riddled with shallow cuts from Bakusaiga. His opponent turned in a wide arc ready to attack again, and Sesshomaru waited impatiently. Moments before he lifted his blade again, the distant twang of bow strings preceded a dark shadow across the land. *Archers.*

He did not have time to warn the soldiers below, as the green dragon spewed fire at him. Slightly more well trained than his previous adversaries, that one forced Sesshomaru to exert a small amount of caution in order to avoid the strike. Faintly, he heard calls on the ground, “Ranged attack!”. The black stain of arrows moved between his position and the army. By the time he had dispatched the green dragon the volley was over and the Western soldiers were already regrouping for another assault. Sesshomaru used the brief pause to assess the field. Hirimoto's physician was darting behind a sturdy line of bears, returning most of the injured back to fight alongside the Southern Lord. The monk, almost directly below him, had been wounded and was being carried to the medical tents in the rear. Another would replace him, Sesshomaru knew. He saved Kagome for last, and his gaze lingered on her longer than he should have allowed.

She was covered in blood. His keen eyesight could make out the dark red on her pale hands and smeared on one edge of her jaw. The blue of her strange hat remained a bright spot amid the dirty snow and mud. One of her guards assisted her, handing over her bow before returning to his place. *She is protected*, he reminded himself, even as another injured youkai made its way to her for healing. He fol-

lowed the motions of the eagles and humans that deflected any attack that drew too close to their charge. They made a tight circle around her. *A circle*. His eyes widened slightly, taking in details that another would have missed.

He fueled his cloud and shot straight up into the air, so that he could turn and look down upon the entire battlefield at once. The archers had fired with precision accuracy – straight at each of the healers. A circle of dead and wounded surrounded each of them, with open spaces of unharmed western soldiers in between. Ryukostokken knew Sesshomaru had healers behind his front line, and he was focused on removing them. A roar, a thousand voices yelling and screaming, caused the chill breeze around him to tremble. Sesshomaru cursed the timing, and descended again to meet the second wave of dragons, arriving from the mountains and onto the field. He had to trust that Kagome would defend herself, that she was capable and those that protected her dedicated – to the point of their own deaths. He was the Saidai Mao, and he was needed elsewhere in order to win the battle. The war.

He pushed the frustration and anger aside to keep his mind clear and focused. With Bakusaiga in one hand he flicked out his free fingers, releasing a stream of youki to form his whip. Three dragons were cut down before he recognized the ruse in the latest attack. The soldiers were better trained than those that had first taken the field, but their skill was used primarily to dodge and distract. The real threat was embedded within their ranks. *Dark miko*. Every twenty or thirty feet a priestess of evil power and unnatural energy stood, weaving her magic. Some placed protections on Northern soldiers. Others sent out their spells against the youkai that fought for Sesshomaru. He watched as one inu was struck by a clinging mass of fog. The grey wisps latched onto his skin and pulled, sticking and binding, burrowing under his skin and flaying it from his bones while he screamed and thrashed uselessly.

Sesshomaru bared his teeth with a growl and let his whip crack in a signal to the human lord, Date. Ryukostokken had bribed or threatened witches to serve him, but Sesshomaru had allies equally strong. Allies that fought of their own will. The dragon lord no doubt thought himself shrewd and adroit in his strategy. The growl turned to a cold countenance of grim fortitude. Sesshomaru had faced deception and tricks since birth. He had learned such lessons from his own dam's knee – no cupidinous reptile was capable of besting Kimi in chicanery. There was no strategy that he and his advisors had not foreseen, considered, and counter-planned. Of that he was certain.

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“Get down!”

Kagome dropped her bow and pulled her staff from the ties on her back. Purple scales and scorching heat moved toward her faster than she could raise the weapon, so she heeded the advice and fell flat to the ground. The flap of dragon wings was so close that it sent dirt and snow billowing up her nose and into her eyes; her spine tingled and flinched with the pressure of movement as the demon missed her by less than a foot. Tears were running down her face, her vision distorted by dust and debris, as the shadow of the dragon passed and she tried to roll to her feet to stand. Too late she saw the dark blur of a muscular tail whipping toward her. She was hit from the side suddenly – not by shiny scales and sharp spikes, but by a solid mass of red silk and golden feathers.

The impact was bruising, jarring, almost causing her to drop her staff. It was the second blow when she hit the ground that knocked the breath out of her. The eagle remained perched over her, his head up and scanning for the enemy even while he protected her from another assault. “To your left!” he screamed,

and Kagome heard a grunt and another sound like tires kicking up gravel. Wide, dark chips rained down on them. The eagle crouched lower to cover her face. Kagome could see the debris where it landed; concave plates the size of a cell phone scattered across the ground. Another voice yelled, indistinguishable from the rising noise of battle increasing around them.

With a grunt and a yell of anger, her guard was ripped away. Golden feathers fell from the sky, mixing with blunt, discarded scales, as a burst of youki signaled his transformation. Kagome scrambled to her feet and shielded her eyes against the bright sunlight. The purple dragon hovered some thirty feet above the ground, twisting and snapping at two dark figures on its back. Ninja had leaped onto the demon, one barely maintaining a hold on the spines of its neck while fending off awkward swipes of large claws. The second had secured his position ingeniously, having driven two sai deep into the hide. One was pressed close to the spine, creating a handhold, while the other was at the base of the tail and supported the ninja's feet. His left arm was free to wield a sword, although with the wild movements of the dragon he was not able to score any more decisive hits than scraping off protective scales. Another shower of the hard flakes fell down as the northern youkai was attacked by her eagle guard. Transformed, the eagle was virtually equal in size, and he had the advantage of flying without passengers. Kagome worried for those soldiers that were fighting above her, protecting her, but they seemed to have the situation in hand.

Hastily she tried to take in the condition of the battlefield. Another line of dragons were advancing on the Western troops, and aerial assaults had increased in accuracy. She could barely make out Sesshomaru's tiny figure, high above her. The green light of his whip flashed, but it was clear to Kagome that her daiyoukai's opponent was not trying to engage, but only to distract. The dragon flitted close and out again, like Buyo teasing a stray dog. Never close enough to get bitten, but never far enough for the dog to lose interest. *Something is wrong here*, the thought flashed across her mind. A few other youkai had been stationed in the air over the army – hawks, eagles, and one wind demon that were loyal to the West. They too were under assault from dragons that dipped and turned, inviting attack but never themselves venturing to strike. Her eyes raced across the sky and she spun in a circle, nearly tripping on her own feet as she searched for each of the youkai that Sesshomaru had ordered to take flight. The two that had been on her left, between the field and the forest where Kimi was waiting, were nowhere to be found. Only one demon, the hanyou that she had met on her last trip back from the well, was between the forest and Sesshomaru. All of the others had been taunted or maneuvered further East, or were no longer in the sky.

It's a trap, she thought. Kagome's lungs froze in her chest and her mind raced. Her reiki was shooting out in a panicked attempt to find the threat to Sesshomaru, to the West. *Why, why, what could they – Sesshomaru's exposed on one side, they could, but-* Then she felt it. The sensation was light, but pervasive. Power was leaking from an unseen source. It washed over her reiki and clung there, like grease on water, clouding her senses. She had to close her eyes to focus on finding the root of it, trusting in her guard to protect her. The battlefield fell quiet around her. In her mind's eye she stood in a washed-out version of reality. Those around her moved with a strange combination of slow-motion and sudden blurs, as if she was watching a stop motion video that hadn't come out right. She tuned out the sharp lights of those monks that were among the Western army. Like turning a dial, the vivid lights that represented the energy of every youkai around her faded.

Remaining behind was only the massive green light high above that was Sesshomaru, and shadowy knots of power secreted among the dragon ground troops. *Dark miko*, she realized with horror. She could see their magic at work, attacking inus and bears, shielding dragons. Without thought, she began to shape her reiki between her hands, forming a sphere of light so intense it warmed her skin. Just as

she prepared to throw it and eliminate the twisted witch nearest to her, a flicker of movement caught her eye.

At the very edge of the Northern army, within a few hundred feet of the trees, knelt a trio of women. The energy around them turned Kagome's stomach as it writhed and paced. They each had one hand on the hilt of an upraised knife, and the shadow of their power slithered across the surface, making the old metal glint in the sunshine. Kagome followed the oily spell as it left their implement, rising in the air to collect and hover in a cloud over the forest. It would be invisible to the naked eye, she knew, but its intent was clear to her. Those witches were concealing something that was intended to attack the West. Kagome dropped her staff.

She pivoted on one heel and slammed her opposite foot into the ground. She drew hard on her power to increase the size and impact of her sphere. Then Kagome braced herself just as she had practiced with Kimi and her reiki shot forward like a major league fastball. *Hit the mark*, she whispered in her mind. The purple dragon above her screamed, and the ninja both jumped to the ground beside her. Kagome lurched, startled, and tripped over a body on the ground at the same time the huge scaly wyrm slammed to the dirt in front of her. The eagle perched on its exposed, bleeding belly and shrieked in triumph at the sky, distracting her. It was the violent connection of her reiki with the dark spell that drew all eyes to the air over the forest. Pink sparks showered down on the trees, sizzling where they met the last wisps of evil smoke – exposing what it had hidden for all to see. Hovering at the center of the maelstrom was a knot of dragons, at least sixty, Kagome estimated. They hesitated for only a moment after the spell was lost before opening their maws in unison. The glow of their combined fire rivaled the sun.

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“Enough waiting. I need some action,” the wolf prince growled, fidgeting in place. Kimi would have smiled at the predictability of his impatience, but there was another concern teasing at the edge of her mind. She listened to the monk settle his companion with one ear while she stretched out her senses.

“Calm yourself, Kouga-san,” he said in a soothing voice. “Your tension is making the others nervous.”

“I am not tense,” the wolf bit off. Kimi stared unseeing into the shadows of the thick forest. Her youki flitted through the trees, as quick and unobtrusive as a bird. At the edge of the forest she touched on the amassed energy of the Western Army. The quiet pink spark of Kagome's power was discernable from that of any other holy human only because the daiyoukai had spent so long training the woman. It was still amazing, even in the pitch of battle, that such a small, delicate creature could so easily and completely conceal a power to rival the Saidai Mao.

Kimi found nothing unexpected there, and so sent the tiny flutter of her youki further out. Sesshomaru's massive energy, even as controlled as he was, lay over the army like an armor coating. On the far side, opposite her and nearly out of range of her senses was the sharp gold of Hirimoto. His youki was furious, but well disciplined. Having not found anything that accounted for the disturbance that was still ruffling her mokomoko, Kimi wanted to frown. She smiled instead, directing her power to skirt along the enemy lines.

“I must respectfully disagree, Kouga-san,” the monk was saying. “It is not a shameful thing. Any great warrior in his prime, as you clearly are, would feel tension in forced inactivity.” The wolf's youki swelled annoyingly and his chest puffed up. “In addition-” Miroku continued. Kimi easily anticipated what was coming, and several youkai close enough to hear the two leaders talking obviously guessed

something similar as they backed away quietly. “Although it has never been in my destiny, and many would say it is not misfortune, but opportunity to better direct one’s thoughts and actions-”

Kimi noted the increased level of youki in the next rank of dragons that were attacking. They were still not the best the North had, but Ryukostokken was preparing to end the distract-and-tire portion of his strategy and move on to more pointed combat. The first hint of power was so slight that she doubted for a moment what she had sensed. The second confirmed it: dark miko.

“Such tension is an understandable result of a lack of masculine release.” They quiet waiting that had been the group’s companion for one night and most of a day fell into a horrifically eager silence. In the long moment it took for the wolf to understand the insult, Kimi had identified twenty-six other witches working among the enemy. Her mind reviewed and discarded many possibilities. Although she and Sesshomaru had considered that Ryukostokken might employ mercenaries of many different skills, the possibility that the xenophobic lord would actually do so was remote. Cautiously, she pulled her youki back in, considering what such an ally might mean to the North.

“You saying I’m not getting any?” Kouga’s voice remained quiet, but his youki was bucking hard, nearly breaking his control. Kimi noted absently that his nostrils were flaring and his tail twitching in anger.

“Action?” The monk sounded so believably innocent that even Kimi was almost fooled. “I believe you were the one who made such a statement.” The threatening rumble Kouga made signaled that the teasing was about to become something else. Kimi raised her hand, prepared to intervene, despite the loss of entertainment she would suffer. She opened her mouth, and then stopped in shock. *Power.*

Reiki flashed across her senses, blazing through the combined armies and leaving the smell of a sea breeze in its wake. Kimi’s youki recoiled. Never had the miko attacked her, or used her power in a manner that would result in actual injury anywhere that Kimi had seen. The projectile that the miko had let loose was burning, uncaring and uncontrolled. The allies hidden around her in the forest sucked in a collective breath as they too felt the distant scorch of purification. It collided with another force, high above the trees, and the resulting shockwave deafened her sensitive ears temporarily. Twinkling bits of reiki fell through the branches overhead, smoking where they hit unprotected youkai flesh. Kimi noted that another substance fell in droplets that smeared and greased any surface it touched. Kimi snapped her jaw shut, decisively. *Magic.*

“What the-” Kouga began with honest confusion.

“I believe Kagome-san-” Miroku said at the same time, his tone far more considering.

“You shall have your wish, wolf-cub,” Kimi cut off both males. She shook out her shoulders, letting mokomoko fall so that one end pooled on the ground around her delicate silk skirts. Her youki unspooled languorously, oppressing all of the nearby demons. She smiled, a real, unchecked grin of anticipation. It had been centuries since she had taken the opportunity for a good fight. “Stay on the ground. Wait for This One’s signal before you attack, and action you shall have.”

“What signal?” She didn’t answer the cub, nor acknowledge the respectful bow of the monk, but sprang easily onto a high branch. From there it was only two more jumps and she was clear of the trees and flying through the air. The concealment spell that had hidden the dragons over the forest had been decimated by the miko, and Kimi reminded herself to thank the little human. Dozens of scaly jaws opened

wide. Flame built. Kimi let her youki strip away her fictitious form and reveled in a howl of utter enjoyment, icy wind fluttering the fur of her ears as she charged.

It was time to play.

Chapter 60: Relational Transgression

Inuyasha didn't hate Sesshomaru, he could admit that to himself, if not to anyone else. He hadn't felt anything other than grudging respect, irritation, a tiny amount of envy, and the occasional – also not to be admitted to – stab of fear for a long time where his half-brother was concerned. However, as he was sprinting through the forest, sliding on loose rock and snagging his dark hair on spindly bushes he was very close to hatred. *Four days. Four fuckin' days. And on the new moon. The fucker.*

He used every swear word he knew, under his breath, and then ran through them again employing suggestions for what Sesshomaru could do with his schedule. Most of them were anatomically impossible. Probably. Inuyasha would have been happy to help Sesshomaru try. *Ice prick.* He was tired, but he had been tired before. He had pushed the soldiers hard to reach Maruyama before sunset, but he still had a long run ahead of him to get to Kawageta.

A long, *human* run.

Inuyasha snorted, and barely managed to step around a hole in the ground. The old animal burrow would have been easy to see with his normal eyes, but his human vision was almost as bad as being blind, as far as he was concerned. He briefly considered that he could have asked one of the faster youkai for a ride, but it was too late to change his mind. Youkai would be just what the enemy was looking for, if there were spies around. Vulnerable as he was, Inuyasha was far more likely to get past any dragon informants without arousing any suspicion. It might have been the only good thing about the ridiculous schedule Sesshomaru had imposed. *Asshole.*

Instead, he had left the lieutenant in charge at the camp. Between him and the dragon, Tuso, that had stepped up to keep the defectors in line, they would have the soldiers rested and ready to go by morning; Inuyasha fully expected to have to fight when the sun rose. He had also ordered Egg to make sure no one followed him. Inuyasha trusted the youkai and monks that had pledged to fight with him – as much as he trusted anyone outside of his friends – but he wasn't eager to make his night of weakness public. It was another good reason to make the trip to Kawageta by himself. The hair on the back of his neck tingled, and Inuyasha swore again. Unfortunately, Egg hadn't done a perfect job. One youkai had followed him out of camp, and although they didn't get close enough for his human senses to get a read on them, he had a pretty good idea who it was, and Egg would have had to have been blessed by a luck demon to keep that one behind.

It didn't matter much, in the moment. Even though he couldn't smell or hear them, he knew they were there. Growing up in the wilds had given Inuyasha an overdeveloped sense of paranoia, and he knew when he was being followed. On the bright side, a few more minutes and he should be in range for Sesshomaru's emissary to scent him. They could tussle with his tag-a-long. It would serve them both right – his tail for not following orders, and the messenger for following Sesshomaru. *Fuckers, the both of them.*

He was breathing hard and his legs were near cramping when he arrived at the steep ravine that bordered the village of Kawageta. From previous travels he recalled a small string of huts that trailed up and down a well-traveled road, all anchored by a prosperous inn. *A kitsune inn*, he remembered with a frown. He dropped over the edge to the ground fifteen or twenty feet below, silently cursing himself as

his ankles reminded him that they were not as resilient as he was used to. He rolled to absorb some of the shock and came to a stop on his knees, brushing cold dust and wet snow from his clothes.

“At last you offer the respect due This One,” spoke a quiet voice from the shadow of a tall pine tree. Inuyasha squinted, his weak eyes barely making out the pale smudge of a vague man-shape in the darkness. He didn’t need to see to recognize the arrogant tone and faint amusement of his half-brother. He was surprised that the Western lord had come personally, but did his best to hide it.

“Yeah, that’s it.” He snorted, “After a couple of centuries, I thought, what the hell. Bowing to a self-absorbed, power-crazed ice-prick can’t be that bad.” Inuyasha paused, as though considering the option. After a long second he scowled. “Oh, wait, no. It *is* worse than being fucked by an angry thorn-squid youkai with an oozing rash. Glad we figured that out.” He stood and flicked his hair behind his shoulder, ignoring the tingle of awareness on his scalp and the predatory stillness around Sesshomaru’s seated form. *He sensed my tail*, Inuyasha thought with satisfaction. He was betting the little sneak had realized who was meeting him at Kawageta too. *That had to be a real kick in the pants.*

After a moment of silent enjoyment, he gave in, figuring the soldier had suffered enough. “He knows you’re there, dummy. Just come out.”

Sesshomaru, the picture of serene disinterest, remained seated. Inuyasha moved closer, finding a perch on a bare patch of ground close enough that he could see the daiyoukai clearly, but far enough away that he didn’t feel like they would look friendly. Allies, maybe, but he didn’t want to give any wrong impressions. It took longer than he had expected for the youkai to emerge from the woods. She slinked silently down the ravine wall, practically flowing down to the ground. Her dark skin and clothing made the perfect camouflage for the moonless night. Her red hair looked nearly black under the meager starlight. She came to a halt some twenty feet away and bowed deeply.

“Inuyasha-sama, Sesshomaru-sama,” she murmured in the same silky warm voice that made soldiers fall over themselves just to drool on her. Inuyasha glanced at Sesshomaru to catch his reaction.

“Hn.” That retort was about what Inuyasha expected, but he still relaxed a little bit, not realizing he had carried any tension over what Sesshomaru would say about the rain demoness.

“You were ordered to stay in camp, Niji,” Inuyasha did his best to keep his voice stern. It wasn’t as hard to be the commanding officer as he had once thought it would be. It helped, too, that Niji could have gotten them both killed – or worse, captured – by following him.

“Did you give that order, my captain?” She asked, almost sounding genuinely distressed. Inuyasha snorted. “I must have been on patrol and not heard.”

“You are aware of That One’s nature,” Sesshomaru stated flatly, his hard gaze narrowed on the face of the demoness. Inuyasha blinked, taking a moment before he realized that the formal title referred to him. Then he became uncomfortable. Obviously Niji had figured out he was human at the moment, but there wasn’t a need to call attention to it.

“She ain’t-” Inuyasha began, not sure exactly what he planned to say.

“My lord-” Niji started, but Sesshomaru interrupted them both.

“Patrol,” he ordered. His golden eyes gleamed with a familiar violent intent, “This One’s words are not for your ears. That One will meet you when this is done.” Niji bowed low after Sesshomaru’s obvious dismissal, and Inuyasha was surprised to find that she stayed that way - waiting.

“Wha- oh, er. Yeah. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut.” He folded his arms across his chest, just to let her know he was serious. The dark oval of her face cracked with a wide, white smile.

“As you command, Inuyasha-sama.” Her humor was evident, as was the innuendo in her words, and Inuyasha blushed as she melted back into the shadows. He refused to look at his brother. Thankfully, their relationship, although less murderous than a few years ago, was not one that encouraged teasing or discussion of emotions of any sort.

“You are late,” Sesshomaru said after a lengthy silence.

Inuyasha bristled, but managed not to take the bait. “Yeah, I stopped for a nap. Had a bite to eat. Did a little fishin’,” the sarcasm dripped from his words.

“Your messenger smells of blood and pain.”

“I wouldn’t know, jackass,” Inuyasha rolled his eyes and tapped one claw against his nose. There was only so much of Sesshomaru’s bullshit he could listen to. As it turned out, his limit was one comment.

“She was the cause for the delay.” It wasn’t a question, but a pronouncement, and that really got the hanyou riled.

“Niji was attacked, you self-righteous prick. And she got rid of them all – not a one escaped, and no one followed her back to me or you, so I think she did a pretty damn good job.” There was another long silence where Inuyasha bit his tongue to keep from taunting the older youkai into a fight.

“I did not intend to insult your vassal’s competence.”

Inuyasha blinked. If he didn’t know better, he would have sworn Sesshomaru apologized. He shifted uncomfortably. “Keh. Whatever. What did you want to say – and how come you came yourself?”

“I have brought the strategy for the attack,” Sesshomaru said, ignoring the hanyou’s other question. He pulled a folded paper from his obi and held it out, all without looking at Inuyasha. “We will move tomorrow. I expect treachery.”

“No shit,” Inuyasha replied mildly. “They’re dragons.”

They spent the next several hours discussing the plan, and Inuyasha was quietly impressed. Sesshomaru had outdone himself with detail and counter-contingencies. Although, the younger brother privately thought that the more intricate deceptions were probably the work of Kimi. That woman was devious as all fucking hell. When Inuyasha returned from a break to relieve himself, he found a square of cloth had been laid out with a bento and water skin in the center. Once he sat down, even his blunted nose could pick out the mouth-watering smell of food.

“What’s this?” Inuyasha’s stomach rumbled embarrassingly. He was always hungry, but a human body demanded food on a much more regular basis than a youkai one.

Sesshomaru, typically, did not answer the question directly. “Kagome wished me to tell you,” he paused, and Inuyasha recognized the same weirdly curious voice that he used himself for unfamiliar words from Kagome’s time, “ ‘hi’ and to please be careful.” Inuyasha huffed in acknowledgement. It was just like the soft-hearted girl to worry that he wasn’t eating enough. He opened the box to find several rice balls, wrapped in bamboo leaves. Dried nori was carefully placed next to pickled ume fruit, and in a separate little area thin strips of grilled eel were wrapped in a spiral around a tiny pot of dark, salty-sweet soy sauce and a smear of the wasabi paste that he only liked when his inu senses were dulled.

He seized the included chopsticks and ate with gusto. He had a rice ball and two strips of fish packed into his mouth when he noticed Sesshomaru wasn’t eating. It pained him to do so, and he knew stick-up-his-ass would refuse, but Kagome had made it, and she would think he should. “Want some,” he offered. It came out garbled around all the food, but the daiyoukai understood.

“No,” he replied coolly. “I hunted before your arrival.”

By the time he was done, Inuyasha was feeling the strain of his run on his weakened body. His eyelids tried to slide closed, and so he sat up straighter to stay awake. *Weird*, he thought, *having the Killing Perfection around should be enough to keep anyone from sleeping*. He decided perhaps he was softer than expected at the new moon, or perhaps Kagome’s ability to stay cheerful and decidedly not maimed while living with the asshole was ruining his icy image. Inuyasha chuckled to himself. If anyone thought that having Kagome around made Sesshomaru *less* deadly, they deserved to have their stupid head melted right off their shoulders.

“Rest,” Sesshomaru said suddenly. “I will wait here until dawn.” It was obvious he intended to watch over Inuyasha until his youki returned. The hanyou-turned human wasn’t sure exactly what to think about it, or if he should argue and brush off what seemed suspiciously like concern. The great Western Lord didn’t say it, and Inuyasha certainly wouldn’t, but as he closed his eyes and leaned back against a tree opposite the daiyoukai, it occurred to him that it was appropriate. It had taken Kagome and a threat bigger than even Naraku, but Inuyasha could admit, privately, at least on that one night, that it was almost nice to have a brother.

“Oh, before I forget,” he sat up quickly and drew the light bag off his shoulder, tossing it Sesshomaru’s way. As expected, the daiyoukai caught it, snatching it out of the air on reflex. Inuyasha fought to hide a grin. “It’s not exactly what you asked for, but I’m just a hanyou, ya know? It was the best I could do.” He leaned back and closed his eyes again, biting his cheek to keep from smiling. There was a faint whisper of cloth, and Inuyasha knew the exact moment when the special youki-made wrapping was removed and the scent was released. Sesshomaru sneezed inelegantly, and Inuyasha couldn’t hold back a chuckle. “I brought you all of Natsou I could find. Ask him anything you want – but he’s not much of a talker.”

ooo

Arashi stood silently at Ryukostokken’s left, waiting for an order. Several soldiers had thrown him sidelong glances. Some were envious of his position so close to their lord. Others pitied him for having drawn such attention from the notoriously unstable Saigo Mao. A few others, those that should have

guarded their expressions more closely, clearly felt that Arashi was not in his proper place. None of those things mattered so much in that moment, not when there was a precipice looming before them all.

“Wei,” Ryukostokken called and the administrator appeared as if out of thin air. “Signal to Sou, the first wave is finished.”

“Yes, denka-ue,” the obsequious bureaucrat bowed and hurriedly turned to a runner that would send a message down to Sou near the waiting troops. Arashi reviewed the battlefield with calculating eyes. Nearly a mile away, the conflict was in full press. The frontline for the North outnumbered the Western soldiers considerably, but even their masses were not enough to overcome their lack of training. They were young, some barely old enough to hold their forms. Many too young to be expected to know their kanji, much less fight. Those ranks also held the least important of Ryukostokken’s foreign allies. The criminals, undesirables, and lesser children from shameful unions that were best left to die on Japanese soil – far from the honor of their own lords. Given the rate at which they were falling, Arashi estimated it would be less than an hour before the Western army began to make forward progress again.

His black eyes turned up to the faint blur of color and death that was Sesshomaru. The highest, quite literally, in that moment, of the youkai lords had claimed a vast stretch of sky for himself and easily dispatched any dragon that invaded his territory. *That is power*, Arashi thought to himself. *That is a lord that knows he cannot be defeated*. He glanced at Ryukostokken who was shifting his weight and leaning forward to gain some advantage of view over the battle playing out before him. *Who thinks he cannot be defeated*, he added. Ryukostokken licked his lips and Arashi followed his gaze to the second line of soldiers, at the foot of the mountain. Sou stood there with them, the runner bowing before him. *Perhaps these two lords have more in common than they realize*. Ryukostokken raised one arm, then dropped it. Far away, Sou nodded, then turned to his youkai, issuing commands. The first wave would be pushed into the Western ranks. Their deaths would cause confusion and tire the enemy before the second wave, more skilled and better armed, arrived. High above two silvery dragons flew through the air at reckless speeds toward Sesshomaru.

Perhaps not.

A small dragon, barely out of babyhood and still unable to conceal the scaly tale and flickering tongue of his true form, edged out from behind a large rock and waited to gain Arashi’s attention. He had been expecting the child for some time. The whelp was sneaky, quiet, and loyal to the point of death to the one who had found him and saved him from starvation. Arashi valued fidelity as only one who is intimate with traitors can. He stepped quietly to the side, making room for the returning Wei and allowing his informant to duck back behind the shelter of the rock.

“The lost son?” Arashi asked quietly. The young male nodded, his tale twitching nervously and pointing to the east. Arashi dipped one hand into the bag at his side and pulled out a rice ball, wrapped in a leaf. The boy took it with a quick smile. “The mother?” The boy glanced to the west and nodded again, carefully securing the rice in his own bag. “The ally?” Pale green scales pulled together on the whelp’s brow. His lips turned down into a frown. “That is alright,” Arashi responded. “I did not expect you to find him.” He removed a pouch from his bag, the faint jingle of coin muffled by the leather. “The woman?”

The boy frowned again, then hesitated before angling his chin to the south. “Healing,” he replied shortly, his voice almost too soft to be heard. Arashi tossed him the bag. The whelp drew a line in the

snow with his bare foot, and then three dots behind it. “The woman.” He tapped his toe on the dot to his left, and then turned quickly, sweeping his tail across the drawing and racing into the trees.

“Our lord demands your presence,” Wei spoke from near his shoulder. Arashi had a brief, savagely enjoyable, desire to turn and rip the administrator’s lying mouth from his face. Ironic, really, given Arashi’s own occupation was dependent upon a good lie. He smoothed his face into a mask of indifference before turning and making his way back to the Northern Lord, who was watching him closely. One hand on Shianma.

“You were ordered not to leave This One’s side,” he said. His voice was calm, which every creature within hearing distance knew was a sign that pain and dismemberment were sure to follow. Arashi quickly considered his options, not liking any of them, but finding some more palatable than others.

“I have news, my lord,” he bowed low. “Sesshomaru has secreted healers behind his front line. A targeted attack would weaken his ability to replenish his forces.” He stood tall again, aware that the black eyes roving over his face were looking for any sign of deception. Ryukostokken’s tongue flickered out.

“Scout,” he ordered suddenly. A young dragon, already transformed into his true state, crawled as quickly as he could to kowtow before his lord. “Confirm this information.” He snapped his teeth and the dragon took one powerful bound to soar into the air. He was only an adolescent, but his small size gave him great agility, and his speed was uncommonly good. Within minutes, he returned and with an unimpressive swirl of youki stood on two legs.

“My lord,” he bowed low, “there are three that heal the wounded and return them to fight.” He drew a line in the snow, just as Arashi’s informant had done. “Here, here, and here.”

“Go, tell Sou, and inform him that This One commands the archers to end these healers.” The pale dragon bowed again and was gone before Ryukostokken had turned his attention to Arashi. “Tell me of Natsou,” the lord commanded. His tongue flicked out again and his nostrils flared. “He is late.”

“Inuyasha has been running his soldiers night and day, my lord,” Arashi responded. “I expect he will arrive at any moment.”

“Eh.” Unpredictably, Ryukostokken smiled, but it had the slick, hidden meaning that punctuated most of his humor. “Natsou will be dragging that weak hanyou bastard right to the cowardly pup’s feet. Sesshomaru won’t know what a gift he has received.” Arashi blinked, but did not give any other indication how right, and how wrong, he knew the dragon lord was. “Wei,” he snarled, once more serious and ill-tempered, “Send the signal to the western battalion. They will attack when Natsou arrives on the field.”

ooo

Inuyasha had woken alone just before dawn broke feeling surprisingly refreshed. Sesshomaru had disappeared, along with the empty bento. As the first rays of light spiked over the horizon, Inuyasha sat up and watched with satisfaction as he became hanyou once more. The color drained out of his long hair, and with it the weakness from his body. His eyesight sharpened, almost to the point of pain for a moment while he adjusted. Swiftly, his ears became more sensitive, alerting him to the sounds of the mountain and forest. A tidal wave of scent nearly overwhelmed him, but he was grateful for the sensa-

tion. A bird of prey had killed a mouse during the night. Badgers that had not yet returned to their burrows had met and were fighting for territory. Juniper berries were crushed, releasing their fragrance into the air. *Clear, cool water. Wet leaves. Pheromones.* He opened his eyes to find Niji watching him intently from the top of the ravine. Inuyasha took a deep breath. There was only two ways for such a confrontation to go: either doubt that he was as strong as he was before the transformation, or disgust that he was not fully youkai. He could deal with either, but doubt would be easier. Inuyasha cracked his knuckles. He was always eager for a fight after his youki returned. The mere thought of it had his energy surging under his skin, stronger and more potent than ever.

“Report,” he barked out, standing and stretching while he waited for her reaction.

“A lesser hare youkai was sneaking around a few hours ago. Scampered off to the south before I could catch her, but no other movement.” She cocked her head to the side, studying him.

Inuyasha tensed, “This gonna be a problem, soldier?”

“Did you know,” she replied conversationally, easily avoiding his question, “that you look even more delectable with dark hair?”

His face reddened uncontrollably. He hadn’t considered their might be a third reaction. “Keh,” he muttered. “Get your mind out of the gutter, we got work to do.” He bent his knees and sprang off of the ground, exhilarated, as he always was after a new moon, that his body responded with strength and speed. He soared over Niji’s head and landed easily in a bare tree. Looking back, he was equally proud and embarrassed by her wicked smile and sensuous pose. He forcibly reminded himself that she had given the same lascivious smirk to at least half of the males in camp. And some of the females. *Get your own mind out of the gutter, idiot.*

“There are dragons needin’ a beat down – can’t leave ‘em waitin’.” Her laughing agreement floated up to him as they raced back to Maruyama.

ooo

Ko listened carefully as Wei relayed orders to prepare the archers. She gripped her fists tightly inside her sleeves, stilling the urge to go, to leave. To leap off of the mountainside and take flight. She was one with the wind. She was the air itself. With her eyesight returned, none would be able to catch her. She could be above the clouds and behind the Western line in the blink of any eye. High. Fast. Soaring.

She had to swallow hard and carefully release the tension in her muscles. There were more important things than even her freedom, and she would see them, with her own eyes, or die in the attempt. The witches were weaving their magic, but Ko could do nothing but wait. Wait and listen for the opportunity she knew would come. Wait for Ryukostokken to die.

Arashi had settled back into his place after providing information that might get Kagome killed. Healers, the scout had said. Ko knew that the miko would be one of them. The spy had taken his lord’s temper calmly, as though there was no possibility that the anger of the Saigo Mao could result in his death or maiming. Ko could not understand him, had never, but after they had each revealed secrets to the other, she found him to be more of an enigma. Before her attempt to kill him, she would have said that he was one of many that followed Ryukostokken’s orders because there was no alternative. She had

been nearly certain that he searched for ways to lessen the brutality of those orders – to avoid senseless deaths. She had known that he did not cause pain for his own amusement.

And then she had seen his wings. Felt his power. Arashi was a youkai unparalleled in the North – surpassed, perhaps, only by the captains and Ryukostokken himself. That she was sure of and she wondered about more. Wondered why he had let her see more than he had to in order to survive the fall. Wondered why a youkai with such reserves of power remained under the claw of the North. Wondered why he had not yet revealed her own secret. Her treachery. Ko longed to turn her face toward the spy. To feel the air that moved past him and carried his scent, to brush the haze from her sight and look upon his face. She wanted to know him, to know why.

Ko bit her inner cheek and kept her face resolutely forward. *Wait*, she repeated the mantra to herself, *a little longer. Just wait.*

ooo

The second wave of dragons was significantly better trained than the first. Sesshomaru had little difficulty dispatching his attackers, but the sheer numbers consumed precious minutes. He rarely had time for more than a deep breath and a glance at the field below before another northern youkai demanded his attention. Date's men had positioned themselves perfectly; their stealthy movement across a brightly-lit plain riddled with clashing forces was impressive. They only needed a signal so that they could act in unison. Sesshomaru felt a growl rumble in his chest as he spun in the air. Three dragons had come upon him in formation, darting close and then away again without any taking serious damage. The alternating tactic kept him too occupied to pursue any one of them and end the fight. He needed to light the sky – a simple burst of youki would activate the ninja.

He had no time.

His lips parted in a snarl and he accepted the dig of claws into his shoulder in order to sink Bakusaiga under the foreleg of one of the dragons. His steel delved far deeper and that dragon lost the light in his eyes before Sesshomaru had even withdrawn his sword. It fell toward the ground as he turned on his other assailants. The second, the one who had drawn his blood, was dispatched with a flick of his whip. Acid melted through thick hide as though it were paper. Sesshomaru lifted his hand then, prepared to release a burst of youki, but he was too late.

His eyes widened with concern and surprise and the last of the three dragons flinched and cowered as a pink light exploded in the sky over the forest. *She should be conserving power. What has prompted this?* The oily smoke of dark magic coalesced in the air. *She discovered a spell.* Pride suffused him. His intended, his Kagome, was truly an asset. Even there in the midst of a war against enemies that had centuries of training to her two decades of life, she fought with the unique talents and perspective that had allowed her to survive and thrive out of her own time. He inhaled deeply. It was worth the stench of blood and death to get a taste of the salty-sweet breeze that was Kagome's power. Even more gratifying that the scent, was what her display had revealed. Dragons, older and better equipped than any that he had faced yet that day. They were moving with hesitation and confusion, no doubt surprised and pained by the sudden burst of holy power. Then Sesshomaru noticed the heat growing in their mouths. *They mean to immolate the forest*, he thought. He forced power into his cloud and quickly gained speed as he moved to intercept them, decapitating the still-reeling third dragon on the way. *The monk and wolf-cub cannot be revealed until the time is right.* Although he knew he could not defend two posi-

tions at the same time, he did not allow failure to enter his consideration. He would simply have to find a way to destroy the western flank of the dragon army and still protect the core of his own.

An explosion of splintered wood, fur, and youki slowed his progress. With her usual flair for the theatrical, Kimi burst from the trees, jaw open and claws gleaming in the sun. Her growl shook the air and caused several dragons to swallow their fire prematurely. Sesshomaru considered his mother with the eye of a general. She was smaller than he remembered – although it had been well over two hundred years since he had last seen her covered in fur. Still, she was nearly as tall as himself in his true form, although more delicately built. Any disadvantage she might have in mass was made up for in vicious predatory instinct and a millennia of rigorous training. She bowled through the ranks, catching two in her mouth with a wet crunch before flinging the bodies away to knock another three dragons from the sky. Just past the edge of their formation she turned, her paws churning a wind in their wake as she repositioned for another pass. The dragons that had been poised to blindsides and decimate the Western forces hidden in the forest were in complete disarray, many injured, and at least five already unable to fight.

Kimi did not have a speck of blood on her white fur.

The decision to return to his position was an easy one. Sesshomaru had no doubt that his mother would quickly deal with the situation, and would likely even turn it to their advantage. He flew back to the center of the army, noting that Kagome was closely guarded by a human warrior on each side, in addition to her tight circle of soldiers. The mangled body of a purple dragon lay nearby. Date's ninja had also taken the opportunity to seize the distraction created by his miko's display of power. Three witches had already fallen, the dragon soldiers that should have protected them stumbled and searched blindly for an enemy. It had begun on the edge of the forces closest to the forest, and dark miko fell like tiles set on end – one after the other, just ahead of the realization of the soldiers that an enemy was among them.

It was the opening he had planned meticulously. Sesshomaru removed another dragon from the fight and snapped his whip in the air again. The forces below him did not react, occupied as they were with the dead and dying dragons from the first wave as well as the fresh northern soldiers that had arrived at the line of attack. Instead, wolves surged from within the western ranks – the red hair of Ayame easily discernable amid the snow and mud. They leaped over their allies and raced through the oncoming dragons. Ayame led them exactly as had been discussed. They nipped, clawed and growled, even tripping a few soldiers as they ran, but did little damage as they fled toward the east. It was the distraction and confusion that had been the goal – and that was achieved readily.

Sesshomaru cracked his whip again, and within moments, the forest exploded with snarls and snapping jaws. Wolves and wild youkai of every size and shape flooded onto the field from the west, colliding with the exposed flank of the second wave of dragons. The initial attack was devastating, row after row of dragons were easily dispatched as they struggled to reorient themselves for a two-front assault. Just as the progress of Kouga and his youkai was slowed, the monks stepped out of the trees. Sesshomaru had never been impressed by the quiet prayers and relatively weak bodies of holy humans before he had joined Inuyasha's group in the fight against Naraku. Kagome had given him a new outlook on the power a human could hold. Miroku had shown him a keen intellect that had equal effect in diplomacy and battle.

His skills were clearly displayed – including his flare for spectacle. Sesshomaru noted in the back of his mind that time spent with Kimi might have swelled the pervert's ambition to be the greatest fraud in

Japan. The humans' faces had been painted black with a wide band of silver across their eyes and down their noses. The effect was riveting. Each monk wore robes of dark purple. Simple prayer beads dangled from their necks and hands. Although they were weaker and slower than any youkai, they had played to their strengths. With precision and exact timing, the men moved as one. A hundred staves were planted in the ground, their bells chiming and clinking. The sound was soft and melodious from a single monk; together the jangle grew and swelled until it echoed over the field. Magic of some sort must have been worked into the brass, because the sound was chilling rather than soothing. It rang with the tones of death and the end of things, rather than peace and rebirth.

A single voice rose, the woven words spoken by each mouth so that they blended into a great and terrible thing that was unnaturally loud. It found places in the ear which had never heard sound, places in the heart which had not known fear, and pressed down with the weight of the heavens. With the weight of hell.

Sesshomaru did not know the language. He was not sure if they were even words that were spoken, but the notes of their chant seemed to stretch time out into a thin thread. The battle slowed, each soldier, regardless of allegiance, glancing with trepidation at the line of men painted as gods that stood still and steady. The monks raised their free hands, lifting them parallel to the ground. And then the chant stopped. In a single motion, one hundred fists opened, releasing what had been clutched tightly.

Paper.

Narrow strips of fine white parchment fluttered on the breeze, tipping and floating slowly towards the snow. Before the first piece could land, Miroku stepped forward from his place at the center of the line.

"Evil demons," he called out. His voice was strong enough that Sesshomaru was certain even Ryukostokken, wherever he had secluded himself from the battle, would hear it. "Begone!" He lifted and planted his staff again, thrusting the belled end out towards the dragons. For an instant, nothing happened. Then the papers rose, narrowing, flattening, cutting through the air like blades. In a blur of white motion, they streaked through the warriors, sailing over and around wolves and western youkai. The battlefield was silent. Then the first body fell. A dragon youkai, his tail falling heavily to the earth as he sank to his knees, a slip of white paper embedded half through his neck.

Another, his helmet falling as he slumped into a comrade. Another, sword clanging to the ground as he collapsed. Still another. And another. One hundred dragons were killed with a prayer, and their blood wicked up the simple slips of paper that had ended their lives. Sesshomaru watched with interest as the remaining second wave vacillated for a moment. Then at least a quarter of them turned and ran.

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"No," screamed Ryukostokken. "No, no, no!" He snarled and swiped at the closest youkai. Only his scout was unfortunate enough to have remained within reach when the new force of Western allies had emerged from the forest. Unburnt. Unscathed. Fresh and eager for battle.

The dark miko had all fallen or been incapacitated. The first wave was dead. The second wave was in frightened and confused turmoil; three hundred soldiers turning and fleeing when the monks finished their chant. Arashi had not anticipated such power and precision, after the tales he had heard of the companion to the Shikon Miko, Miroku. *Impressive*, he thought dispassionately. *Humans are truly more of a threat than the Saigo Mao has ever given them credit for. Perhaps even more than I had pre-*

viously considered. Even as he edged away from his lord, anticipating what was to come, he ran through several possibilities in his head of ways to attract and keep such power in the North.

A dark grey hand, pebbled across the knuckles and pitted with scars, snatched the adolescent dragon from his place on the ground. The young male was not even given the opportunity to beg for his lord's mercy. His eyes widened, and then his collarbones were separated from his chest with a vicious tear leaving the front of the ribcage protruding at an angle from the chest and exposing the organs. There was no time for a scream. Arashi listened to Ryukostokken's enraged roar and watched the slow blink of the dying dragon. *Once, twice. Thre- no, he's dead.* Ko, on the far side of the daiyoukai, had positioned herself close the edge of the cliff they stood upon. Arashi wondered if, since she had her sight, she could out-fly a gust of Ryukostokken's fire. He wondered why she had not yet attempted it, in any of the moments of confusion that could have helped her to escape at a time when no soldiers could be spared to go after her.

Hard, black eyes caught his, "You should have known this!" The Northern lord advanced, but Arashi held his ground. He bowed low, folding his hands in a display of subservience and giving him ready access to the blades he kept secured under his sleeves.

"You anticipated as much, my lord," he said evenly. "If not for your placement of the concealed squadron over the forests, even now the Lady Kimi would be on the field." He waited, ears trained on the uneven gallop of Ryukostokken's heart and the grating suck of air over roiling ash in his throat. In a rare moment of self-control, the least of the cardinal lords pulled back, snapping his fingers at the wind demoness.

"This One will remove with the third wave."

"My lord-" Wei protested. Arashi's mind reeled. His plans did not include Ryukostokken attempting a retreat. *Attacks will come quickly,* he thought. *Shianma's reach is-*

"Do not." Ryukostokken's warning and his blazing eyes cut off anything further Wei had intended to say. "This One shall lead the remainder over the mountain pass and west. The shiro of the dog will be unguarded. It will fall while the Western soldiers are occupied here." His clawed hand reached out and grabbed tightly around Ko's arm, wrinkling the pale blue of her sleeve. Wei's mouth fell open in shock. Arashi knew that if the blood-thirsty rat of an administrator found a plan to be ill-advised, then it was foolish beyond reason. Even if the dragon lord was successful and managed to slaughter whatever rear guard and civilians Sesshomaru had left behind, he could not hope to gain anything by holding the Western castle. It would be sieged, and that would only allow time for the enemies of the North to heal, regroup and wait for close quarters and low supplies to weaken the dragon soldiers.

It also did not adhere to Arashi's plan. It could not be allowed.

"I-I, of course, my lord," Wei stuttered a response and bowed. It was clear by his dismayed glance he wasn't sure how to relay the order, given that the scout was dismembered and the last messenger had wisely not returned, sure to have heard the snarls of Ryukostokken. The lord yanked his slave transport to the ground and gripped her hair tightly, preparing to leave. Arashi cast his thoughts wide for an argument that would keep the Saigo Mao in place. He opened his lips, for once without a ready word, but the wind demoness spoke first.

“Someone comes,” she said simply. Her face was tilted into the winter breeze, towards the east. Arashi watched Ryukostokken carefully, and when his interest was secured, the spy too turned to look. On the eastern edge of the plain, the hills rose sharply in rocky, dry angles that were covered only with hardy, sparse undergrowth before merging into the mountains. At the very edge of the trees, barely visible and more than a half-mile away, stood a single figure. The uniform of the North was obvious against the white snow. A second figure stepped out beside it, dressed in red.

“Natsou has arrived,” Wei announced, unnecessarily. The excitement in his voice was obvious.

“He is late,” Ryukostokken stated flatly. He roughly shoved the female away from him and turned back to watch the field, having apparently lost interest in an immediate retreat. The calculating expression on his face made Arashi wary. It rarely gave positive results. “Send the signal.” He gripped Shianma tightly and smiled, baring all of his teeth. “This Ryukostokken will take the field.”

ooo

Kagome felt light-headed. It wasn’t surprising, given the huge amount of power she had used to disperse the spell, and that was on top of all of the healing and the arrows she had fired. She knew she should stand up straight and try to look more impressive, but she was exceedingly grateful for the ninja that allowed her to lean against him.

“My lady,” the man on her right said, concerned.

“Miko-sama,” the ninja she had collapsed against sounded distinctly uncomfortable.

“Just a sec,” she breathed heavily. “I just need a second.” His shoulder shifted under her cheek and Kagome closed her eyes to stop the ground from spinning up at her. Sesshomaru would not be happy if she fainted during a battle. He would probably lecture. Or at least say a few admonishing words. Or frown. Strongly. And he probably wouldn’t let her leave their room for a week. Not that she would have objected, at least not at the moment. She was exhausted. Her stomach fluttered weirdly and her reiki rippled under her skin in a way that made the youkai around her hiss with discomfort. “Sorry,” she whispered, grimacing and trying to get herself under control. “Sorry, just need a sec.”

She opened her eyes once she was sure she wouldn’t black out – only to see the ground moving beneath her feet. “Ugh,” she murmured, squeezing her eyes shut and holding her belly. Only the jostling of her human sentries and the defensive shouts of the eagle youkai made her open her eyes again. Eiji stood in front of her, waving off the spears and swords of a half dozen of her guards. Eiichi was just rising from the ground, dust forming a cloud around his head that emphasized the knot over his eye and the blood running from his hairline down his nose to his jaw.

“Just came for healing,” Eiji was saying calmly.

“It’s okay,” Kagome sank down to the ground beside Eiichi, grateful to be closer to her feet. “I’ve got this, we’ll move again after I heal him.” The soldiers threw dark glances at the rock demons, but returned to their stations, once again working to keep the fight away from the priestess. It took her longer than usual to calm herself enough that she wouldn’t burn Eiichi with her powers, and then a few more moments to coax energy from her fingertips into his wounds. When she opened her eyes again, Eiji was frowning at her and her guards were circling tighter. “What is it?”

“We need to move,” Eiji responded. His flat tone worried her. Kagome glanced to the ninja that had supported her earlier.

“A second wave of dragons has attacked, they are pushing us back,” he said quietly. The narrow strip of forehead exposed by his mask wrinkled and he shared a look with the most experienced eagle youkai. “If we don’t move her now, we’ll get stuck on the wrong side.”

“Agreed,” the eagle nodded shortly. Kagome found herself picked up and shielded by the rock brothers as her circle of guards began a slow, careful pace to the south. Twice, they stopped to pull up their shields as arrows rained from the sky. Eiji offered to take Kagome underground, but she refused. Eiichi was still knitting together, she didn’t want him to strain his youki. There was also the matter of being seen. It was important that the soldiers saw her retreat and advance with them – not run to hide behind their swords. As they stood once the third arrow attack had passed, Kagome found that the front line was nearly upon them. Hisao was barking orders at his warriors, who were struggling to fend off two or three dragons for every one western soldier. As she watched, a huge dragon youkai, taller than even Sesshomaru and twice as broad, closed on the captain and raised a naginata that gleamed with blood. Hisao was occupied with another enemy, their blades locked together.

“Watch out!” Kagome screamed. Hisao jerked his head forward, butting his opponent in the face. Blood spray from a broken nose and cheekbones splattered across both males. Kagome’s stomach dropped in fear as the foot long blade at the end of the naginata pole descended towards her friend. Hisao dropped suddenly, out of Kagome’s line of sight.

“No!” She surged forward, breaking through the ring of guards who were too surprised to attempt to hold her. She sprinted for a dozen yards, then tripped over a groaning youkai. Her face landed in the snow, and then a claw-tipped hand was hoisting her up.

“Miko-sama, you must-” The eagle youkai began.

Kagome cut him off, scanning furiously for Hisao. “No! We have to-” There was a deep grunt, followed by a howl of triumph, and Kagome watched the enormous dragon fall, a look of shock on his face. Hisao knelt behind him, blade buried in the dragon’s spine from base to neck. Kagome felt herself sag with relief and she hung on to her guard with trembling finger. “Oh, it’s-” A few stray arrows sang through the air. The eagle turned her quickly, pulling her to the ground and sheltering her with his body. She heard the ping, ping of the projectiles hitting stone.

“Let go, we can go back,” she said as soon as the sound stopped. Eiji and Eiichi were racing toward her, pointing and yelling at something behind her. She turned. Immediately behind her guard was a newly-formed earthen shell. One arrow was embedded in the dirt. *Rock demons*, she thought, with a twist of humor. Then her gaze travelled outward. Hisao was still kneeling on the ground, but a human soldier was at his side protecting him from assault. The captain stood, one hand over his face, the fingers wrapped around a wooden shaft protruding from his eye. Kagome gasped and slapped her hand over her mouth. As she watched, Hisao clenched his jaw and yanked the arrow out. Blood poured down his face, but his good eye focused on her.

“Kagome-sama,” he called out, “move back! There will be another assault!” Even as he spoke, they could all see the dark line of arrows rising from the distant Northern archers. The Western army began to retreat slowly, gathering the injured as they moved and placing those with shields or iron-tough hides closest to the danger.

“Go get your captain,” she ordered Eiichi, pointing.

“My lady,” the eagle began.

“Our first priority,” Eiji started.

“You have one minute before those arrows get here,” her eyes narrowed and she tried not to think about the lives she was risking. Tried not to think about what it meant to determine one person was worth more than another. Tried not to think about how her guards, and the rock brothers, would give their lives to protect hers. *We need Hisao*, she reminded herself. “I am not moving until you get him.” Eiichi looked like he wanted to argue, but Eiji dragged him away, reaching the inu captain just as time was running out. “Let’s go,” she said to her guard. The rip of earth opening behind her was swiftly overcome by the screams of arrows.

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Sesshomaru cut down another dragon, accepting a minor wound to make the fight end more quickly, and watched the progress below. For once, Inuyasha had arrived on time. A lone dragon stepped out of the trees, at the far north-eastern corner of the little valley where the battle was taking place. Inuyasha’s red clothing was a signal flag as the hanyou followed. Intently, the daiyoukai turned his gaze on the enemy camp. A third division of the northern army was visible at the base of the mountain, those, he knew, would be the core of Ryukostokken’s power. The most skilled, the most experienced dragons were waiting to be deployed after the West had been weakened by a day of battle against expendable thousands. Above them, on a wide cliff, shadowy figures massed and moved together. *Saigo Mao*, Sesshomaru thought with disgust. The tactic was valid, and would serve his life and forces well, but no youkai with any honor would send those loyal to him to die while he watched and waited.

Two more dragons, one black and one red, came at the Western lord from opposite sides. They were quick, and Sesshomaru was unwilling to trade any of his own blood to land a significant hit as long as they did not attempt to move past him. Their agility and willingness to harass, rather than aggressively assault, worked to their advantage. It was the labor of nearly a half hour to dispatch the two. One fell through a cloud of smoke and the stench of his own melting wing, the other was divided in two clean halves that would hopefully crush another dragon below.

When he was next able to assess the Northern camp, the figures on the cliff had disappeared. Sesshomaru had considered that Ryukostokken might flee when the outcome seemed to fall from his favor. He had left kitsune surprises at his shiro in case of attack there, and was prepared to regroup and follow the dragon lord north, all the way to his stronghold if necessary. A cascade of arrows descended on the Western line, and Sesshomaru had to ascend to avoid the missiles. As the sky below him cleared, he noted that Kimi had nearly completed her task over the forest. He frowned, his gaze narrowing. His mother appeared to be toying with the last three dragons, allowing them to fly a short distance and then easily swatting them down towards the ground. He glanced to the tree line where the monks had been stationed. They were given instructions to retreat into the trees in the case of an aerial assault, and Kouga’s wolves and wild youkai would protect them from melee attacks. However, the accuracy of the archers was disappointingly respectable. Kimi soon joined them with a swirl of youki. Her silk kimono was a sharp contrast to the deadly wakizashi blades she drew, prepared to defend the western line, but few living monks were visible.

The reason soon became apparent as the trees parted – quite spectacularly. The largest trunks at the edge of the woods split open, slowly pulling back to allow a tumble of monks to spill out. Smaller trees, moving slowly, emerged as well from deeper in the forest. *Hitashimashita*, Sesshomaru thought. They herded the monks back to the south, even deflecting a few attackers that had slipped past Kouga. The trees had pledged to provide intelligence and ferry messages, but Bokuseno had obviously committed even more. His tree youkai actively, albeit slowly, fought against the dragons. They gave the monks the opportunity to cast additional sutras between attacks.

A small contingent of dragons transformed far below, their outpouring of youki alerting Sesshomaru to their intent. They made a direct line for the opening over the center of the Western army. The daiyoukai rushed to meet their attack. The scent of fear melting away their arrogance was pleasing as he once more drew his sword. He fought through another wave of arrows, carefully tracking the measured retreat of his own army, before he noted movement to the north.

With an irritated, “Hn,” he removed the head from the last of his opponents and focused his attention. The final wave of dragon soldiers was moving forward, instead of retreating. Sesshomaru stilled, pushing youki into his senses to fuel them. His sight narrowed and sharpened, bringing the oncoming army into clear view. A tall dragon, scarred by battle, led. His face was hard and devoid of emotion. *The captain, Sou*, Sesshomaru noted. Just behind the first two ranks was a void space. *Ryukostokken*, Sesshomaru thought with satisfaction. The Saigo Mao strode forward surrounded by his personal guard. To his left was a stocky dragon, grey-skinned like his lord. To his right was a pale female, dressed in blue. *Ko*, Sesshomaru surmised, based on her position and the unnatural breeze that pulled her hair to float out behind her.

Two more dragons, larger and more obviously well-trained than his previous opponents closed on the daiyoukai’s position. Sesshomaru allowed a smile to tug at the corners of his mouth and he released his whip. Finally, he would have the opportunity to face his enemy. Ryukostokken would die.

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Kagome fell down at Hisao’s side as soon as she found him again. The captain was snarling at a healer, trying to force the man away without hurting him. “I am fine,” he bit off. “I will return to the battle!”

“Not until I take care of this you won’t,” she said, drawing his attention. The broad-shouldered inu turned towards her, and Kagome nearly gagged. Blood covered most of his face, some already dry, and ran down his neck, obscuring the black stripes there. Of all of the wounds she had seen, some horrific beyond belief, the empty eye-socket was one of the most sickening. The lid was nothing more than a few wisps of flapping skin. She wondered absently if he had closed his eye when the arrow came down – it would have been nearly impossible not to. The organ itself had burst upon impact, the bulk of the fluid and tissue fallen out with the arrow or removed already by a healer. A greyish jelly sat in the hollows and gouges left behind, making the raw flesh that still oozed blood appear vividly red and the places where bone was visible starkly white. Loose strands, the arteries and nerves that had been brutally severed, hung short and shriveled against the back of the socket – as though trying to draw away from the agony there.

“There’s others that need you more, Kagome-sama,” he said gruffly.

“I will get to them,” she replied. It wasn’t entirely true, and she tried to push down that knowledge with the bile that rose in her throat. Some would die. Some who might have lived if she had gone to them

immediately would die because she had chosen to treat this wound. Although the poison on the arrow-head was preventing his youki from beginning the healing process, Hisao's life was not in danger. Even humans could survive the removal of an eye, as long as the bleeding was stopped. She closed her own eyes, extremely conscious of the act and of the movement of the orbs behind her intact lids. Reiki came easily when she called it, a small, steady amount. It was as if her power agreed that Hisao was necessary, needed to be able to fight with all he had. All he had previously had, to protect the West.

She found the poison first and corralled it within reiki – forcing it to disperse through sheer will. She knew they were pressed for time, could hear the shouts of soldiers and feel the shield wall being raised over her once more as another wave of arrows descended on them. Hisao grunted as she increased her energy, not taking the time to ensure that it would not sting. His youki rose to fight her off, once the poison was gone. Kagome batted it aside. His body would be too slow to heal itself, and she knew that they were on the knife's edge. The war would be decided soon. Her heart beat too fast, as though it might burst out of her chest at any moment. Blood pounded in her head and her muscles clenched. Reiki burst from her fingertips and Hisao gripped her arms tightly. Her guards let out groans and hisses as an overflow of power singed them.

Finished, she slumped back. Only Hisao's palms on her arms and his claws sunk into her skin kept her from falling over. Her vision tunneled for a moment, and she thought she might black out. A rustle of feathers behind her startled her into full wakefulness.

"Let go, Captain-san," her guard said sternly. Hisao's claws pulled back, tearing her sleeves, and she relaxed for a moment against the chest armor of the eagle youkai. His head feathers cascaded over his shoulder and tickled her cheek. Kagome was thirsty. And hungry. And so, so very tired. "Your- Captain, your eye," the eagle said warily.

Kagome looked up, wincing and thinking that she must have messed up the healing process. She was sure Hisao looked terrible. The inu captain was holding one hand over his face, moving it in and out as though trying to focus. His mouth was pulled into a scowl.

"Can you see even a little?" she asked timidly.

One dark brown eye, whole and unharmed, focused on her. He dropped his hand, and Kagome gasped. The empty socket had been filled, but his new eye did not match the original. The iris was completely pink, the pupil silver instead of the black that it should have been. He focused on her and both eyes widened, the new reddened skin around his injury stretching and swelling a little. His mouth opened and closed several times, as he looked at her, then up at the sky, then back to her.

"Is it-" she began hesitantly.

Hisao scowled. "He's not going to like this," Hisao stated. His grumpy tone was almost a relief. Obviously he could at least see, even if it was a strange color. "Don't think I won't put all the blame on you for this." Kagome had no response to that strange statement, nor the energy to argue with him as he stood and pushed out of the circle of her guards. "Don't let our Miko do something so stupid again," she heard him lecture as he left, "Or I'll have your eyes to replace this one." His mutters were lost in the noise of combat as he got farther away. "Holy eye. Never thought...Ridiculous."

"My lady?" The eagle beside her lowered his head in an awkward bow, waiting for her order.

“Right, well then.” She struggled to stand, and only had to grip her head once to keep from hitting the ground. “Find me someone injured.”

Eiji reappeared from a nearby tent, with a new weapon to replace one he must have lost somewhere. Kagome hadn’t realized how far they had been pushed back. The rear of the Western forces was backed against the outer edge of their encampment. There was only the lake beyond it. “That won’t be-” Eiji started with a tired smile. A sudden increase in the volume of the battle buried the rest of his words. They all turned to look, and Kagome felt the blood draining from her face as she watched Sesshomaru descending at breakneck speed, toward a massive dragon. The explosion of youki as he transformed washed over both sides, causing physical pain to the demons closest to him. Kagome sucked in a breath and tasted the sharp, electric tang of his power.

There is no going back, she thought. She searched for her bo staff, and found one of the ninja was holding it for her. With a gesture she took it back. “Come on then, before the reinforcements arrive,” she said with forced cheer. They had not taken more than a few steps before a roar thundered across the plain, bringing combat to a temporary halt.

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Inuyasha jogged as slowly as possible, waiting for his scout to return. His lieutenant matched his pace on one side. On the other, Tuso, the dragon that had stepped up to lead the others walked at a fast clip. His long legs ate up the ground and put his head more than a foot over Inuyasha’s.

“Why do we travel so slowly,” Tuso asked quietly. Sunlight glinted on his coppery skin. “I would rather we attack now, and end this.”

“Eager for blood,” the lieutenant muttered.

“Enough,” Inuyasha ground out. Niji snickered somewhere behind him and he rolled his eyes. He had listened to the two demons taunt each other for the entire four day run to Maruyama, and it hadn’t lessened as they came closer to joining the fight. They had their reasons – had been bitter enemies less than a week ago and both had killed comrades of the other during the conflicts. It had to end now, or at least take a temporary break. Inuyasha was depending on them to fight together, not with each other. “I’m eager to get this over with too, but we gotta take our time. Let others get into place.”

“Others?” the dragon questioned.

“You don’t need to know,” the crane responded, not mentioning that he hadn’t been let in on the entire plan either.

“The West has allies,” Inuyasha answered instead, “and this is going to be the last time we fight Ryukostokken, as I promised.” He had told all of the dragons that joined him that once the Saigo Mao was dead they would be free to return to their homes without penalty from Sesshomaru. “We just need to make sure he can’t get away.” As he spoke, the hanyou judged the field before him carefully. The final wave of dragon soldiers had marched, using the second wave and successive barrages of arrows to push the Western army back to their camp. The tactic was well-designed, trapping Sesshomaru’s forces between a thousand or more fresh soldiers and an icy cold lake. *Would have worked, if the scaly bastard wasn’t fighting Sesshomaru*, Inuyasha thought to himself. The mixed battalion of cranes, turncoat

dragons, and lord-less youkai was only a few hundred yards from the main battle when the scout descended, dropping into a kneel with a flurry of feathers and youki.

“Get up,” Inuyasha snapped, startling the bird. “Talk while you move.” The crane scrambled to his feet and began running backwards with impressive agility while he gave his report.

“The Saidai Mao has given the signal. One of Uesugi-sama’s otters ran for the lake and dove in. The dragon captain is leading the charge, with the Northern lord behind him. I-”

Youki surged under Inuyasha’s skin and he stopped abruptly, causing the rest of his soldiers to do the same. His energy was crawling over his muscles, building and twitching and making him feel like he had squeezed into clothes two sizes too small. Inuyasha looked around wildly for a threat. Never had he felt so out of control before, except when he had lost his sword. He gripped the hilt of Tessaiga tightly, still searching for something that might have set his instincts off. Far ahead, a burst of energy shot out, tingling his senses and throwing snow and dirt into the air. When it had cleared, a huge pearly-white dragon stood on its hind legs. Its forelegs crashed to the ground and the northern soldiers attacked aggressively. Two bears launched themselves at the large dragon, and were immediately snapped up by its maw.

“Captain Sou,” Tuso stated flatly. The hanyou barely heard, his own power screaming for release. He could barely control it, unsure what his instincts were driving him to do. On the other side of the dragons, a funnel cloud of swirling youki shot out of the sky. A semi-circle of northern soldiers flew backwards, knocked to the ground by gale-force winds. Sou stood his ground, but turned his head from what Inuyasha knew from experience was a searing bite of electricity. In the next moment, a white dog, more than two times larger than Sou, growled, the sound reverberating in Inuyasha’s chest even from the distance.

Something deep inside him snapped into place. Miroku would have teased him in his good fortune for having such a slow mind – if his thoughts had caught up with his body he might not have been able to complete the act. A roar was building to the south, but Inuyasha ignored it, focused entirely on himself. Power, red-hot and gleaming, shot through his limbs. He threw himself down to the ground, digging his claws into the snow and dirt to keep from screaming at the pain. His muscles pulled and stretched, his bones broke with an audible *snick-snack* that repeated over and over until it was one long, continuous sound. The soldiers around him stumbled and backed away, but he paid no attention. A surge of heat and power was building and growing inside him. It burned. It was amazing. His skull felt as though it would crack open. Every nerve was alive. Scents that had been dull and far-away to him burst into full-color in his nose. The sounds of the lieutenant scrambling backward was just as sharp as the beat of the scout’s heart, just as clear as the grate of steel on bone as a dragon one hundred yards away attacked a kitsune. He opened his eyes, not having realized that he had shut them, and the world tilted around him. Colors were strange and somehow better, the things that were important were vibrant and pulsing, others fading to greys in the background. He was ready to *fight*.

We attack now, he meant to say, but it came out as a low growl that almost startled him with its deep intensity. He turned his head to look at the lieutenant, and found the crane was far below him – his feathered head just below the joint of Inuyasha’s foreleg. *His foreleg*. Inuyasha looked at himself and saw only white fur. Powerful paws the size of a hand cart and tipped with razor sharp claws. He glanced back at a tail, straight and high in the air. Inuyasha was reeling, his mind spinning over itself as he tried to take it all in. He was a *dog*. He was a youkai. Inuyoukai. *Inudaiyoukai*.

“Inuyasha-sama.” The hanyou turned canine demon whipped around to face the Tusō. The tall male had bent on one knee, his head lowered in a bow of respect. “Lead us.”

Fuck thinking about it. Introspection had never been his favorite activity, and it was easy to put off with a war so close at hand. Inuyasha lifted his head and howled. The gathered youkai behind him raised their weapons and yelled their own battle cries. A few transformed into a more deadly version of themselves, following their leader’s example. Inuyasha dug in his claws, and ran.

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Ryukostokken swung Shianma in a wide arc and cut down another demon. The bear twitched and moaned as the blade drank up his energy, flooding the dragon lord with excitement and vitality. Arashi had moved further away and slightly behind him, but Ryukostokken allowed it. The spy was engaged with a wolf-female that sounded more animal than youkai. And the death of a mere hanyou could be arranged at any time, the lord had more important matters to execute.

Sou had blinked hard, but given no other indication of surprise or hesitation when he was ordered to attack Sesshomaru. Wei had long insinuated that the taller of his two captains was plotting treachery, and although Ryukostokken had not entirely believed it, he had grown increasingly displeased with the soft-heart and bold words of Sou. Natsou had taken the field and would soon join his lord, and so Ryukostokken determined that he no longer needed two captains. Either Sou would die by Sesshomaru’s jaw, or he could easily be killed for failure to do so. Either way, he would test the pretender Sesshomaru’s defenses. The pup would be even weaker when Ryukostokken made his move, allowing the dragon lord to savor the defeat of his enemy.

The wind demoness had stayed close to his side, never more than an arm’s length away. There was no need to order her compliance. A blind demon in the midst of a battle was helpless without protection. She would follow him to the gates of hell, he was sure. A grin split his face, growing into a laugh as another Western soldier slipped past the line and threw his life on Shianma. The additional pulse of energy left him feeling incredible. His power was ultimate, his conquest secure. He ripped his blade from the corpse and licked it, lovingly. His eyes found the tangled forms of Sou and Sesshomaru, rising above the gathered armies. This would be a great day.

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Satisfaction flooded Sesshomaru as Ryukostokken ordered his army to engage. The dragon lord was finally within his grasp, and Sesshomaru would end things. For all he had done, to the North, to youkai and humans throughout Japan, for all he intended to do, Ryukostokken deserved a death sentence. For what he had done to Kagome, he deserved to die slowly. Sesshomaru dispatched the last of the dragons that had attacked him in the air and lightly ran his fingers over Tenseiga. The sword hummed under his touch. Perhaps, in the moment, it could be persuaded to revive the filth so that Sesshomaru might kill him a second time.

Inuyasha and his soldiers had come down the mountain and spread themselves across the plain. Their approach was measured, as Sesshomaru had instructed, to allow the Northern army a moment of confidence. Ryukostokken had not yet realized it, but he was surrounded. To the north and east was Inuyasha. To the west, Miroku, Kouga, and Kimi. His mother fought with a graceful fury, her twin wakizashi flashing as they cut down dragon after dragon. To the southwest were Sesshomaru’s forces, led by him in the air and Hisao and Hirimoto on the ground. There was only one small gap to the southeast

which led to the icy waters of Inawashiro lake. Sesshomaru cracked his whip with a burst of green light and began a rapid descent.

Before he could get halfway to his target, the dragon captain stepped forward from the line and transformed. Sesshomaru let out a snarl of frustration. It had been too optimistic, too great an assumption upon Ryukostokken to think that the dragon would fight his own challenges. Even in the midst of war, even so close to the enemy that he had plotted to kill, to overthrow, the Saigo Mao would send others to fight on his behalf. *Coward.*

A roar was growing in the air. Ryukostokken would not find that such tactics could keep him safe.

Sesshomaru steepened the angle of his descent and allowed his youki release. His form rippled and stretched, and he was relaxed and predatory as he could only be in his true form. His paws touched down and the force of his youki pushed back the soldiers around him, leaving a barren ring in which to face the dragon there. Sou was large – an indication of the strength of his youki – but still smaller than Sesshomaru. However, he had the advantage of three additional limbs with which to fight. His tail swung out first. Razor sharp ridges along the top of it would cut through flesh and demon bone easily. Sesshomaru met it with his forepaw, digging the claws in and helping Sou to complete the motion – with a quarter less meat on the appendage.

The dragon roared, smoke and heat flaring from his mouth, and leaped. Sesshomaru was quicker, surging into the sky, forcing the dragon to put his wings to use flying so that the clawed points could not be utilized as weapons. Below them, the dragons were advancing, pushing the Western army hard against the shoreline. The sun was dipping closer to the horizon. The long day of battle against so many, despite their lack of skill, had worn down those that fought for him. Sesshomaru knew they could not continue much longer.

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Kagome yelled orders at the monks, healers, and even the injured who could walk. The roar was growing louder, and she had almost forgotten why they had fought so passively. Almost forgotten the true purpose of their tactics today. *Make certain Ryukostokken cannot escape. Kill the Saigo Mao.* The inu lieutenant that should have been organizing the retreat and watching the camp had gone to the front line after his mate and counterpart was killed. It fell to Kagome to make certain they were ready.

“Move!” She smacked a young bear on the back of his head to gain his attention. The youkai had one arm in a sling and an eye swollen shut, but his legs worked. “If you see someone who can’t walk, carry them!” The soldier nodded vigorously and ran to do as she ordered. Kagome glanced over her shoulder at the snarling mass of fur and scales that was locked in battle. Her heart clenched, but she forced herself to turn away. Oncoming sunset had put a new, sharp chill in the air. The orange light glinted off of the surface of the lake, making the water appear more like a sheet of glass. A ripple started in the center of the lake, some two hundred feet from the shore line. It grew rapidly, each ridge growing and rising as another took its place until the roar in the air was earsplitting. Kagome clasped her hands over her ears, hoping that she would not go deaf from the noise. Her ever-present guards did the same, halting their movements to clear the center of the camp and turning to face the lake.

A channel formed in the water. At first, shallow, like the wake of a boat. Then it grew. Widening and deepening and the roar was still building. The ripples had become waves, towering over the surface of

the lake and casting shadows over the camp. The setting sun was perfectly framed by the ravine of frothing liquid. Its light shone wetly on the exposed sand of the lake bottom.

As the water pulled away from the floor of Inawashiro lake, the roar stopped. Kagome waited, holding her breath for what seemed to be an eternity. Steadily, with the practiced gait of a skilled soldier, a head rose above the sand. The figure grew in size as it stepped over the ridge of the lake shelf. Dark blue hair gleamed in the orange sunlight and danced across glittering armor. Kenjirosu strode out onto the beach to stop before Kagome. Behind him marched Matsudaira and two thousand human and youkai soldiers.

The soldiers streamed out onto the shore, taking several minutes, even at their quick pace, to clear the water. Kagome could feel tears of relief starting to prick at her eyes. *Reinforcements have arrived.* “Miko-sama,” he bowed deeply. “I believe these are yours.” He held out his hands. In one was a purple pearl, its surface dark and still. In the other was its mate, the green half of the kanjou manjou jewels. Light pulsed in its heart in time to the pull of the lake waters. Matsudaira joined them. “I thank you, and Sesshomaru-sama, for the loan of your betrothal gift. I fear I would have been tardy, if not for ebb and flow.” A smile twitched the corner of his mouth, and Kagome returned it with a huge grin.

“No problem, Kenjirosu,” she carefully plucked first ‘flow’ and then ‘ebb’ from his hands. As her skin touched the green pearl, its light winked out and the water of the lake crashed back to the surface, spraying those soldiers who were nearest the shore. She tucked them into a pocket, and then gestured toward the battle. “Please,” she said.

Kenjirosu nodded and Matsudaira offered her a small smile before they turned and ordered their soldiers into a quick run. Kagome circled around them, her guard forming a half circle behind her as they were further from the fighting. She hadn’t realized how much tension had been riding on the arrival of the water demon and the bulk of the human forces. Now that they had joined in the fight, she felt almost lightheaded with the loss of strain. She came to a stop a short distance behind the main front, prepared to return to her duties as a healer even though her reiki felt nearly depleted. She would deal with the consequences later, after it was over.

Kagome glanced up to check on Sesshomaru just in time to see him swipe a paw at the white dragon. The force of the blow snapped its head back, and it fell to the ground. There was a scream of rage, which sent a chill down her spine. Three more dragons, much smaller in size, darted up to prevent Sesshomaru from descending. Western soldiers who had fought all day began to filter behind the line as relief troops joined the fight. Through a narrow gap in the wall of bodies, Kagome caught a glimpse of Ryukostokken. Her breath caught in her chest, her lungs painfully tight. The lord had his hand wrapped tightly in Ko’s hair, a trickle of blood running down her temple. *He is going to escape.*

Kagome’s heart stopped. He couldn’t. *He can’t.* Sesshomaru was too busy with his own enemies. Ryukostokken would sacrifice every soldier in his army – throw them at Inuyasha and Kouga, Miroku and Kimi, Hisao and Hirimoto. Even with Kenjirosu and Matsudaira’s strength, they would not be able to keep the Northern lord from fleeing. *I can.*

Rightness, a goal, seized her mind. Kagome darted forward, clipping one soldier with her bo staff and giving the weapon up to another who attempted to stop her. She broke through the line of Western soldiers and straight into the open area around the fallen white dragon.

“Ryukostokken!” she screamed. Cold black eyes turned on her.

“No!”

Arashi's ears stung from the scream that Ryukostokken let loose. It was the sound of reality breaking. It was the sound of death approaching – the sound of failure. Although his little informant had not been able to find out what had happened to the water demon that so astonishingly refused to ally with Sesshomaru, Arashi was not surprised to see him join the fight.

He had been shocked to see his method of arrival, as had the majority of the army. The waters had parted for the demon as though he controlled the lake itself. Many would see it as a sign of his powerful youki, and the dragon soldiers avoided him, some even turning as if to flee rather than face such an ability. Arashi had the strong suspicion that there were other forces at work, but the thought had little value – the outcome was the same. There would be no pushing through the Western line with Sesshomaru's additional reinforcements. Ryukostokken could only hope to use Natsou and Inuyasha to cover his retreat and allow him to regroup or escape.

Ah, Natsou, Arashi thought to himself as he picked up a fallen spear, the grey flag of the North torn, but still visible. He could almost read Ryukostokken's mind as he turned to look for his most trusted captain. Unfortunately for the dragon lord, those soldiers that had been guarding the rear or recovering from injuries were about to come under a heavy assault. Arashi slammed his fist into the demon that had attacked him and glanced up, trying to gauge the timing. For a moment, even he was stunned to see the force descending upon them. Inuyasha's crane soldiers and mixed youkai were expected. And Arashi had considered the possibility that some of the dragons under Natsou, if given the prospect, would join the inuhanyou for the opportunity of vengeance against the lord that had abused them so long. It was their leader that gave him pause.

Inuyasha, obviously. That much was apparent from the color of his coat and eyes, and the aggressively reckless way he charged into battle. It was his size and nature that was a shock. Few hanyou ever managed to live long enough with their clashing blood to reach adulthood. Fewer still were strong enough, had enough power, to manage a transformation. It was rare even for the offspring of a daiyoukai to achieve it, and Inuyasha had done so with alacrity and of a size that exceeded most noble full-youkai twice his age. The spy was intimately aware of the requirements. Arashi glanced to Ryukostokken. There was still a glimmer of superiority, of pride, on the lord's face. *Foolish. If only your rage and arrogance had not blinded you*, he thought. *Then again, fate is a hard-shaken thing*.

Inuyasha opened his jaws and tore a dragon from the rear line. Ryukostokken's face fell, the color leaching out of it until it was nearly white under the dark pock marks from his disease. Arashi cast a glance to Sou. The captain was still alive, his chest moving eyes turned toward Arashi, and his soldiers had rallied to defend him, but he had not gotten up. Sesshomaru was high above, his massive form harried by several small dragons. *The battle is decided. Time for the final move*.

Arashi thrust the almost useless spear into the ground, the Northern standard fluttering half-heartedly in the winter air. He started to reposition himself at Ryukostokken's right, just behind the lord and the wind demoness. So close, he could taste the power in the air around the Saigo Mao. Shianma hummed with it, and the overabundance of energy was vibrating under the lord's skin. Arashi wondered, in the back of his mind, how Ryukostokken had not been driven insane by the near-sentient sword and its lust for youki. *Then again...* He placed his hands in his sleeves as the Northern lord seized his slave trans-

port. The demoness cried out sharply as claws dug into her scalp. As Arashi had surmised, Ryukostokken intended to escape with whatever soldiers could follow him. A figure, dark with blood and mud, burst from the line of Western youkai.

“Ryukostokken!” The Shikon Miko skidded to a stop, throwing out her arms wide to keep from falling. Her sleeves were torn. Great claw marks wrapped in red around her pale upper arms, as though someone had tried to hold her back. Blood was smeared on her jaw. Dark purple bruises under her eyes suggested she had not slept in days. Her hair was in wild disarray, tumbling out of a blue covering - the only part of her that was not filthy and exhausted. Although he wondered how the scenario would turn out – he had assumed that the miko had avoided the potion to enslave her to Ryukostokken – the larger part of him was focused on the task ahead. This day was the culmination of years of planning, of decades of service and cunning. Treachery and spying. Lying and debasing himself and plotting for the future of the North. No miko, no matter how powerful, could thwart that.

A soldier, older and scarred from the pox, turned his sword on her. “No!” Ryukostokken snarled. White-hot shards flew from his claws and sliced into the male that would have killed the woman. Battle around them began to grow quiet. “Come to me, my priestess,” Ryukostokken demanded. It should have been a demand, a command, but his voice broke somewhere in the middle into a plea. Begging. Arashi could hear it and his stomach turned. *Thousands of dragons dead and dying, defeat eminent, and still he lusts for power over a woman.* Three other dragons surged behind the miko, forcing her to take a step forward and further separating her from the Western soldiers.

There was a spray of blood and scale-covered bodies fell from the air. With a swirl of youki, the Saidai Mao returned to two legs. His kimono was nearly perfect, his hair smooth as silk. The hard calm of his expression was a sharp contrast to the wild-eyed fury and pleading on Ryukostokken’s face.

“Do not,” said the Killing Perfection flatly.

The miko turned her eyes to him, but still took another step forward. “I have to,” she said. Her voice, too, broke, but with sadness.

“Stop!” It was Ko who cried out, finally struggling against her captor. Arashi paused in his own actions. He had never seen her openly defy Ryukostokken, not in two decades of captivity. “Kagome-san, no!”

“Quiet!” Ryukostokken hissed, shaking the demoness so hard her teeth snapped together. His face turned away from Arashi, toward Sesshomaru. “How does it feel, dog, to know that you have been beaten? Kill every dragon here, and I will still be victorious.” Spit was flying from his mouth as he spoke ever faster, “She would rather lie at my feet than rule at your side.” Sesshomaru’s expression lost its icy façade and grew thunderous. Youki gathered around him, a storm of vengeance, of death, that began to suffocate those nearby. Ryukostokken did not take notice, “The miko is mine. And after I have taken her, all of Japan will be at my rule! No longer last, but first! No longer Saigo Mao, but Saidai – no, Emperor!”

ooo

From the corner of his eye, Sesshomaru had seen Kagome break through the lines. The pull of her reiki on his youki was unmistakable, as was the bright blue of her hat. He saw a dragon raise their sword against her, saw that she was unarmed, that she made no move to defend herself. *I will not reach her in*

time. The thought was agonizing and infuriating. He bit and clawed, destroying those that blocked him from protecting his mate. As he neared the ground, he watched Ryukostokken prevent her death. It was only her safety, for that moment, which allowed him the control to take on his smaller form.

Ryukostokken was asking, waiting, for Kagome to come to him. She could not turn back – other dragons had closed the gap behind her, sealing her away from allies. Fear grew inside him, not only for her body, for what harm might be done to her, but for what she would do to herself. He could feel it in her, her reiki growing, preparing. She was drawing upon the last of her reserves – upon her own life force. Their enemy had a friend, a female that had saved Kagome, in his grip. Sesshomaru's intended would never allow another to suffer in her place if she could help it. The scrap of her power under his skin hummed in echo of the weapon she was building within. He could see what she intended to do clearly. She had no blade nor staff, she could not cast her power out for fear of hitting the wind demoness. She would let the dragon lord touch her. Once Ryukostokken's claws were on her skin, she would channel all of the power available into his body to purify him. He might kill her in the process. The immense effort could end her life just as easily.

"Do not." It was the strongest command he could give, and he knew it would not be obeyed. Her blue eyes turned to him, and Sesshomaru cursed himself. He cursed that he had not been stronger, faster. Cursed that he had not already killed the egomaniacal murderer that threatened his mate. Cursed that he had not forced her to stay behind, secure. Cursed that he had not trained her himself, given her more opportunity to defend herself. Cursed that he had fallen in love with a person that would give everything for another. Who would die.

She took a step forward, and his heart shattered in his chest. It was the only explanation for the tearing, agonizing sensation he felt. "I have to," she said quietly, tears beginning to pool in her eyes.

"Stop! Kagome-san, no!" the wind demoness screamed, and Ryukostokken nearly broke her neck to silence her.

Ryukostokken began to spew vitriol, denigrating Kagome even as he proclaimed his desire to have her. Calling Sesshomaru a weak coward. He obviously believed her to be under the spell of the potion, and Kagome was playing into that to get close enough to act. His youki was rising, swelling, demanding that he slaughter those who might hurt his miko. The power escaped the tight confines he usually kept on it, expanding and intensifying around him. He clenched the muscles of his legs, preparing to pounce. The wind demoness would likely be caught in the attack, and if she died, Kagome would never forgive him. But he would not be able to forgive himself if Ryukostokken hurt her. He would not be able to forgive himself if Kagome had to live with the dragon's death on her hands.

"How does it feel, dog, to know that you have been beaten? Kill every dragon here, and I will still be victorious." Fighting had ceased completely in the space around them, and was only heard distantly on the edges of the field. Those dragons that had a good view of their lord shifted uncomfortably. It was obvious to them the day was lost, and any who declared otherwise was a fool or a madman. "She would rather lie at my feet than rule at your side." The white dragon on the ground stood, weaponless, a sluggish swirl of youki returning his smaller form as his wounds began to heal. "The miko is mine. And after I have taken her, all of Japan will be at my rule! No longer last, but first! No longer Saigo Mao, but Saidai – no, Emperor!"

His exalted shout was abruptly cut off, a blade protruding through his chest. Sesshomaru blinked. Ryukostokken looked down, seeming just as confused as everyone around him. He let go of the wind

demoness to clutch his hand to the wound. Furious dawning realization grew and with it his youki – lashing out around him. “Traitor!” he screamed.

A shorter dragon stepped around Ryukostokken, grabbing the lord’s sword arm by the wrist. His skin was the same dark grey as the Northern lord, his black hair worn long and tied back. His eyes were hard, and so dark the pupil was indistinguishable from the iris. Sesshomaru breathed deeply, sorting through the scents of war. There was a thread of similarity between the two. *Sulphur. A flaky, metallic mica.* His eyes narrowed and he gripped the hilt of Bakusaiga, prepared to kill either dragon.

“I should have left you to rot, half-breed whore’s son!” Ryukostokken screamed, blood bubbling from his mouth and bursting to fleck onto the other dragon’s sleeve. “You bring dishonor to the North, Arashi!”

“Never, Saigo Mao.” The shorter, younger dragon smoothed back his hair, as though murdering his lord was simply a distasteful task that was now complete. “I have done exactly as I said I would.” He glanced up, and Sesshomaru watched the cold gaze shared by the two men. “Natsou attempted to flee the battle, so I made certain he was dead.” Sesshomaru was not aware of the actual words which must have been spoken, but Natsou had certainly been killed. Arashi leaned closer, his own youki rising as he spoke. It grew harder and more threatening, pressing against Sesshomaru’s own power and stifling Ryukostokken’s youki. “You have met both sons of the dead dog on the battlefield. The miko has run toward you, calling your name. I have brought your enemy before you. I have secured an army to bring swords at your back. And the North, as I swore to you so long ago, is still in the hands of the line of Ryukotsusei.” There was a long pause, and both armies seemed to hold their breath, waiting. The captain, Sou, was the first to react. He fell to his knees, bowing low.

“Arashi-sama.” He declared his allegiance with a simple title of respect. Sesshomaru watched as other dragons followed suit, slowing gaining momentum until nearly two-thirds of the northern soldiers on the field were bowed in fealty. If not for his inu hearing, Sesshomaru would not have caught Arashi’s last words, whispered in Ryukostokken’s ear.

“Just as I promised, Father.”

With a roar filled with pain and the blood in his lungs, Ryukostokken surged forward, towards the dragon that had just claimed the right to one of the four Cardinal Lands. The struggle was brief. Ryukostokken was older and mortally wounded, and Arashi had taken precautions to keep him from his sword. There was a snarl from the two males, and then a swirl of blue silk and wind.

Sliiick.

The sound, wet and under pressure, preceded Ryukostokken’s head falling from his shoulders. Shortly thereafter, his body followed it to the ground. The wind demoness turned, green eyes burning with vengeance, her breath coming hard and her cheeks red with anger, and spit on the body. The blades of air she had summoned whirled around her for a moment, before settling back into the cool twilight breeze.

“Well,” Kimi’s voice drew everyone’s eye. The dowager Western Lady stood at the edge of the clearing, close enough to Kagome to whisk her away from danger if necessary. Behind her was an open pathway among the dragons. Those that had not parted at the mere sight of her had sutras plastered on their faces. A line of monks followed her quietly. She continued, one brow raised and a short sword

gesturing vaguely at the decapitated lord and the two that had murdered him, “That was certainly dramatic.”

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Kagome sat by Inuyasha’s side and tended to his wounds, despite his objections. His forces had been outnumbered two to one when they attacked the rear Northern guard. Although he had lost only a few of his soldiers, his own leg had been severed in the fight. Kagome tried not to let her tears well up again, but she was just so grateful that he wasn’t dead.

“Ow, would you watch what you’re doing!” He winced and grumbled around a third helping of food. They had both been starving from the long day and unusual displays of power.

“Quit being such a baby,” she responded, although she did her best to be gentler. So many had died. Hitashimashita had been immolated, along with several other tree youkai. Many of the monks they had been sheltering inhaled too much smoke to survive. Ayame had been pinned under a dragon she killed; the weight had broken her back. It might have killed her, if Hirimoto’s physician had not been nearby. It would take years for her to be able to walk again, but Kouga had quickly seen to her comfort. Date had only a few minor wounds, but his samurai and ninja had taken a heavy toll. A new friendship had been forged there between the eagles and the humans. Tsukahara had sacrificed himself to save the lord’s life. Date had left the field with promises to secure a peace with demons in his lands, but only time would tell where that gambler was concerned.

“It will grow back, Inuyasha.” Sesshomaru’s cool voice interrupted her thoughts and she turned to see him enter the tent. Warm light from the lamp on a nearby table lit his eyes with a soft glow. It was mirrored and amplified in her chest. There had been more than one moment during the battle where she thought she had lost him. More than once where she thought her own life was over. She didn’t bother trying to contain herself.

“Sesshomaru,” she exclaimed, jumping up and throwing her arms around his waist. He smelled stale. Like blood and sweat and something that might have been wet seaweed – but she tried not to examine that too closely. His clothes didn’t look any worse for wear, the advantage of Aki’s workmanship and a little magic, but his face showed his tiredness. “I have been waiting for you, where have you been?”

“Keh,” Inuyasha grumped. “I’m the one missing a leg here. How come he gets all the attention?”

“Be grateful it was not your sword hand, *brother*.” Kagome grimaced at the reminder of Sesshomaru’s lost limb.

“Eh, I doubt I’m gonna use my youki to forge a new – shoe, or whatever, to grow it back though, so fuck off.”

“Inuyasha,” Kagome scolded, hiding her laugh behind her hand.

“You are strong enough,” Sesshomaru said, easily ignoring the embarrassed shock on Inuyasha’s face. “It is possible. Although waiting a century for it to regrow may be preferable to wasting power on a... shoe.” He looked pointedly at Inuyasha’s bare feet. The hanyou opened his mouth to retort, and Kagome stepped in to prevent the argument from continuing.

“How did the negotiations go?” She led Sesshomaru over to their futon, drawing back the curtain so that Inuyasha could still see them from his makeshift pallet near the desk.

“Better than anticipated.” He rolled his head slightly, from side to side, as though trying to loosen some muscle knot. Kagome could imagine his discomfort; she felt like she had been through the workout from hell. And then hit by a truck. She poured a cup of tea, grateful that she had found time in the hours since the battle and looking after the wounded to wash and change. Sesshomaru was even more fastidious than she was, he was probably eager for a bath.

“Egg was by earlier,” Inuyasha mentioned. “Said Tuso asked permission from that Arashi guy to stay in the East.”

“Yes. It would seem you have a dedicated following among Natsou’s former soldiers. He specifically asked if he and his men could swear allegiance to you.” Sesshomaru sipped his tea calmly, but Inuyasha sat up straight as if he had been stabbed.

“What! I don’t want vassals!” He sputtered, red-faced, “I’m no lord!”

“In point of fact,” Kagome answered, smiling, “You are. Your mother was nobility. Your father was the Lord of the West. That makes you like a prince, or...” she glanced at Sesshomaru for conformation, “something.”

“Indeed.” Sesshomaru turned his most serious gaze on his half-brother and straightened his posture. “This Sesshomaru is most grateful for your assistance, Tashio Inuyasha, and most honored to name you as pack.” He nodded his head, the closest Kagome had ever seen him come to bowing to anyone. Inuyasha just sat there, mouth gaping stupidly. “Of course, you will need to establish a House,” Sesshomaru continued. Kagome could hear the lighter note in his voice that signaled teasing. She frowned at him, trying to let him know to be nice. “The House of the Dog in a Tree? Or perhaps, The House of the Well? The House of Falling Over One’s Own Sword? The House of Ill Manners? The House of-”

“I’m sure he can come up with something on his own, Sesshomaru,” Kagome said with a quelling glance. The daiyoukai had obviously been saving those up for a while. *How strange*, she thought, *to hear such normal, sibling teasing from those two*. “I found Miroku a tent near the water,” she tried to deflect the conversation.

“He okay?” Inuyasha asked.

“He’s fine,” Kagome assured him, “Still scrubbing off all that paint. But he’ll be a lot better once he and Sango get a chance to talk, I’m sure.”

Sesshomaru picked up where he had left off, completely undeterred. “There is also the matter of a mate. I have received an offer, but if you have another in mind – perhaps an elemental?” The lord’s eyes cut slyly to the side, and then his tiny smile fell away. Inuyasha was stiff, no longer blushing or riled up.

“If you mean Niji,” he said flatly, “she’s dead. Took a blow for me after I lost my leg.”

There was a long pause. Kagome felt her tears welling again. She hadn't known the Niji that Sesshomaru mentioned, but she had obviously been admired by Inuyasha. It pained her to think he had lost one of the few friends he had. "She will be remembered with honor," Sesshomaru finally stated.

"Yeah. She will." Inuyasha slowly lowered himself back to the pile of blankets Kagome had laid out for him. "So," he said, after a few minutes of no sound but Sesshomaru's quiet sips of tea. "You made a treaty with that sneaky bastard then?"

"Yes." Kagome wrapped her own hands around a tea cup, trying to determine how she felt about that. The end of war was a good thing, but she had also recognized Arashi as the youkai that had abducted her. "There will be sanctions, which the Cardinal Lords will decide. A counsel of all daiyoukai will be called to discuss the matter, but I believe, in the end, he will be named as the Northern Lord."

"Even if he's hanyou?" Inuyasha pointed out shrewdly.

"He has the power, and the bloodline. The dragons follow him." Sesshomaru narrowed his eyes. "As long as he keeps the peace, I will support his claim."

"And Hirimoto, is he..." Kagome couldn't finish the thought, *is he okay*. Of course not. The death of his sister's murderer did not bring her back. Vengeance didn't end pain.

Sesshomaru held her tighter. "He will return to the South. He has given Kimi his proxy in the peace negotiations. He will...I believe he will become who he once was. With time." It was a small thing, but Kagome heard the guilt in his voice. It had not been easy for him to order Hirimoto to leave his dead unburied, but the burden was not Sesshomaru's alone. She returned his embrace, and silence resumed in the tent for a while.

"Ko won't...I mean, she left right away, I can't blame her, but..." Kagome's voice drifted off, unsure what she wanted to ask. The wind demoness had seized her hand tightly – as soon as Sesshomaru had allowed her to leave his side – after it was over. She had thanked Kagome, for what exactly, the miko wasn't sure, and promised that they would see each other again. And then she was gone. Flying high and fast and with a look on her face that made Kagome cry in earnest, just remembering it.

Freedom.

"None will sanction her for the death of Ryukostokken." Sesshomaru so often seemed to know what she intended to say.

"Hard to," Inuyasha snorted, "fucker would have died soon anyhow. Arashi has good aim."

"And she is welcome in the West, as often and long as you would like," Sesshomaru continued softly to Kagome. He held out his cup for more tea. "The remaining dragons have all either pledged loyalty to Arashi or fled north. He has sworn to track down those that left and deal with them. Arashi will be extremely busy for the next few months."

"That's when the lords will meet again?" Kagome waited for Sesshomaru's nod. It felt surreal still: that it was over, that they were safe. She wanted to go to the shrine immediately and see the children, hug them, but she knew she needed time to reorient herself, to settle her emotions. That, and she remem-

bered the legend of the shrine. The goddess had not come until the next morning to open the gates. Suddenly, Kagome laughed. Outside, she could hear the fires and loud conversations of a few thousand soldiers who were drinking and celebrating their victory. Weapons clashed together occasionally in cheers, and a few wolves had taken up howling along to a kitsune song.

“What is so funny?” Inuyasha asked sleepily, turning down the lamp before laying flat again.

“It’s the legend,” she managed to say between chuckles. Sesshomaru pulled her back against his chest, and she relaxed there, still smiling from her realization. “The monks cowered inside the Inawashiro temple all day and night while they listened to the terrible sounds of the battle. Get it?” She used her thumb to gesture to the tent flap and grinned up at Sesshomaru. “All night? Sounds like a pretty ferocious battle to me.”

“Hn.” Whether Sesshomaru was agreeing or not, she wasn’t sure, but she didn’t much care as he pulled her down to lay beside him on their futon. She wrapped her arm over his chest and squeezed.

Inuyasha’s rough mumble came from the semi-darkness, “House of the New Moon.” Kagome felt Sesshomaru’s nod, and then his youki reaching out to rest first on Inuyasha, then to blanket her. Mokokoko pulled tight around her. He was hers. They were safe. Only the future was before them.

Epilogue: Choices Design Fate

“It’s sealed,” Kagome said quietly.

Sesshomaru pulled her back to lean against his chest, breathing in her scent. She smelled of sadness. The camphor stung his nose but the salt of her tears was light. She was not in danger of sobbing. More vibrant was the scent of freshly cut cherry wood and magnolia blossoms, barely open and heavy with dew. She sighed and allowed her weight to sag against him.

Overhead, stars shone brightly against a dark backdrop. The breeze was slight and cool, the weather unseasonably warm. Spring would come early this year – so Bokuseno had told him. The sap was stirring, the world ready to breath deep and begin to repair the wound left by Ryukostokken. Nearly a month had passed since the battle, and Sesshomaru was tired of the endless meetings and ceremonies. They were worth his time, however. Each night since they had returned to the Western Palace, he excused himself when the sun set. Regardless of the state of the discussion or the importance of his guests, he returned to his private quarters before the last glow of orange had left the sky.

There Kagome was always waiting for him. The pups would be finishing supper, and implore him to eat with them. And she would smile and offer to fill his bowl. Or they would be preparing for bed, and Kagome would watch as he patted heads and left the mark of his youki upon them. Or, as the days grew a bit longer, she would be reading quietly, and set down her scroll or book when he came in, offering tea. And then, he took her to their rooms, and showed her how much he cared for her. Never had Sesshomaru felt so at peace.

Their mating, the official ceremony, was to take place on the next full moon. Sesshomaru knew she was missing her family, thinking of the human ceremony that would have been theirs if time was not an obstacle. He had nearly had to force her to come to the well, on the first new moon after the battle. She insisted that she wouldn’t try it, even if the magic was still active, but he wanted her to have the opportunity. He thought she should go see her family, even if the well would not accept him, and let them know that she was safe, and that he would protect her. Until she could be together with them again.

“That’s it then?” Inuyasha asked abruptly. He perched on the edge of the well, his dark hair falling over the ancient wood. His pose was not encumbered by the loss of a limb, which he refused to allow Kagome to heal. The hanyou bluffed that she would burn him, which was most likely untrue, but Sesshomaru was thankful for the reprieve. His miko had been pushing herself hard since the war to deal with injuries and youkai seeking assistance to conceive.

“Is that *it*? Idiot! Try to be a little more sensitive!” Kagome slapped at his half-brother’s arm, and the hanyou scowled.

“Ow, hey that hurts when I’m human!” He rubbed his arm, but his face softened. Sesshomaru had begun to notice that Inuyasha was far more open and emotional when his youki was suppressed. “Sorry, Kagome. Me and my big mouth. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay,” she sighed. “I’ll just miss them. I should feel grateful.” She turned her head up to stare at him, and he was lost for a moment in the sparkle of stars in her blue eyes, “and I am, so much.” Her voice was soft and her scent full of the sweet smell of carnations and warm gardenias. She turned back to Inuyasha, “But knowing that I might live to see them again doesn’t make the distance any easier.”

“I miss ‘em too,” Inuyasha said gruffly. “Specially your mom. And her cooking.”

“Inuyasha!” Kagome began to laugh, and Sesshomaru relaxed. She would be all right, and she *would* meet her family again, he swore that to himself.

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“I don’t see why I have to be here for this. It’s sappy – and gross to think about Kagome and the ice pr – ah, Sesshomaru,” Inuyasha grumbled, blushing. He shifted his weight against the wooden staff that helped him to walk since he had lost his foot.

Kimi smirked and reached out to straighten the collar of his formal robes. He looked spectacular, and she could not help but see Toga’s face for a moment, peering out through those golden eyes. She blinked, and Inuyasha’s scowl was back in focus. The mating ceremony was far more private than the announcement of their intentions had been, but it was tradition for the packs of the two soon-to-be-mates to listen to their pledges and offer blessings. Inuyasha was part of Sesshomaru’s pack, officially, and also, she supposed, part of Kagome’s pack – rather more unofficially.

“Sappy,” she drew the word out, just to draw attention to it and watch the hanyou flounder, “this is another word from Kagome’s village, yes? Why is it that their language is so strange, and yet so like our own, do you think?”

Predictably, Inuyasha glanced around like a cornered rabbit and blurted out the first thing he could think of. “Ah, so it takes a long time to decorate for these things. Looks great, I mean, you did a great job. Or I mean – your servants, or, er...people, with...things.”

Kimi laughed, delighted. “Thank you, son-of-my mate. Aina helped with the decorations, as did the children. I think they look quite lovely as well.” She paused to consider the twinkling green stars that Shippo had produced and stuck into all of the bare trees in the garden. Rin had designed a large bower and covered it with the last of the winter greens and a few early spring flowers. The light from the full moon reflected off of the floor which Aina had charmed to appear like water. “Although, you should be careful. I believe young Shippo has concocted several rather mischievous ideas for your own mating ceremony, when the time comes.”

“Keh,” Inuyasha shrugged thoughtlessly, “doubt that’ll be an issue. Not likely to mate, being hanyou.”

“Do not take such a dour view of your own future, Inuyasha-san. Your Lord has already received an offer to see you well mated.” Kimi had to pinch the flesh of her hands to keep from laughing at the outrage on Inuyasha’s face.

“What!”

“One of the human lords has an eligible daughter. The alliance would be most advantageous. And she is quite pretty, I am told, for a human.”

“Fucker,” Inuyasha muttered with vehemence.

“Hn,” Kimi’s eyes sparkled with mirth. “But you do not even know her.” After a few tense moments while her double entrende sank in, the hanyou’s face, predictably, turned as red as his haori.

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Kagome remembered very little about the mating ceremony. Inuyasha and Kimi were there, with the children. Rin had cried; Shippo had behaved himself. Emi fell asleep on Kimi’s shoulder before it even began. Sango and Miroku stood to one side, the slayer’s belly just beginning to show a small bulge. They both glowed with happiness. Aki and Kento had bowed when she came into the courtyard. Hisao had shushed Nankae after his loud exclamation of, “Whoa, ‘Gome!” Kaede had made the long journey on Kirara to bless the couple, and stood on the dais near Sesshomaru.

He took her breath away. It was good that she knew the order of the ceremony – had been to many, many Shinto weddings at her family shrine – and Kimi and Kento had lectured her on the youkai aspects until she had them memorized. She must have responded correctly, bowed and nodded, spoken and remained silent when she was supposed to, but it was her intended, her fiancée, that stood out in her mind. He wore a gold kimono. No decorations disturbed the rich color, but the sleeves and collar exposed a red under-kimono, and another layer of black below that. His obi was wide and purple, the material intricately embroidered with red and gold chrysanthemums overlaid with a hexagonal pattern. Four crests were detailed in black, signifying the House of the Crescent Moon, the Tashio family, the West, and Japan.

The color emphasized the pure white of his skin and hair, and the gold of his eyes. As always in public, his expression remained calm, but when her eyes met his she could see the warmth there, the crinkling at the corners that indicated a smile. His youki wrapped around her, warming her in the brisk night air and making her feel safe and loved. She barely felt the press of the ceremonial tanto against her skin as she made a shallow cut on her palm. Sesshomaru spoke, vowed that he would heal all wounds and hold her to him for the remainder of his life. He cupped the back of her hand in his and raised it to his mouth. His breath was warm and his tongue both soothing and sensual as he licked the wound. His saliva began to work quickly to seal it, the small pain disappearing almost instantly. Then he tucked her hand into his elbow and took the knife, quickly slicing his own flesh. Kagome repeated the words. She had been hesitant, before the ceremony, to taste his blood, but with his eyes on her, his youki around her, it did not seem anything but natural. Her reiki rose to her lips, healing him as he had her.

Kaede poured the sake. Sesshomaru drank first, and Kagome imagined she could taste his lips on the bowl when he offered it to her. The old miko gave a blessing. Then they bowed to one another and embraced in front of everyone, whispering their own promises to each other.

“I will always love you, Sesshomaru,” Kagome said. The scent of cloves was faint and tantalizing. “I will be the strongest, the wisest, the most compassionate I am capable of – for you. And for myself. I will share your burdens and responsibilities. Your joys. Everything that I am, I offer to you. My mind. My body. My heart.” She brushed her nose along his jaw and Sesshomaru mirrored the action, bending even lower so that he could speak in her ear.

“As you are mine. I am yours. No power, no enemy, no time shall separate us. Everything that I am already belongs to you. My wealth. My power. My strength.” He rumbled something else, in the language of the inu, then finished, “My thoughts. My body. My heart. My eternity and the next shall be yours.” What happened after that was a blur of congratulations and blessings. Sips of sake and bites of sweet fruit and rich meat. Kagome remembered nothing specific except the pull of Sesshomaru’s youki

on her reiki and the echo of his words deep in her chest, making her pulse beat erratically and her thoughts glaze. *My heart.* Sesshomaru loved her. He *loved* her. Her own love for him swelled and heated at the knowledge. He was hers, as she was his.

Hours later, or perhaps only a few minutes after the obligatory meal with their pack, Sesshomaru escorted her to their room. The children had been temporarily relocated to another portion of the shiro, where Inuyasha would read bedtime stories before he had to leave for duties in the East. Kimi had agreed to oversee the West for the traditional honeymoon period – which for youkai was an actual moon cycle. Although Kagome had been tantalized by the idea, and Sesshomaru had suggested uses for the time that had made her blush vividly, they had both agreed that in the aftermath of the war they should forego such a long period of seclusion. Three days was all they had afforded themselves, and they intended to make the most of that time.

Sesshomaru closed the screens quietly behind them, and his barrier rose. Stillness settled in the room and Kagome felt her breath hitch. Although it would not be the first time they had sex – *far from it*, Kagome thought and heat gathered between her legs – she still felt a flutter of anxiety, or perhaps anticipation. Maybe both. She waited, biting her lower lip to try to contain a ridiculous blush, while he stared at her. The passion in his gaze was searing.

“Allow me to assist you,” he said. The deep rumble of his voice sent a shiver down her spine. *Definitely anticipation.*

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Sesshomaru had to force himself to concentrate on the congratulations and blessings of his pack, on consuming the correct amount of sake and meat to show his appreciation for the ceremony – for the bounty that would come from his mating. It was an effort in futility. She was beautiful, but Kagome was always beautiful. There were other females that could surpass her under a clinical assessment of their features, but under the light of the full moon she outshone them all. His miko, his mate, glowed from within. Even after the visible sign of her reiki had faded, she still appeared lit with emotion. Some combination of moonlight and power and the happiness that he could smell wafting from her skin gave her a luminosity that was nearly blinding.

Blinding, but he could not stop his gaze from returning to her over and over again. The taste of her blood was still faintly present in his mouth. Her power tingled under his skin. Her scent was drugging.

As soon as was acceptable, or perhaps a bit before that, Sesshomaru led Kagome away from the courtyard and back to their private rooms. His instincts were predatory and watchful, waiting for the moment when he could claim her, leave his mark upon her and have hers on him. As he closed the screens to their room behind him, she turned, the soft whisper of silk on wood an enticement to his senses. Her gold kimono was heavily decorated on the long sleeves and at the hem with full, red flowers and new, pink buds. The precisely folded obi was the green of fresh spring and the golden symbols of his house and hers, and the West, were carefully worked into the scene on the silk. Aki had outdone herself. Gold mountains fell into rich, shadowed purple valleys. Tiny trees dotted the landscape, rivers flowed across it and past a miniature shrine. Hidden in the stitches of foliage, too small for human eyes to see, were miniscule creatures. An upturned nose peeked out from one side of a trunk; two mischievous tails emerged from the other. Within a meadow of purple and red flowers, the shoulder of an orange kimono and a windblown black knot of hair were buried. At the edge of the shrine, two figures were entwined in the shadow of a silver boomerang. High in the tallest pine, an outline in red, with silver hair flowing

in an unseen breeze. And at the center, sheltered by a magnolia tree studded with tiny flowers, the spider youkai had created two figures. Red and white clothing stood out against the green background while silver and black hair twined together.

He allowed his eyes to follow the story told by her clothing while he took in her scent. *Cherry wood, freshly cut. White blossoms, heavy with dew. Sweet Carnations. Spicy Cinnamon. Satsuma oranges.* He wanted her, but it was far more than lust for her body. *Though that is no small part*, he acknowledged silently. He wanted to be with her, to watch as she continued to grow in strength and skill. To see her raise Rin and Shippo, watch her with their unborn pups, help her to teach them to survive, to live, to thrive. He wanted to see if she would ever learn how to properly tie obi. He wanted to catch her every time she tripped over her own feet. He wanted to know her thoughts – even when her speech seemed incessant and inconsequential. Even when he was torn between kissing her or muzzling her simply for peace, he still wanted to be with her. He wanted to share in her burdens, to ease them and soothe her pains. Even those of her heart.

Four months previous, he had sought her out to heal his child. At the time, he had found her to be intelligent and powerful, tolerable above any other female he was not related to, and some he was – even if she spent too much time with his half-brother. But he could not have conceived of what she would become to him. Of how he would come to know her and want – need - her beside him. She was his match. Not his opposite, but his equal. His miko. His Lady. His Kagome.

Sesshomaru let his eyes linger on the soft skin of her neck, just above her collar, before he traced the plump bow of her mouth – the bottom lip nearly punctured by blunt white teeth. The sight sent another pulse of heat through him. Youki throbbed without thought and reiki responded. The scent of an ocean breeze was accompanied by a spike of her passionate spice. Sesshomaru found his clothing was suddenly too restricting, as was hers. It was his right, his duty, as her mate to see to her comfort, her needs. He looked forward to centuries of the responsibility. He caught her blue gaze.

“Allow me to assist you,” he said. He held out his hand, and her fingers were cool as they slid across his palm, the faint callouses from her bow sending a delicious rasp across his skin.

“I don’t know why I’m nervous,” she confessed with a self-deprecating smile. It fell away, her lips barely parted, as he drew her closer to him. “I’ve been thinking about this all day,” she whispered.

“Only that long?” he murmured, dipping his head to hers. Then his mouth touched her lips and she sighed against him. The faint traces of her anxiety all but disappeared as she leaned into him. The layers of her kimono separated them, frustrating his desire to touch her, taste her, feel all of her against him. He knew he should move slowly. Despite their more frequent nights tangled together since the battle of Inawashiro, Kagome was still not fully prepared for the untampered lust of an inudaiyoukai. They had days ahead of them, he knew he should pace himself. Coax her, tease her, prime her for his need which had been growing since he claimed her in front of his pack. Her tongue darted out to lick at his lips, and for a moment Sesshomaru forgot his resolve. He crushed her to him, bending over her and delving into her mouth. He tasted her deeply and even as it satisfied one urge it spurred another, more primal, more insistent craving.

“Sesshomaru,” she moaned his name as he allowed her a moment to breathe. He did not bother with air for himself, but seamlessly moved his mouth to her jaw, down to her neck, to the joint with her shoulder, just under her clothing. The taste of her was exquisite, the feel of her smooth, cool skin a taunt to his most instinctual drive. His fangs felt large in his mouth. Saliva pooled in his cheeks even as blood

pooled in his core. Youki surged from his hand to hers, from the palm that had cupped her bottom to slide under her skin and into the core of her. She was delicious, outside and in, and each press of flesh and shared inhalation and intimate sweep of power drove his hunger higher.

“Sesshomaru!” Her hands fluttered at his shoulders, skimmed down his back as far as she could reach and up into his hair, wandering and seeking. Even through the heavy layers of formal clothing, he could pick out the rising salty musk of her need. His cock hardened painfully in response and he had to rip himself away from her before his desire overcame him. Her eyes fluttered open in confusion, still clouded with want.

“Come,” he said, tugging lightly on her hand. Kagome’s blue irises darkened, the centers growing as he uttered that simple word. He had not intended any meaning beyond her following him, but he had to swallow a groan at her reaction. *Soon*, he promised himself. *Often*. “Let me assist you,” he repeated roughly. She followed him on stumbling feet to the kimono stand. He removed her clothing carefully, reverently, taking the time to breathe her in and center himself as he went through practiced and functional motions. Each successive layer revealed more of her figure, more of her scent. She was trembling when he finally knelt before her to remove her socks. Only a short, translucent yukata remained between her skin and his. He found his face only inches from her as he took her ankle carefully into his hands and stripped first one foot, then the other. She had braced her hands on him – one against his shoulder, the other resting lightly on his hair. He wanted her to know, without any doubt, the depth of his feeling for her. To know what she was to him.

“I have waited for you, Kagome,” he said quietly, pressing a kiss to the thin skin just under her ankle. She sucked in air and her nails scraped against his scalp. The words were for her, but his actions were almost entirely for his own selfish pleasure. He ran his nose along the curve of her calf, rubbing his scent against her, until he reached her knee. Gently, he pulled her leg to the side, his grip firm but careful. The movement released a burst of salt and musk, and he rested his forehead against her leg for a moment, re-centering himself. His lips found the soft skin behind her knee and he kissed her there, then nipped lightly, drawing a shocked, short giggle from his mate. The sound was pleasant, the smell of her happiness and excitement stirring and gratifying at the same time.

“Seven centuries,” he continued, his voice deeper. His tongue wrote hidden messages across her inner thigh, the wet trails drawing a shiver from her. When he reached the hem of her yukata, he stopped, only to press his open mouth where fine silk ended just inches past the juncture of her legs. The scent of her was overwhelming him. Lush, thick spice and citrus flooded his nose and swirled into his lungs. The flavor of her desire coated his tongue and urged him to find more – not just her emotions but the taste of her body as well. “I did not know that I was missing you, until I found you.”

A drop of liquid, the thin honey of her need, slid down her skin. He followed its progress with his nose and ears, unavoidable to imagine the sight as the intimate whisper of her readiness called to him. He was waiting at the hem of her garment, and caught it on his tongue as soon as it appeared. Salt and musk, the faint iron of her blood, the sweet fullness of her flavor exploded in his mouth. A rumble of pleasure passed from him to her leg, and her fingers tightened in his hair.

“Sess-sesshomaru,” she gasped. Where the first drop had forged a path, others followed, a river of Kagome’s lust made for him alone. He growled and glanced up at her. Red lips, wet from her tongue and still stained with balm. Eyes blown wide and dark, outlined with kohl. Cheeks flushed pink, the color bleeding down her neck and onto her chest. For him. Because of him. He hooked her knee over his shoulder, freeing his hands to reach for the tie to her garment.

“I will wait no longer,” he promised her, promised himself, as the loose belt fell away and silk parted over skin. One half of her remained immodestly concealed behind the transparent fabric – caught on her upraised thigh and the rigid peak of her breast. The other he pushed aside, smoothing across her belly and around her waist, forcing the cloth to slip off her shoulder. The gleam of lantern light on her flesh was mesmerizing, the shadow below one full globe intriguing. His claws brushed against the heavy weight of her breast, seeking and finding the eager pink nipple that she thrust into his hand. “No longer,” he repeated, holding her gaze even as his tongue moved back to her skin, seeking her desire. “You are mine,” he vowed.

“Yes,” she whispered, “yours and you-oh!”

He found the crease between her leg and the most intimate part of her and pressed his cheek against her body. She bucked, involuntarily, grinding her mound against him. The brush of soft hair on his skin and the fresh burst of her scent drove him to the brink. The hand on her breast tightened reflexively, drawing another gasp from her, while his other fingers slid from her leg, down and around to find the cleft of her body. With careful claws he parted her, running the smooth backs of his deadly nails along her moist folds. When he reached her opening, he nearly slipped in the wealth of heat and liquid she made for him. A rumble of satisfaction started in his chest; he did not deny himself. Sesshomaru turned his mouth toward her, cupping her bottom and tilting her hips to give him full access to all she offered. The first long, slow lick against her was torture. The second heaven. By the third she was panting his name. He delved inside her, lapping up her juices and satisfying his own thirst. It was the work of only a moment to clip the claws of his first two fingers. He used them to replace his tongue and free his mouth to seek out the tender, swollen berry just above her entrance. Sesshomaru pulled it into his mouth to the sound of her indrawn breath. He pumped his fingers gently to the grasping of her hand on his shoulder. He sucked and swirled and she cried out. His control was slipping, his body hard and tense, but he demanded her pleasure first. He pinched her nipple and thrust with more force inside her. She went rigid. He flicked his tongue and curled his fingers and she flew apart.

“Sess-” He had to move quickly to catch her as her knees gave out, but mokomoko curled against her back and eased her to the floor. Her chest was heaving, her eyes struggling to open. Sesshomaru’s blood was pounding, his very nature demanding he find completion inside her. Still, he held himself back, taking in her flushed skin and the lips she had abused with her own teeth. He loved her. There was nothing else that could compare, that could wholly ensnare him, that could crush his heart from the inside out with the fullness it had for her. Her breathing slowed and her eyes fully opened, a soft smile curling her mouth. “My turn,” she murmured. Sesshomaru growled.

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Kagome undressed her daiyoukai as slowly as she dared, draping his clothes carefully over the kimono stand. She caressed and kissed every inch of skin as it was revealed and basked in the sounds he made as she did so. She would have taken him in her mouth – was eager to taste him again, to make him lose control with her – but he halted her actions with a snarling string of inu and carried her into the bath.

It had been prepared before they left the ceremony, and although Kagome loved hot water more than almost anything, she was frustrated by his denial of her. Until he seated himself, helpfully offering her a dish to rinse him with. She could not help but grin. Happiness and laughter pushed up alongside the love and lust to burst out into a chuckle. “Enjoyed that the first time, did you?”

“Hn.” His response made her laugh again, but then he pushed her down to her knees, between his spread legs, and the humor faded quickly. He was magnificent. Beautiful. Perfect. The long, lean muscles of his legs flexed as she poured water over him. The markings at his hips and collarbones grew darker and jagged as his breath became uneven. She washed him thoroughly – everywhere but his hair – and stirred herself up just as much as him. Kagome saved what she wanted most for last. Warm water first, that made him bare his teeth. His cock twitched under the onslaught. Her mouth watered. She soaped her hands, leaving the bar on the floor and cupping him. Suds made her hands slippery, and she watched, fascinated just as she had been the first time, as he slid between her palms. The soft, white hair at the base of him was short and framed skin tight, full, and heavy for her. Kagome kept one hand on him while she rinsed away the soap. She felt powerful and feminine, secure in the knowledge that his body was waiting for her. Ready for her. Her fingers slid around the silky skin of his shaft; the hard heat of him nearly burning her. Her thumb and second finger could not quite meet, and so she twisted slowly as she stroked toward the head.

“I am yours, Sesshomaru,” she said, determined to finish what she had started to say before he had buried his face against her. Her gaze flicked up to meet his, and found the gold dark and narrow behind lowered lids. His jaw was hard, the muscles flexing, straining against the restrictions he had placed on himself. Fangs, sharp and white and deadly, hung over his lip, pricking the flesh. He looked like a demon on the edge. *I can do better*, she thought wickedly. Her hand reached the end of him, and she smoothed her thumb over the head of his cock, dragging the pad through his precum. “And you, Sesshomaru,” she whispered, leaning close and holding eye contact. She began the journey back to his base, twisting again as she pulled the foreskin back. He bared his teeth and sucked in a breath as cool air hit his sensitive flesh. Firmly, she squeezed his balls, rolling a little as she leaned forward to let her words brush across his cock. “You are mine.” He growled, and his hands left the abused wooden shelf behind him in an attempt to seize her, but Kagome had seen it coming. Her lips were already open and over him, her tongue dancing across the hole, catching up salty liquid, before he could touch her.

“Ka-go-me,” he ground out. That was the last word he spoke that she understood. The rest was growls and rumbles, purrs and moans. His reaction was enough for her, and she would not have made sense of anything he wanted to say if he had spoken plainly. She was far too entranced by the taste and feel of him, by the convulsive clench of his muscles when she swirled her tongue just right. The ripple of his abdomen when she tugged lightly on his sac. The prickle of claws thrust into her hair as she found the hypersensitive tendon on the back of his swollen head and stroked. She ignored the first ache of her jaw because his hand tightened painfully against her scalp, causing pins to fly out and ping against the floor. She moved her hands in tandem with the *swirl-swirl-stroke-suck* of her mouth and it was only moments before he came with a shout and an explosion of youki that exhilarated her. She caught the first mouthful, but had to let him go to swallow. The rest landed on her chest, but Kagome kept ahold of her prize even as he finished. She watched him, a sense of pride and possessive ownership overcoming her, as his eyes slowly opened again. A drop of blood on his mouth, from where his own fang had punctured a lip, welled up and rolled down his chin to drip onto his sternum.

“As I was saying,” she smirked, “all mine.”

“Hn,” he leaned forward suddenly, tipping her head back with the fingers still tangled in her hair and wrapping his other arm around her back to pull her out of her seiza and up to meet his face. Mokomoko twined around her legs, the tickling slide of silky fur a deliciously sinful thing. “I intended to take you first,” he stated and she felt a surge of arrogance that she had ruined his plans so easily, “your antipodal behavior-”

“Antipodal?” She could not help but repeat him, slightly affronted and more than a little amused. She saw it coming in the quirk of his brow even before he spoke.

“It means-”

“I know what it means, Sesshomaru.” She rolled her eyes. It was strange, and becoming familiar, to feel irritation even while she was aching for his touch. “I am not obstin-”

He nipped at her mouth, cutting her words off. “Do not interrupt your alpha.” She would have retorted, but the sparkle of humor in his eyes combined with the quirk of his lips and the stroke of soft fur on her thigh to shut her up. “Your contrary nature is beneficial, this time. I now have the control to make you cry out my name until your voice is no more.” He pressed closer, his lips brushing hers as he spoke and Kagome could feel the increasing hardness of his length against her belly and the rush of moisture between her legs. “Then, my miko, only then I will fill you.” Her lips fell open, her eyes wide but unable to focus on him – so close they were together. Her heart was beating fast, and although she could still taste a faint trace of him on her tongue, still felt the excruciatingly wonderful ache of her own flesh, she wanted him. Now. “Are you ready, Kagome?” She nodded, *screw dignity*, and he kissed her. She was breathless and eager for more when he stood, bringing her with him. “Not yet,” he whispered.

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He washed her. Coated her body with soap that cleansed her scent of everything but *her*, and then covered her skin with his hands and his mouth to drench her in his musk. Carefully he wet a cloth and wiped the smudged traces of cosmetics from her face. He untangled her hair and gently scrubbed it with the last of her concoction from the future. Grooming her was as satisfying as it was stimulating. Caring for his mate even as he pushed her need. Readied her for him.

She was begging by the time he was done and his own body was demanding a second release. He took his time, however, carrying her to their futon and kissing her again. Mapping her mouth and the sharp angle of her collarbone. Tracing the slope of her breast and the curve of her waist. Tasting the hollow at the back of her knee and the ticklish spot in the arch of her foot. He was drowning in the sensation of her when he finally pressed her legs apart. She immediately hooked her free foot behind him, digging into his backside with her heel and demanding his compliance with action and fiery looks. He denied her, continuing to sample her ankle with his lips before allowing it to rest on his shoulder. Her eyes widened, and he knew she was surprised at the position. She was open before him as she had never been before. He sat back on his heels, letting his eyes rove what belonged to him, just as she had done with what was hers.

“Beautiful,” he growled. And she was. Glowing with passion and misted from exertion. The salt of her light sweat made him thirst. Her lips as red and swollen from his attention as the peaks of her breasts. The pale skin across her belly jumped under his claws as he caressed her. He splayed the fingers of one hand around her hip to press into the generous swell of her bottom, repositioning her slightly and tilting her up for him. With the other he gripped her thigh, pulling her leg away from his hip to part her further. The neat, dark triangle of hair beckoned him, dripping with moisture and unable to hide the responsive little morsel of flesh engorged from his attention or the parted lips, flushed with blood and waiting for penetration. Youki surged under his skin, escaping his control and flooding the room with a green light that washed across her features and caught in the liquid that dripped from her opening. Her power responded, the ocean breeze of reiki blowing back his hair and cooling his overheated skin.

“You too,” she gasped, as their energy continued to grow and build. Her hands fisted in the bedclothes, her hair splayed in damp tendrils across his fur. Holy power skated across his skin, caressing, sliding into him and urging him forward – into her. The first press of his skin against hers was exquisite anguish. Wet, warm sex slipping across his burning head and coating him in her honey. “Ah-oh!” She cried out, attempting to lift her hips up to him. He forcefully held her in place. Waiting. Open. Hungry.

“Look at me, Kagome.” Her eyes had fallen closed but snapped open at his rough words. He wasn’t sure if he was speaking, or commanding in his own language, but she understood, her passion-darkened gaze meeting his. He sank into her, clenching his jaw against the almost undeniable urge to thrust hard, to take her in one motion and bury himself in her softness. With each inch, her body embraced him, pulling him deeper and adjusting around his intrusion. The noises she made – tiny mewls of need, moans of pleasure, sharp inhalations of want – they seized his control and shook him to his very core. When at last he was seated to the hilt, he broke from her gaze to glance down at her body where it parted for him. He could feel sweat on the back of his neck – tension from the effort to hold himself still in her, to make the moment last as long as possible. To make the act one not only of claiming and passion, but of commitment and love. He rocked his hips, twisting slightly, and watched with approval as the muscles of her stomach and thighs clenched and she cried out his name.

He turned his face back, only to find her eyes closed again as she panted with need. “Look at me,” he demanded. He waited until he had her attention to speak again, “I love you, Kagome.” Her scent blossomed around him, making him heady with the sweet spice that thickened the air. Her eyes widened, and then inexplicably filled with tears. He froze, uncertain for a moment if he had miscalculated. He had wanted her to know, to hear him say what was in his heart. He had needed to say it plainly for her. Tears were not expected.

“I love you, too,” she rasped. “Sessho-maru,” her voice broke on his name, but the smell of camphor sadness was absent. She smiled, tremulous and beaming with joy. “So much, Sesshomaru. You don’t have to say it. I just, I mean, I-”

“Cease speaking,” he grumbled, pleased and relieved that he had taken the correct course of action. The human that had changed his mind, thawed his heart, cradled his body, was still attempting to have a conversation, her lips moving but the words stilted and unintelligible around broad smiles and sniffs. Sesshomaru was mildly insulted that her attention could be diverted so long as he was inside her. He withdrew, slowly, and thrust back in with more force - bringing an end to any words that were not ‘yes’, ‘please’, ‘more’, and his name. It was not long – too long, not long enough – before he felt pressure building at the base of his spine. Youki and reiki swirled in the room pressing against each other and seeping under their skins.

“Please, please, please,” she whispered, the column of her throat arching up as she tried to urge him faster, harder. Sesshomaru reached between their bodies, finding the bundle of sensation that would take her over the edge. As he withdrew, he dipped his fingers in their combined moisture and then circled the nub of flesh, drawing a soundless scream from his mate. He thrust back in, once, twice, gritting his teeth against the luscious grip of her, and pressed down –pinching her lightly. She screamed in earnest then, her back flying off of the bedding and her breasts thrust toward him. He caught one in his mouth, sucking and nipping as she shuddered through her climax. His need continued to build, his energy flooding the room as he feasted on her flesh. He lay her back down, pressing one of her knees flat to the ground and placing her own hand on top of it to hold it there. He removed her other leg from his shoulder, gripping her behind her thigh and forcing her as open as possible.

Her body was young and strong, prepared by all they had done together in the last month and she accommodated him as he found a new angle, a new depth. She gasped, then moaned, each of his thrusts bringing them both closer to a shared end. He slid his free hand under her shoulders, gripping her and holding her tight to meet him as he increased his force. He caressed her cheek with his own, leaning down to speak into her ear. *Mine. Mate. Yours.*

All of him was in the room with her, the massive beast that he was condensed to pure energy, and she matched it, called to him. Took him eagerly. Her power rose as well, surging in harmony with him, accepting him. The building tension in his spine reached a breaking point, his seed compressed and ready to burst. Sesshomaru took the juncture of her neck and shoulder between his teeth and bit – as gently as he could. The room around them exploded and all he could hear was his howl drowning out Kagome’s muffled scream. His nose knew only the scent of their bodies joined together. The sensation of her blunt teeth on his chest, the near-strangling grasp of her body milking him as he found release. His tongue tasted her skin and a drop of her blood. He could see only the white light of their power searing around them, surrounded by a halo of darkness as he collapsed against her.

Some time later, he became aware of the insistent tap of her fingers against her shoulder. She was speaking – again, but it was muffled even to his ears. Sesshomaru sighed against her hair, his languid contentment not disturbed in the least by the peppery irritation that floated over the thick layers of spent power and sex that clouded the room. He rolled her with him, keeping them joined as he was unwilling to leave her body even though he knew she should rest before they repeated the act. She pushed against him, struggling to sit up and managing only to press her elbow into his ribs and brush a wild tangle of hair out of her face.

“You’re too heavy,” she complained softly before relaxing against his chest.

“Hn,” he acknowledged her. In truth, he would never have allowed her to support his weight if he had not lost consciousness for a few moments. It was both disconcerting and a stroke to his ego that their mating – the full joining of their power – had such an effect on him. He assumed she had been equally overcome. Sesshomaru tucked one arm under his head and eyed her critically. Her eyes were heavy lidded and still glazed with pleasure. Her lips were dark and swollen, the hair around her face damp with sweat. Her neck was exposed, and the sight of the small puncture there, already beginning to heal from his saliva, was fulfilling like nothing he had known before. He could sense his youki in her, stemming from the places they had been joined, and circulating throughout her body. A part of him would always be with her. He found an equal measure of reiki in himself, and the caress of her power inside him stirred his blood. *Humans need rest*, he reminded himself. “I will not be so affected next time, so you will not be uncomfortable.”

His claws trailed down her spine to dance along the upper curve of her bottom. She shifted slightly, her muscles tightening around him and drawing a sharp breath of nearly painful pleasure from him. “You think so?” Her voice sounded amused, but her expression was forced into a contradictory frown. “I’ll have to really apply myself then. To make sure you are completely *affected*.” He let loose a rumble to reprimand her, even as he began to grow harder.

“If you are any more diligent, you may kill me.”

One of her hands held her chin, her elbow pressing sharply into his sternum. Her other hand trailed down his side, working under him to grip his thigh and pull up. He allowed the movement, and was surprised by the sudden shift of her weight, dropping her legs between his and pressing his swiftly

growing erection more deeply into her. “Mmm - Hn,” she moaned then agreed, a mischievous, sultry sparkle in her eyes, “Just to be safe, maybe I should be on top.”

Sesshomaru reflected, much, much later that night, that he had indeed chosen his mate well. She matched him in every capacity. Repeatedly.

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“Push, Sango,” Kagome smiled encouragingly at her friend. Kaede sat by Kagome’s side, her vast experience with delivering babies a relief for the younger miko. Kagome had received training in the future, and knew vastly more about techniques and potential illness, but it seemed unimportant once the screaming and cursing had started. Aina had come with her, to help occupy the children while they waited to meet their little cousin, and Sango had allowed the demon into the hut. Kagome was grateful for that too. Aina and Sango had become friends, and it was better that Sango turn her warrior’s grip on a demon hand than a human one.

“I. AM. Pushing.” Sango glared daggers at Kagome, but her expression of anger quickly melted into one of pained acceptance. Her grimace grew as the contraction took longer than any of the others, and ended with a short scream of defiance.

“Almost there, child,” Kaede murmured.

Sango panted. “Get out, already!” Her furious gaze was back, now directed at her belly. “I blame your father for this! Patience isn’t always a virtuuuue!”

“I can see the head!” Kagome was equally excited and fearful. Two more hard pushes and the baby was out. Kaede took over cleaning it while Kagome worked through another contraction with her friend.

“Why isn’t it over?!” Sango moaned. Sweat ran in rivulets down her temples, soaking her hair and yukata.

“We talked about this, Sango,” Kagome said, running her hand over the slayer’s belly to check for issues. “Twins mean twice as much pushing, but twice as much love.”

“Good,” Sango panted. “Because I am never having sex agaiiin!” Her wail was louder than even before, and a commotion outside the hut alerted Kagome that Miroku had probably heard his wife’s declaration.

In minutes, there was another tiny infant. Kaede began to clean that one, who screamed as soon as she took a deep breath. Kagome took over with the first child, a boy. He was quiet, and already blinking sleepily.

“Are they okay?” Sango’s exhaustion was pushed aside with the anxiety that had plagued her pregnancy – sure that she would miscarry, sure that she would die in childbirth, sure that the children would be born too weak to survive. Kaede encourage her through the last few necessary pushes to deal with the afterbirth while Kagome carefully listened to the heart and lungs, looked in the eyes, nose and mouth. Checked the ears and reflexes. Took his temperature.

“Perfect,” she whispered, smiling through the tears blurring her vision. She wrapped him in a thin cloth and turned back to the worried mother. “He’s perfect, Sango.” After putting the boy in his mother’s arms, she took the wailing girl from Kaede.

“Takes after her mother,” the older priestess murmured with a smirk. Kagome smiled back and performed the same check on the second baby. She had just as much thick, black hair as her brother – but apparently twice the lung capacity.

“Sh-shh,” she crooned, carrying her to Sango as well. Aina stepped out of the way, watching the proceedings with interest. Mother and babies were quickly settled with bedding to support them, and Kagome bent down to kiss her friend’s sweaty forehead. “They are both beautiful, Sango-shimai.” Sango was crying too, and both women laughed with tired joy. The miko washed her hands and face before stepping outside to meet those who were waiting.

“Is she okay?” Miroku’s face was strained with tension, and pale with fear. His hair had come completely free of his ponytail – no doubt from running his hands through it many times. In the early morning light, Kagome could just make out the figure of Inuyasha in a nearby tree. She guessed he had been trying to save his ears and nose from the situation in the hut while still looking out for Shippo and Rin. Emi had stayed in the West with Kimi.

“She’s fine,” Kagome assured him. “Sango and both babies are doing well, you can go on in.” Miroku was already through the doorway before she could finish speaking, and Kagome watched after him with a laugh. Aina took her arm, and she leaned on the kitsune as they walked towards the one room hut that Miroku had built just for their visits.

“Are all human females so...aggressive during childbirth?”

Kagome laughed at the kitsune’s question. “I suppose that depends on the woman.”

“Damn, Kagome,” Inuyasha dropped down beside him as they neared his tree, the ever-present staff that helped him keep balance on one leg clutched in his hand. His face was pale, whether from fear for his friend or the previous hour of piercing screams, Kagome wasn’t sure. “Why would anyone want to do that? Miroku better get used to being slapped again. I doubt Sango is going to let him get close for years.”

“The best rewards often come from the greatest labors,” Aina said quietly. Kagome could hear the sadness in her voice, and her heart clenched for the kitsune. It had been a difficult few months for the demoness since the war had ended. Although she had taken Ryukostokken’s potion willingly, she had chosen the target for the spell out of real feelings. Anything that might have once blossomed between the irascible captain and the vivacious fox had come to a complete stall. Aina was feeling unsure of her actions while under the magical influence, and Hisao stank of guilt and remorse whenever they were in the same room. Kagome had never asked what had happened before the potion wore off, she figured one of them would tell her if they wanted advice, but it was clear that Aina was rather hopelessly infatuated with the inu warrior. If he would ever be able to return her feelings was another matter entirely.

“It is easy to forget something like that, I guess,” Kagome said to draw attention away from Aina’s sad frown. “Scientifically speaking, a woman’s body produces all sorts of chemicals after birth that kind of help her to focus on the miracle of the baby and forget the pain. Besides,” she elbowed Inuyasha in the

ribs to get his attention, “making them can be pretty fun.” Her teasing had the desired effect, and he leaped back into the trees, blushing and muttering until he was out of earshot.

Kagome laughed. It was more obvious, in just the last few months, how much younger, both emotionally and mentally, Inuyasha was than her. He had matured, certainly. Sesshomaru had told her that Inuyasha was considered an adult, after his transformation and the new balance and control he had over his youki. Still, it was a bit like teasing her brother Souta. That brought a little bit of wistfulness to her thoughts, and her steps slowed as they approached the hut. Eiji and Eiichi stood sentinel outside the door. Eiichi’s face still bore an angry scar along the hairline from a poisoned dragon blade. Despite Kagome’s almost immediate application of reiki, it hadn’t completely healed.

“Will you wake the children now?” Aina asked softly.

“No,” she decided, “let them sleep. Sango needs a rest too, and the babies, before two excited kids rush in there.”

“Go,” the kitsune instructed, “you should also sleep. I will keep watch.”

Kagome nodded, hiding a yawn behind her hand, “Thanks. Let me know when Sesshomaru arrives. He thought he would be able to get away from the Council sometime this morning.”

“Of course. I will notify the guards as well.” Aina grinned, her smile resembling the bright, mischievous smirk from before the war. “Those rock demons will be grateful to know that the screaming is finished.” Kagome nodded and entered the hut quietly, finding her futon by touch so as not to wake Shippo and Rin. As she relaxed her aching muscles, she ran one hand over her own belly, smiling up at the ceiling.

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Aki was clearly distressed, and Kagome was quickly beginning to realize why. Sesshomaru and Kimi had both explained to her, in turns exciting and mortifying, that inu usually had twins just as often as either triplets or single babies. Spider demons, apparently, were more likely to have three or four at a time than one or two. She cast about for something encouraging to say.

“It is more than we ever could have hoped for,” Kento beat her to it, laying one hand over Aki’s where she was rubbing her stomach. “Thank you, Kagome-sama.” He bowed and Kagome removed the stethoscope from her ears. A single heart beat strongly in Aki’s distended belly. There was not much else the miko could tell about the pregnancy without modern equipment, but the child – *pup, hatchling*, she reminded herself – was growing as expected, according to the few youkai medical scrolls she found on reproduction. As long as the heart sounded good and Aki was feeling well, there was no reason to think the pregnancy would be anything but a success.

Aki blushed, “I am ashamed of myself, Lady Kagome. Of course I am grateful for all that you have done for us. Thank you, so much. Thank you.”

“I am happy to do anything I can for you. For both of you.” Kagome smiled at the couple, but they were already lost in each other and something she couldn’t sense. Perhaps they were listening to the baby’s heartbeat, without the need for a stethoscope like the human priestess. Feeling as though she

might be interrupting something, Kagome cleared her throat, “I would like to check its youki, if that is alright?”

“Yes, please do,” Aki’s attention snapped back to Kagome. Her worry was clearly in evidence once again.

Gently, slowly, as softly as possible, Kagome placed her hands an inch above the exposed skin of Aki’s stomach. A small smile twitched at her mouth, wondering what Kento would have done if he had to solicit an examination from one of the youkai healers that worked in the palace. They were all male – a terrible combination with a disrobed, pregnant mate and a protective inu father-to-be. She closed her eyes, and imagined the pink glow of her power, hovering over Aki’s skin, waiting for permission. Her dark blue youki surged to the surface protectively, then calmed when Kagome did nothing. The spider demoness must have held herself back, or her power recognized the miko that had healed her, as she relented, thinning the barrier that surrounded the unborn life.

Kagome was nervous. She had helped Sango through pregnancy and checked on her twins in a similar way, but human children did not have the instincts and energy of young youkai. A thin ribbon of reiki, as soft as Kagome could make it, reached towards the fetus. For a moment, nothing happened, and Kagome held her breath, waiting. Then, like a fern uncurling towards the sun, lavender light bloomed open, inviting the miko to know the little creature still growing. Distantly, Kagome was aware of Aki’s startled noise, but she was too entranced with what she learned to pay attention. The baby would be ready soon, on the fourth day after the new moon, or perhaps the day after. It was still sleepy from a long nap, but was starting to feel hungry. Its lungs were strong and its silks produced a mild anesthesia.

Kagome blinked, jarred by the sudden brightness in Aki’s home and the tingling withdrawal of the baby’s youki. Aki was biting her lip, her face already preparing for the worst. Kento was absolutely still. “It’s a girl,” Kagome blurted out. The expecting parents sagged with relief, and Kagome smiled, telling them the approximate due date. “And you might want to prepare for her webbing, I believe it will cause drowsiness in lesser youkai or humans.”

“Oh,” Aki gasped, excited, “I had an aunt with that ability!”

Not too long afterward, Kagome left Kento and his mate still murmuring together, heads bent, discussing names and covering their child with their own youki protectively. Kimi was waiting for her outside.

“All is well?” One fine white eyebrow lifted in question. Kagome slipped her arm through her mother-in-law’s and they began a measured stroll through the village, nodding as demons bowed to them in greeting. Eiji and Eiichi fell into step behind them, ever watchful. Kagome found their guard a bit unnecessary, given her own defensive capabilities and growing skill with the bo staff – which she utilized as a walking stick most of the time. And then there was Kimi. Any attack would be highly inadvisable. And suicidal.

“Yes, although-” Kagome paused, unsure what she should share. She felt like she was Aki’s doctor, despite not having a license, or even a quarter of the necessary schooling, and that would necessitate privacy. But the feudal era was different, both in rules regarding the confidentiality of healers and the rights of the dowager Western Lady. *Aki and Kento should also get to reveal the sex, if they want to*, she thought. “I am eager for Hirimoto’s physician to return. I need to learn a lot more about youkai mating and reproduction if we are going to make progress on a large scale.”

“This One,” Kimi reminded absently.

“This One,” Kagome repeated with a sigh. She still wasn’t used to the formal language, doubted she ever would be, but she tried to remember when they were out in public or in front of the Council. “This Kagome needs a teacher. Badly.”

“Yes, This Kimi may have a solution to that, if the Saidai Mao can be persuaded.” Her eyes twinkled mischievously. Kagome wasn’t sure whether to laugh or groan. She was sure that in Kimi’s mind, persuading Sesshomaru would be up to his mate. “The healer who was in the castle for the last royal birth is still present, if insults can be borne, his knowledge would be most enlightening.”

Kagome did groan then, and stopped to look through some sweets being offered at a nearby stall. She did not believe there was anything she could say to convince Sesshomaru to let her question the disgraced Gekien about his skills and experience. The youkai had been let out of the dungeon, but was only allowed to work in the infirmary under guard. There was also the matter of his hand, and how Sesshomaru had melted it for Gekien’s attempt to strike her. It would be nice, however, to get started on her youkai medical education while she waited for the one year mourning period to finish in the South. There was only six months left. How bad could six months be with an instructor who thought she was the downfall of Sesshomaru, the West, and all youkai?

“I’ll – This One,” she corrected herself, “will think about it.”

“Hn.” Kimi nodded, and she spent the rest of the walk to the castle greeting youkai and a few humans that had taken up residence after the war, admiring goods, and even purchasing a few small items – which Kagome had to argue and cajole for as everyone wanted to simply gift things to the new Western Lady. They made their way to Kimi’s private garden for tea and a few more minutes of peace until Aina would bring the children in from their lessons.

“Hirimoto will send his physician soon. Have you given more thought to Sesshomaru’s suggestion for a school?”

“Some,” Kagome admitted. “I’m just not sure I am ready to teach other miko or healers how to deal with this infertility thing until I have a good handle on it myself.”

“One of the four females you have seen since we returned to the West is already pregnant, and from what the servants say about the mate’s stamina, another will be soon.” Kimi did not draw attention to Kagome’s blush, so the miko ignored it.

“It would help if Sesshomaru didn’t make such a big deal out of me examining the males. I’m certain we could have a better rate of success if only-”

“That is not a battle I would recommend, Kagome,” Kimi chuckled. “An inu male is possessive of his mate. As Hirimoto’s physician will be able to address the male half of these issues, there is no need for you to prod the dog where he is already sensitive.” Kagome nodded, understanding the wisdom of not starting arguments that weren’t necessary, but still chafing at the restrictions of youkai and feudal society. At least one would grow less conservative, she knew.

Kimi poured the tea, one sky blue sleeve held back with a slender hand. “Aina cares quite deeply for Nankae,” she noted, changing topics.

“Yeah,” Kagome sighed. “She must love him, or she wouldn’t look after him like she does. It is obviously painful for her to be around Hisao. I wish there was something I could do for them. I feel like I owe it to her.”

“Tsk, always trying to help where you are not needed.” Kimi lessened the admonishment with a smile and offered Kagome a cup of tea. “Let time work. There is little that cannot be mended in a century or two.”

“Century!” Kagome bit her bottom lip. “If they have to wait that long, Nankae will grow up an only child!”

“And what of young Shippo and my grandpup? Do they not need younger siblings?”

Kagome’s face burned under golden scrutiny. It was both teasing, and serious, and the miko was conscious of the weight of expectation on her shoulders. Or rather, her womb. Women, even in modern Japan, were expected to have children. Only one or two, in contrast to the multitudes demanded of feudal women, but the expectation was still there. Even a successful career did not always stop the guilt, even if it was self-inflicted, for not having children. As the mate of the Saidai Mao, the pressure was exponentially increased. She was supposed to further the line, create heirs for the West. It didn’t help her anxiety that she also knew how badly Sesshomaru wanted children. He had not spoken of it since the day, so long ago it seemed, that he had found her birth control, but she knew he was eager for it. Her prescription had run out three months ago, and since then he had taken to practically secluding her in their rooms when she was ovulating. Not that she was complaining. That would be hard to do after being satisfied into exhaustion.

It was the sniffing that was bothering her. Two to three days of marathon sex was followed by a week of running his nose across her neck and his hand over her belly as soon as he woke up. He didn’t say, but she knew he was looking for traces of pregnancy. Under normal circumstances, *what the hell is normal for a time-travelling miko*, Kagome wouldn’t have minded waiting to have a baby, but neither did she dislike the idea of it happening right away. What she did mind, was the growing stress of not having begun the royal family that everyone was eagerly awaiting. The growth of Sesshomaru’s pack would be taken as a sign that the West, and all youkai and humans allied with Sesshomaru, were blessed with prosperity. More importantly to Kagome, it was also a sign that maybe she had changed the future. If she could have a baby – a hanyou baby – then there would be one more youkai that she knew would make it to her time.

“I thought, last month, when I went to help Sango, but...it wasn’t...” Kagome’s voice drifted off, and she could feel her shoulders tensing. She had already tried to examine herself, just to see if there might be something that was making her infertile, with mixed results. It was harder to use her reiki to check her own body than she had thought it might be. She hadn’t even bothered suggesting to Sesshomaru that Hirimoto’s physician should examine her, or, *holy hell*, that *he* might have an issue. She would wait a few years in the hope that blow to his ego never had to come. He would sulk for days.

“Time, my daughter, give it time.” Kimi sipped her tea and Kagome tried to let the steam ease her own burdens. If Kimi wasn’t pressuring her, she shouldn’t pressure herself. A thought occurred to her as she sipped, the sound of swiftly approaching children giving her the perfect opportunity for a passing shot.

“Perhaps, you could try instead. I believe there is at least one youkai that would be eager to help you further the House of the Crescent Moon.” She held her cup up to her lips to hide her grin, and watched with satisfaction as Kimi’s mouth opened, then closed. A tiny, faint pink flushed across her cheekbones. *Score: Kimi – too many to keep track; Kagome – one.* It was a satisfying point.

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Sesshomaru considered the slatted wooden outer door that covered the entrance to the guest quarters at the shrine. He had never been in such a position before. After nearly one hundred years of living with Kagome, three adopted children, two frightening and joyous pregnancies, this was the first time he had been barred from her bed. He lifted Chiasa higher on his back, her warm breath blowing against mokomoko, and glanced around the yard in puzzlement.

Much had changed at the shrine since Sango had followed Miroku in death. Their children and grandchildren had laid out pavers near the gate. A new, larger shrine building was under construction just above the steps that led down towards the village. A building had been built around the well, and a new fence separated the public shrine area from the collection of well-maintained huts and structures that made up the homes for the shrine family. The guest hut, where Kagome had sealed herself with their youngest pup, had been enlarged and improved as well. It was still tucked back against the forest, to give more privacy to visiting youkai, like himself. Inuyasha had given input on the design, to ensure that it would look as it did in the future. The soft sound of a breeze rustling through fabric alerted him to his brother’s approach. His gait was even, his leg having regenerated after only eighty-two years.

“What did you do?” The hanyou asked without ceremony.

“She did not tell you,” Sesshomaru responded coolly. In truth, he was eager to hear anything Kagome might have shared with her friend. It might shed some light on his situation. Chiasa mumbled in her sleep and Inuyasha reached out and smoothed his hand over her head. She calmed under her uncle’s touch.

“Keh,” Inuyasha snorted, “so you don’t know then.”

Sesshomaru hesitated for a moment, still feeling the long-harbored instinct to keep any lack of knowledge to himself rather than give an opponent an advantage. He was able to relax and overcome the reflex much easier after a few decades of working closely with his brother without either of them attacking the other. “Do you?” he finally asked.

“Nah.” The easy reply set Sesshomaru’s teeth on edge. If the hanyou had no information, then his presence was unnecessary. “But that’s pretty normal for me. I usually just apologize and let her yell a lot. She’ll forgive you once she gets it out of her system.”

“There has not been any yelling,” Sesshomaru noted. His gaze returned to the door, wondering idly if he sent his youki inside to check on her if she would finally speak to him. Three days previous, he had gone to their rooms after he finished working and discovered she had absconded with Emi and little Masahiko, leaving only a note saying she would return when he had fixed the situation. He had not been aware there was a *situation*. And he was most displeased to be separated from his mate and their pup who had not yet learned to crawl.

“Silent treatment?” Inuyasha raised his brows. “Man, that’s bad. What did you do?”

“Nothing I can conceive of.” The words surprised even the daiyoukai as they left his mouth. One of Sango’s granddaughters, carrying a toddler on one hip and a basket of weapons on the other, rolled her eyes as she walked past. When he caught her gaze, she gulped.

“S-sorry, Sesshomaru-sama.” She dipped her head into the best bow possible, given her burdens. Sesshomaru continued to stare, hoping his expression had not lost potency after so many years of smiling with Kagome. He also supposed that carrying a child who appeared only five years of age might also lessen his perceived ferocity. “Er,” the young woman said, “I heard that there might be an announcement soon. Regarding the new slayer school?” She gulped and threw a glance at Inuyasha.

“And?” The hanyou prompted. Ground had been cleared for construction on the far side of Edo, to complement the training grounds Inuyasha and Kouga had spent years arguing over and redesigning high in the mountains.

“And, uh, I guess I might have heard Aunt Kagome say something about you, and Shippo-san, and maybe a trip to, ah,” she paused and pronounced carefully, “yur-up?”

Inuyasha snorted and turned on Sesshomaru, waving the woman away. “You told her? Are you crazy?” The hanyou reached down to scratch at the still-sensitive skin of his new foot.

“We discussed the matter calmly. There was no problem,” Sesshomaru replied. *There is no problem*, he assured to himself. Kagome had long been encouraging him to establish some method of controlling violent youkai – in order to better conceal the existence of demons and ensure that they survived into the future. Although the treatments Kagome and her school of miko and healers offered had significantly increased the rate of births among demons, it was not a given matter that it would be enough. Reducing combat and promoting blending with human society was also necessary. The obvious recourse had been some sort of military unit. It was Inuyasha who had suggested a police force. He had explained the modern concept quite thoroughly. Kagome’s own books had alerted Sesshomaru to the potential dangers of the larger world, and how ignorance of it could become a threat. It was only natural that he determined to meet those threats.

Inuyasha would take Shippo with him on a world tour, meeting and arranging for diplomatic talks. Eventually, Sesshomaru would have to visit them as well, but by the time the two travelers returned, they would have amassed knowledge regarding the temperament and capabilities of demon and human societies around the world, and Sesshomaru would have secured domestic matters so that Kimi and Inuyasha could manage in his absence. Masahiko would be old enough that he and Chiasa could accompany Kagome and himself. It was all extremely reasonable.

“You decided to send her little boy on a secret mission to meet potentially dangerous demons and humans two oceans away – and you didn’t think she would have a problem?” Inuyasha’s incredulity made Sesshomaru’s fur stand on end. *It is a reasonable plan. Logical*, he told himself.

“Shippo is a two-tail and very near to adulthood. And you would not let any harm come to him,” Sesshomaru pointed out. He was swiftly realizing that he might not be able to calmly argue his way out of the matter. Inuyasha reached out and took his niece as the female began to make sounds indicating her nap was over.

“She just had a baby, Sesshomaru. Women are always a little weird after that, and Kagome’s a little weird even when she hasn’t recently given birth.” He hefted Sesshomaru’s daughter onto his shoulder where she grabbed a fistful of hair and snuggled her own furry ear against her uncle’s. “Get comfortable, idiot. You’re gonna be here a while.”

“She will see reason,” Sesshomaru stated, although he was aware that his voice had lost some of its customary confidence.

Inuyasha shook his head and began to walk away, “I don’t think there are enough flowers or chocolates in Japan for you to get out of this with your dignity. How the hell have you stayed mated so long?” Sesshomaru turned back to the closed door again, wondering the same thing, given the communication difficulties between himself and Kagome. He sighed, stepping backward to lean against the Goshinboku and slide to the ground. It seemed he would have to wait. At least it would give him time to think of a new strategy.

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“How do you feel?” Kagome reached out a hand to smooth over Rin’s obi, then snatched it back. One and a half centuries of life, and she still couldn’t manage a formal kimono. *Better to leave Aki’s work alone*, she thought with chagrin. Rin still only looked eighteen or nineteen, the age she had been when Sesshomaru first began to give her youki.

“Good. Fine. Great.” Rin swallowed, and her delicately kohl-lined eyes found Kagome’s. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

Kagome grinned and bit back a laugh, “The engagement ceremony is easy, you remember mine, and you are so much better at protocol now than I ever could be. And you look gorgeous.”

“Mama,” Rin asked in a small voice. Kagome reigned in her humor. Her daughter, her first daughter, needed her. “Do you think Makoto is a good choice?”

“I think you love him, and he loves you,” Kagome answered. Rin nodded, and seemed to lose a little of her anxiety. “And your father is so grateful that you gave up on Inuyasha that he barely flinched when you brought up a mating with the House of the Ebbing Wave. You could have told him you wanted to permanently live in the South, and he might have considered it.” Kagome offered Rin a wink and a smile, “Take advantage of his weakness here. Ask for the moon.” Rin grinned, and the moment became more boisterous as the screens slid open to admit the other females of their pack.

“No takesies-backsies,” Emi sing-songed, obviously having overheard part of the conversation. Her half-joking, half-serious tone made Rin and Kagome share a look and both women burst out laughing. After Rin had gotten over her childhood infatuation, it wasn’t too long before Emi had started to take an interest in males. One male in particular. The inu girl had grown a bit taller than Kagome, and her black hair and blue eyes made them appear blood-related. It was clear, however, that she had taken more after Kimi, personality-wise. “You promised me a party, so pay up, or face the wrath of the great and powerful Emi-sama!” *Yes, definitely melodramatic*, Kagome thought.

“I am certain that will not be an issue, pup,” Kimi added in. Her long white hair was beautifully styled in twin pigtails, each with a simple golden cuff ornament that emphasized the silky smoothness of the

daiyoukai's locks. Chiasa followed her grandmother in, looking decidedly less elegant.

"Chiasa!" Kagome said, horrified over the state of her daughter, "What on earth have you been doing?" A beautifully embroidered kimono had been reduced to a collection of unidentifiable stains and rips.

"Cousin Miro said that there was no way I could withstand a holy sutra, and Shippo-chan laughed, and I just know I can, mama – you know I did with your reiki! And-"

"Stop." Kagome pinched the bridge of her nose. A representative from the Higurashi shrine had come to give blessings to the intended couple, and had brought her small family. Her boy, Miro, might as well have been Miroku incarnate, as devious and wily as was. In the three days they had been at the castle, he had instigated a six-child strong raid on the sweets prepared for the ceremony, convinced an aged youkai that there was an evil spirit in his hut, and stolen a kiss from not one, not two, but three of the maids in the shiro. All that, from a boy of ten. *Definitely Miroku's spawn*, she thought with a wistful smile. "Did he force you to do this?" Kagome gestured at Chiasa's clothes.

"No, but-"

"Were you unaware that your kimono is a very expensive piece of art that took Aki-san weeks to create – in the pattern that you specifically requested?"

"No, but-"

"Were you unaware that today is your sister's day? And we are here to support her and help make it go smoothly. To show her how much we respect and love her."

"No, mama," Chiasa's voice had grown quiet, a sure sign that she was over her temper-induced argument. Her blue eyes fell to the floor. "Sorry, Rin."

"That's alright, Chiasa-chan," Rin said sweetly. She bent over to give her sister a hug, then stopped, realizing how the mud would affect her own garments. She settled for patting the pup's white hair. "I know how awful boys can be."

"Then why are you mating one? Egh!" Chiasa made a face, as only a pre-adolescent girl can, and everyone else laughed.

"Aki is on her way with a replacement kimono," Kimi said quietly to Kagome, who was already turning to the private bath off of her and Sesshomaru's room to heat water and clean up her daughter. Behind her, she could hear the young women continuing to talk.

"-ink was everywhere!" Rin said.

Emi chimed in, "Ooo, I remember that, Rin! Poor Sesshomaru-papa looked terrible! All covered in feathers!"

Chiasa's voice was filled with equal parts awe and terror, "How did Shippo *live*?"

Kimi nodded, and took another sip of her tea. *Really, youth is so easily distracted from important issues*, she thought. The treaty ending the war with the Russians had been signed, in Japan's favor of course, in no small part to her own negotiating skills. She had anticipated at least some congratulations from her only son. *Very well*, she admitted more than a little miffed, *not expected, but a nod of gratitude would have been nice*. Generally, Kagome would have made up for her mate's lack of expression by exuberantly cheering Kimi's success. Her return to the Western shiro was anything but celebratory. The dowager Western Lady felt put out.

"The future, that's, that's where I'm from," Kagome repeated.

Kimi struggled not to roll her eyes, then went ahead and gave in to the impulse. There was only Kagome, Sesshomaru, and herself present, no need to keep up formalities. "Yes, dear. I heard you the first time. I haven't grown so old that my ears no longer work."

"Oh! I didn't-" The miko began in apology.

Sesshomaru cut her off, "Please take this seriously, mother."

"Your mate," Kimi gestured with a languorous hand, "was born five hundred years before she arrived at the Western palace." Kimi named the date specifically. Kagome's eyes widened in shock, Sesshomaru's narrowed in suspicion. "You didn't honestly think I didn't already know?" Kimi raised one brow, and with it her spirits. Bating her son very nearly made up for the praise that she should have received. No matter how much he had relaxed, at least in private, in the almost four centuries since the plague war against Ryukostokken, he still responded poorly to insinuations that he didn't know something. It was terribly amusing.

She hadn't always known, but she would have been disappointed if Sesshomaru had expected her to leave a mystery as delicious as Kagome's origin alone. It had taken more than two centuries, but she had discovered the particulars of from where, and how, Kagome managed to arrive to save them all. The miko was the key to changing fate. Destiny. Time itself. When she discovered the truth, it was all rather anti-climactic. Obviously she bent time to her will. No individual without that kind of strength, that control over the flow of nature, could have succeeded in the tasks set before Kagome. *Really, she was a perfect complement to the power already in the House of the Crescent Moon.*

"Then, then you believe us?" Kagome asked cautiously.

"I have never know either you or Sesshomaru to be prone to lying, daughter." Kimi sighed, giving up on any chance that she would get the greeting she deserved. "Is there some event we must be aware of, something else we must avoid or change?" They had already changed the future as Kagome knew it, of that Kimi was certain. It was clear through the determined, almost desperate, way that the miko pursued her studies to assist youkai in bearing children that she was trying to fix what she believed to be a great wrong. Kimi had known, through her own record-keeping, that demons were dying out. It was the success of Kagome's methods, which she had passed on to many students, which allowed youkai to survive as long as they had. Although births had never returned to the numbers of Kimi's youth, almost any demon couple, with assistance, could have one or two offspring. Those that mated with humans had less difficulty – and hanyou seemed to need no assistance at all. While litters, clutches, and broods appeared to be a thing of the past, youkai were no longer in danger of fading out of existence.

Sesshomaru opened his mouth, but Kagome glared until he shut it. *Her story to tell, then*, Kimi thought smugly. “There will be another war,” she began.

“There always is,” Kimi agreed, pleased to see her interruption irritated Sesshomaru. His youki began snaking around the room with agitation.

“Two actually.” The miko took a deep breath, and the sweet and often innocent child that Kimi had come to love as her own fell away – revealing the strong leader that had been born of war and matured by centuries of responsibility. “I studied them as World Wars – wars to end all others, historians thought. You need to leave Japan, Kimi. You cannot stay in Nagasaki.”

Kimi adored her little castle on the island of Kyushu. It was the perfect place to get away when Hirimoto had been an idiot or Sesshomaru was riled about some little thing. Emi lived most of the year there with her, and the gardeners were just finishing a new space for her. “Do not worry about me, little one, I-”

“You will die,” Kagome said bluntly. Kimi was taken aback, not only by the rude language and interruption, but by the uncompromising knowing in Kagome’s blue gaze. “Your entire section of the city will be destroyed – completely leveled.” The miko talked about a weapon, about death and disease and injuries that sounded too gruesome to be real. *Humans will do this*, she thought, overwhelmed, *to each other*. It had not been so long ago that youkai had routinely committed even greater savagery, but never had they created technology to cause evil on such a scale. To end evil, Kagome said they claimed. *Americans*, Kimi thought sourly - and, she knew, a little unfairly, *never satisfied with the small. Always bigger, always more, always absolute*. Kagome said it was an event that could not be changed, that too much in Japan’s future – too many wonderful and unimaginable things – would come after the rebuilding. It would save millions of lives of American soldiers and Japanese civilians that would die if there was an invasion.

But tens of thousands *would* die.

“We – we should-” Kimi found herself at a loss for words. It was the first time since Toga had died that she was incapable of planning action.

“You will go, with Emi, to New York.” Kagome said decisively. “You’ll be safe from the camps there. Take up an Americanized name, throw money at charities. Make friends, Kimi.”

“Inuyasha will go with you. We’ll need strong ties with the American demons when this is over.” Sesshomaru added.

“My staff,” Kimi started, but Kagome overrode her concerns.

“They will stay in Nagasaki or go, as they see fit.” Even in her own shock, Kimi could hear Kagome’s heart. The steady beat that had been in time with her son’s for nearly four hundred years stuttered, paused, then beat hard. Kimi sucked in a breath. This woman before her was the Western Lady, the mate of the Saidai Mao and a leader of nations in her own right. She was taking responsibility for youkai and humans, for her country, for deaths that were horrific and necessary. Higurashi Kagome, of the House of the Shikon, the Miko no Mao, bore her responsibilities well even though her heart was bleeding for it. “We cannot save them all, Kimi. We can only prepare to build a new and better place, after this is done.”

After a long moment, Kimi sniffed. “Hn. I will expect you to make certain everything is cleaned up and construction begun before I return, Sesshomaru. I particularly love the view from my tea room.” It wasn’t just about her private palace, her son and daughter-in-law recognized that and so it did not need to be said. Kimi’s tea room looked out over the sizable city that had grown up around her castle as well as a bustling port. She promised to herself that she would not let the opportunity Kagome’s knowledge had provided her languish. She would plan to rebuild her adopted city, and make it a center of trade for Japan.

“Are you sure you can spare Inuyasha,” Kagome asked her mate quietly. “I know he never officially took the title, but Emperor Hirohito depends on him to act as the Eastern Lord. The government will need guidance, and a reminder that youkai are neither legends nor soldiers for their exploitation.”

“We will take up residence in Edo for a while. Rin, with Makoto’s assistance, is prepared to watch over the West in our absence.”

“How long will this exile last, Saidai Mao?” Kimi asked. Sesshomaru dourly named a year, and Kimi forced a smile. “Ah, then while I am gone, we shall make a wager.” She could see, from the relaxing of Kagome’s shoulders and the twitch at the corner of her mouth that the human was aware of what she would propose. “If I return without a date for Inuyasha’s Courting Ceremony, you will pay to have one of those,” she glanced at Kagome, who helpfully mouthed the words, “baseball teams started in Japan for me. The Americans may win this war, as you say, but I will see them defeated at their own game.”

To his credit, Sesshomaru did not flicker an eyelid at her pronouncement. “And if you are unsuccessful?” he asked dryly.

Kimi flicked her hair over one shoulder dismissively, “As if that were even a possibility.”

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The younger children had wide eyes and open mouths as they listened to Gramps tell the story of how the Saidai Mao and the Shikon Miko – Kagome was always the *Shikon* Miko in Gramps’ stories – saved Japan from the cowardly pox-demon. As usual, many of the more graphic details had been left out. When Miroku had first written down the tale, he had left out the particulars of Ryukostokken’s deeds, simply referring to him as a blackguard, villain, and evil demon.

Specifics beyond that were better left to the youkai court records. And so Miroku’s children had passed the information down through the generations, with some minor embellishments. It was that scroll, when Miroku presented it to her the year after the war, which had made her realize that Miroku and Sango were the first Higurashis. It was the same scroll that her Grandfather kept carefully locked up in a glass box in his office. The scroll that had been handed down through generations of *her* family.

The revelation was so *right*. Kagome had always felt a particular kinship with Sango, and had not thought twice about agreeing that they should build their house near the well. Miroku’s decision to train new monks and priestesses at a school of the Shikon made sense too – as she had always known that her family’s shrine was so large because it had been a school before the second world war. Inuyasha, as usual, had nearly ruined it. When she told him about the connection, he had laughed, and

promptly reminded her about all of the times great-great-great-etc.-grandfather Miroku had pinched her bottom. It wasn't anything like being her own grandpa, but she still tried not to think about it.

The anniversary of the end of the plague war was a tradition that those close friends who had fought together always celebrated when world events allowed. Since Kagome had caught up with her own time, the shrine closed to the public on that day and instead had hosted dozens of youkai, hanyou, and humans.

"And then, the spy looked at the evil pox demon with cold eyes and said, 'I am no traitor to the North...'" Gramps paused dramatically, and Kagome nearly rolled her eyes at his theatrics, "...Father."

"No way!"

"Holy cow!"

"I knew it the whole time." That was said scoffing from Inuyasha's son. His arms crossed over his chest and his eyes half-closed, feigning disinterest. He had declared that story time was for babies, but still managed to sit close enough to listen in. His little white ears twitched in his hair as Gramps wrapped up the tale, ending with the extremely fanciful mating ceremony of the Shikon Miko and the Saidai Mao. Kagome noted with amusement that this year the embellishments included an ever-blooming tree which dropped petals on the couple and shining golden crowns placed on their heads. She was pretty sure the old man had been watching Disney movies again. There were also several not-too-subtle hints that the bride was devastated that her family was not present, particularly her beloved, wise, extremely good-looking grandfather.

"But what happened to the foul-mouthed hanyou?" Asked Kazue, his shimmering, iridescent eyes reminding Kagome of his grandmother, Aki. "Did his leg really grow back? Can a hanyou really change forms?" Kagome leaned forward from her place on the bench under Goshinboku, ready to soothe any troubled feelings. Aki, her daughter, and human son-in-law were at fashion week and wouldn't be back until the next day, and Kagome knew how sensitive little Kazue was about his heritage.

"Foul-mouthed!" The outraged interruption turned all eyes to the shrine gate. Standing in dark slacks and a white shirt, his jacket thrown over one shoulder, was Inuyasha. His youki was carefully controlled, concealing his ears and claws. "I thought I told you last year to change that, old man!" Gramps smirked, but was saved from the hanyou's ire by several high-pitched cries of, "Inuyasha-sama!", "Uncle!" and "Dad!". He picked up and tossed his little girl, Niji, into the air and pinned his golden gaze on Kazue.

As soon as Niji had stopped squealing, he said, "Of course it grew back." He shook out his left leg, making his pants ride up and expose long polka dotted red socks. "What do you think this is, a peg?"

The children all laughed, just as he had intended. Kagome leaned forward to whisper in Kazue's ear, well aware that although Inuyasha's dog ears were hidden, he would still hear her, "It takes very strong youki, but it can be done. Ask him after dinner to show you, and I bet he'll take you into the woods tonight, before they hunt. Don't ask to pet him though," she winked at the little boy and smiled at Inuyasha, "he gets grumpy." She couldn't help but tease her friend; it was an old habit of theirs that had survived the years and his task to keep the future intact. It had been a tremendous burden to place on Inuyasha's shoulders, but he had risen to the occasion beyond either hers or Sesshomaru's wildest

expectations. He was the liaison with the human government in Toyko, and, more importantly, he had organized and enforced the temporary relocation of a hundred thousand youkai and hanyou in the capital city. The forced movement was essential to ensuring that neither Kagome nor the young Inuyasha ever sensed demons – before the time was right. When the date of her last trip through the well had come and gone, they all breathed a collective sigh of relief. Perhaps none, however, as great as Inuyasha's, whose decades-long vigil over time finally ended. He had celebrated by inviting himself to the shrine for Gen Higarashi's excellent food. Kagome owed him so much; reflecting on it made her heart swell with love and pride.

The children gradually pulled Inuyasha towards their group, and once the gate was clear, Sesshomaru and Kimi followed him into the courtyard. Kagome smiled at her mate, her heart just as painfully full as it had been five hundred years before. His white hair was shorter, although still well past his shoulders, and the ponytail made women at his office - and in the grocery, and at preschool, and on the street - swoon with jealousy. It was better than the tide of lust that followed him whenever they went to the beach. He had not removed his jacket or tie, and the suit with its dark blue vest looked marvelous on him. He raised an eyebrow and made a silent production of flaring his nostrils. Kagome stuck out her tongue. There was certainly something to be said for being so in love after so many years. That Sesshomaru's interest in her body hadn't waned was also a positive aspect.

"How did the meeting go?" She asked quietly as he claimed a seat next to her.

He pressed a kiss to her cheek and waited to answer as a dark-haired little boy climbed into his lap.

Once Saburou had settled in with his thumb in his mouth to listen to the questions the older children pressed on Gramps, Sesshomaru responded, "As well as could be expected. The global treaty will be signed in May. They mentioned festivities." He said the last bit with a forced frown that Kagome knew well. Sesshomaru wanted her to think he was not happy about the idea of a party, but she knew he was always pleased to see her in a new gown – and for the opportunity to dance with her.

"Spring in Paris?" She asked with mock dismay, "Surely you told them we couldn't possibly?"

He leaned close to her, so that she couldn't see anything but the mischief in his gold eyes, and spoke in a cool, deep voice, "I told them we require our own apartment." His voice dipped lower, and his gaze fell to her mouth, then somewhere below her neck, "With soundproofing."

"Sesshomaru!" She couldn't help but blush and laugh. Her daiyoukai's chest rumbled as well, and Saburou growled a little as his pillow moved.

A kitsune child, her little red tail snapping side to side in consternation, raised her hand politely.

"Yes, Yua?" Gramps waited for her question.

"What happened to the sword?" There were several blank stares sent her way, and Yua sighed as if she was exhausted with having to explain herself to such a slow audience, "The pox-demon's sword. It sounded really dangerous, what happened to it?"

"Shianma?" Gramps looked surprised, but quickly covered his fumble with a cough, "Well, I suppose, it..."

“The rightful owner took it back, of course.” Kimi bent low in front of Yua, who immediately scrambled into a seiza and gave an adorable little bow. The other children were a few beats behind, with mumbles of ‘Kimi-sama’ and ‘Grandmother’. Saburou waved a sleepy hand at his youkai grandmother. “It belonged to my grandfather, you see. So I took it, and I keep it somewhere safe so no one bad can ever find it.”

“But, Kimi-sama, why did your Grandpop make such a bad sword?” Yua’s confusion was evident. Kagome sent a small prayer up at that moment, so happy that her children, and those of her friends, never had to know what it was like in those times. Never had to know the instability of the childhoods that Kimi, Sesshomaru, and Inuyasha had known.

“May I tell you a secret, Yua-chan?” The little girl practically vibrated with excitement and nodded. Kimi glanced at Kagome and gave the miko a wink. It was an odd sight, to see a woman with a regal French twist in her white hair, a tight-skirted business suit, and tasteful diamond earrings that cost more than most cars, kneeling in the grass and speaking seriously to a child not quite old enough for school. “My grandfather was not a very good swordsman. Actually, he was,” she held up perfectly manicured nails with about an inch between them, “a teensey bit crazy. That’s why Shianma turned out like it did. Probably that’s why Sesshomaru-sama is so crazy too.”

As one, five little pairs of eyes turned to look at Sesshomaru. In his pristine suit and shoes, with his calm expression and a little boy curled against his chest, it was hard to believe he might be crazy. Yua clearly was having trouble with the image, but would never say so to the dowager Western Lady. “Thank you for explaining, Kimi-sama.”

Yua and her cousin Kazue took the only human child from the group with them and followed Gramps and Kimi into the house for snack after that, while Saburou fell asleep on Sesshomaru. Niji stubbornly refused to let her father put her down, and so Inuyasha found a seat on the ground near his son. The hanyou flopped back onto the grass, shaking his head and letting his ears and claws return with a gentle exhale of youki. Niji squealed again, making the appendages twitch, which was just what she wanted. She petted them carefully, then demanded the same treatment for her own little ears. Inuyasha tilted his face toward the house and inhaled as he set to work soothing his daughter before naptime.

“Is Emi not back yet?”

“No,” Kagome answered, toeing off her shoes to pull her legs up beside her. “She was still at the hospital when I left, but she didn’t have any procedures scheduled. Just wanted to take care of some paperwork before the long weekend, I think.”

“How were things at the hospital?” Sesshomaru asked her quietly, careful not to disturb the tiny snores of his son.

“Good,” Kagome smiled. “I know you want to say ‘I told you so’ but you were right. I was too stubborn about leaving in the sixties, but we needed to get out of Tokyo before Mama and Daddy were born, and the hospital ran fine without me.”

“So no desire to go back?” Inuyasha asked casually.

Kagome smiled, his wife, Emi, had things well in hand and she loved working at the youkai hospital that Kagome had founded. “No, I have my clinic in the West, and a new research project I am working

on. Emi is safe from any hostile takeovers.”

“She has half of the old guest wing layered in cables and server cabinets,” A new voice chimed in from the top of the stairs. “Who knew sequencing genomes required so many hard drives?”

“Rin.” Sesshomaru’s warm greeting was met with a wide grin and a little bow.

“Papa-sama,” she answered playfully. “Makoto just dropped me off. The baby fell asleep on the way from the airport, and you know how he likes car rides.” Thankfully, both for Inuyasha’s discomfort and Sesshomaru’s stellar record of never having committed fratricide, Rin had gotten over her infatuation with Inuyasha in her youth and fallen deeply in love with the son of the Southern Lord. Hirimoto had lamented that it took the young bear almost a year to get a human girl to say yes, but they had mated happily and had one child. Rin stepped lightly over to the grass and kicked off her shoes, dropping her purse as she sat down. “If Tomomi weren’t stuck at the University today, she would have taken care of her own son, but you know your granddaughter. Can’t pass up an opportunity to make her students suffer.”

Kagome smiled at the thought, and then pulled a little face, “Rin, we’ve talked about this. No mention of how I am now a great-grandmother. It makes me feel old.”

“Technically, I said grand, not great grand, so I think I adhered to the edict, Mama.”

“Hah, birthday worries again, Kagome?” Inuyasha chuckled. “You don’t look a day over three hundred.”

“Oh shut, er, it. You. You.” She floundered, aware of Inuyasha’s son listening avidly. That child knew too many curse words already. “Friend. You friend,” she finished lamely.

“Yeah,” Inuyasha laughed, then immediately lowered his voice when his sleepy daughter started to fuss, “you sure told me.”

“And where is Hirimoto?” Kagome asked to deflect her embarrassment, “I had expected to see him arrive right behind Kimi.”

Rin lowered her voice to something just above a whisper, glancing around comically, “I think they had another fight.”

Sesshomaru nodded, finally deigning to join the conversation, “He requested to court her.”

“Again?” Kagome raised her brows, but she wasn’t really surprised. The Southern Lord took it upon himself every fifty or seventy years to ask Sesshomaru for permission to court Kimi. Sesshomaru usually deferred, Kimi went a little crazy and stopped speaking to the bear for a few years, and then everything settled back down until the next time. Of course, Kagome, and most of the occupants of the Western and Southern palaces, was well aware of the sleeping arrangements between the two daiyoukai. Quite cozy for the last few centuries. She was beginning to think that Kimi only said no so that she could have some excitement. “Maybe we should get your mother a trip. Has she ever tried arctic scuba diving?”

“Kagome,” Sesshomaru said with a long suffering sigh. Which meant he breathed out heavily. “Do

recall the incident where you purchased her dune buggy lessons.”

“I thought it went really well,” Kagome insisted. Kimi had been incredibly cheered up by the exercise. She had started talking to Hirimoto again after only six months that time.

“Didn’t you guys have to buy out the whole course?” Inuyasha asked, “Like, half of Nevada or something?”

“Stay out of this,” Kagome sing-songed. Inuyasha threw up his hands in mock surrender. After a long-companionable silence in which Inuyasha’s son got bored and started to climb Goshinboku, Kagome spoke up again, “I saw Ko this morning.”

“Oh,” Rin smiled, “how is she?”

“Well, she just finished a shoot for the Discovery Channel in Brazil. I invited her to come to the shiro once the celebration is over.” Sesshomaru acknowledged her with a nod. “I know she won’t ever stay long, she’s just not that kind of person, but it is always so good to see her.”

“She will most likely be late tonight,” Sesshomaru offered, “Arashi mentioned during the meeting that he intended to speak with her before he left for the North.” Kagome frowned, and tried not to worry for her friend. Arashi had put Ko in charge of a sizable foundation. She could spend the money however she wished, but Ko funded mostly domestic abuse shelters and advocacy for victims of violence. It had been just one of many gifts that Arashi gave the wind demoness, but he never made any advances toward her, and she never acknowledged them as anything other than a business deal. Either reparations for Ryukostokken or public relations for the North, which had finally recovered its standing in the youkai community after centuries of sanctions by the Cardinal Lords.

The afternoon was beginning to grow late, and Kagome was thinking of waking the children so that they could play before dinner when more guests arrived. Hisao and Aina entered the yard with Kento and his grown son. The kitsune greeted them and immediately went inside in search of her daughter. Kento and his son payed their respects to Sesshomaru, and left in search of a beer after a long flight. Hisao stayed behind a moment, his pink eye sparkling once his concealment fell.

“Sesshomaru-sama, Kagome-sama,” he turned to Inuyasha and frowned, “Hanyou.”

“Hey!” A little voice called out, dropping from the highest branches of Goshinboku. Kagome’s breath caught for a moment in fear as a tiny body flew toward the ground. Hisao already had his arms out and easily caught the pup. “You can’t call my dad that!”

“Why not?” Hisao asked, amused, “Is that not what he is?”

“Well, yeah, but-”

“Settle down, squirt,” Inuyasha said mildly, getting to his feet. He pushed Niji up on his shoulder and clasped hands with Hisao. “This old dog doesn’t mean it in a bad way. In fact,” he leaned over and stage whispered out of the corner of his mouth, “it is a title of respect. Since I’m the only one to ever beat him down.”

“Really?” The boy’s eyes were wide, and Hisao rolled his own.

“One time, Inuyasha. One time I *let* you beat me.”

“Let me!” Inuyasha barked out a laugh, “I don’t think so!” The two turned to the house and continued arguing and boasting good-naturedly, a short, attentive inu on their heels.

“The eye still has not faded,” Sesshomaru noted as he began to gently wake his son.

“I said I didn’t know for sure if it would,” Kagome pointed out. “Is it really so bad, do you think? Hisao never admitted anything to me.”

“Not bad,” Sesshomaru stated. “But it has been difficult for a youkai to always carry a trace of purity. And to see another’s aura is a gift that many miko and monks train years for. When it was thrust upon him, my captain did not have such an advantage.”

“I think it makes him look debonair,” said a voice from right beside her ear.

“Ack!” Kagome shrieked and jumped, turning to face a tall, red-haired man. His green eyes sparkled with mirth, his short-trimmed beard caught the afternoon sun. Casual slacks and an open-necked button-up shirt gave him the air of a graduate student. “Shippo, don’t do that!” She smacked him on the arm, and then leaned in for a hug. “You’ve been gone too long,” she whispered. Despite the tantrum she had thrown when Sesshomaru first proposed the idea, Shippo had become one of the first members of his youkai police. With his skills as a kitsune, he spent much of his time undercover, dashing around the globe to carry out Sesshomaru’s vast interests. He often compared himself to James Bond. Kagome had the feeling it was all of the danger with much less fun. Certainly she hoped there was less gambling, drinking, and sleeping with loose women.

Sesshomaru nodded a greeting to Nankae, who was coming through the gate with his luggage and several other people’s, from the looks of him. “Shippo,” he said without looking at the kitsune. There was an underlying vibration in that one word that made the kitsune straighten and the toddler Saburou fling his eyes wide open. “Do not frighten your mother.”

“Oh, right, ah, sorry, Kagome.” Shippo pulled away and bowed politely. His fangs, claws, and tails emerged from the concealment he usually kept them under, and Kagome admired the four fluffy appendages with pride. From one of his pockets, he pulled a long box of chocolates that shouldn’t have fit inside. She wondered how many more adjustment he had made to his clothing with magic. “Chocolates for my favorite girl?”

Kagome wanted to give in, all her children knew she was a sucker for a smiled apology and gifts. However, she wasn’t about to let him off that easily. “While you’re here, I can shave that thing off your face for you.”

“This?” He stroked his beard and posed with one brow raised, “It makes me look dashing.”

“Dangerous is more like it.” Kagome snorted, “Pirate Shippo.”

“That’s the point, Mama,” he sent her a wink with the title. “Danger and intrigue always get the ladies.” He gave his adoptive father a sly grin, “Right Sesshomaru-sama?” Sesshomaru wisely stayed out of the argument, standing to take Saburou into the house.

Kagome took Shippo's offered hand and stood as well. "Girls who are looking for danger are not girls who settle down and have kits," she admonished.

"I don't know about that, Kagome. You couldn't stay away from dangerous males, and Saburou is your fifth!" Kagome sputtered and blushed while Shippo laughed. The kitsune, fully grown and handsome in both his human and demon forms, bent to hug his mother and whispered in her ear, "I won't settle for anything less than the best, so when I'm ready to bring one home, she'll be a lot like you."

Kagome had trouble keeping her tears at bay as she entered the house, which was bursting at the seams with guests for the celebration. Her oldest daughter, Chiasa, was talking on her phone and carrying food outside to grill. Her first born son, Masahiko, was reading a story to his only child. Junichi was trying to corner his girlfriend under the stairs, to much laughter from both the girlfriend and Rin's daughter, who had finally arrived. Mayu, who looked exactly like Sesshomaru, was playing a video game with Souta and Inuyasha's son. Somewhere upstairs, children were shrieking with laughter. On the back patio, Kimi's chuckle mixed with that of Kagome's mother and several other youkai and hanyou. Kagome leaned into Sesshomaru with a sigh.

"This might be the best anniversary of the peace treaty yet."

The doorbell rang then, and as the only adult whose hands were not occupied, Kagome took it upon herself to answer. Standing on the front step was Eri, her usual black clothes accented with a pink scarf. Her long, cinnamon colored hair was pulled into a casual tail. Kagome squealed, and pulled her in for a hug. It had been another wonderful surprise, as the years passed and she traced the family lines of all of the friends she had lost, that one branch of Sango and Miroku's family had resulted in Eri. The same branch that continued to train as demon slayers and holy people. Although, it turned out most of them worked for Sesshomaru in his youkai police force. Which meant that when it came time for someone to be assigned to stay close to young Kagome and keep her safe until the well opened, Eri was a natural choice. It was a relief, when enough time had passed, for the two friends to meet again without having to hide anything for the sake of the timeline. That had been almost four years ago, although Kagome still easily passed for twenty-four, her legal age.

Eri squeezed back and whispered, "So sorry, I couldn't shake him." Then she slipped around Kagome, calling loudly and obviously to Shippo that she needed food – in the backyard. Kagome was confused for about three seconds.

"Kagome-san." That voice. It was overly warm and soft, like bread that hadn't cooked long enough. Doughy. She hadn't heard it in five hundred years, but it was still too soon.

It was a sincere effort for the miko not to grimace. "Hello, Hojo-san."

"Eri-san mentioned that she was coming to the shrine, and I am in town visiting my parents, so I just had to drop by and see you. Is everything okay?" He leaned forward, his hands held out awkwardly, and peered into her eyes with concern. Kagome suddenly realized what his visit was about. Apparently, not nearly enough time had passed for the washed-out, skinny man to get over whatever protective feelings he had towards her.

"I'm well. Thank you, Hojo-san. I am here with my husband." She stressed the word, but didn't see more than a twinge of disappointment in his open, stupid face. "And my sons-" she quickly corrected

herself, “friends. My son and my son’s friends. So I am sorry I don’t have time to catch up.”

“Please Kagome,” his whisper had a tone of desperation in it, and Kagome quickly stepped out onto the porch in her socks, pulling the door mostly closed behind her. It had been a long time since Sesshomaru had tried to melt someone, and she wasn’t eager for that streak to be broken at her mother’s house.

“Hojo, thank you for thinking of me. You have always been a polite boy, but you need to go now.”

“Boy?” His surprise and offense had her wincing. Sometimes she forgot that she looked so much younger than she really was. He did seem like a boy to her though, painfully young and mortally clueless. “It’s him, isn’t it?” Hojo snatched up her hands, holding them in a surprisingly strong grip. His face hardened with a determination that she wouldn’t have thought him possible of. She briefly considered using one of the martial arts skills she had learned a few hundred years ago and breaking his weak little human wrists. “That gang-member’s brother. He did force you into this, didn’t he? I knew it!” Kagome didn’t have time to interrupt him, not that she could have formed any words past the shock and anger clogging her throat. “You don’t have to suffer in silence any longer, sweet Kagome, I’ll-”

“You will get your hands off of my wife.”

The sentence was spoken evenly, and so coldly it sent a chill down Kagome’s spine. *Days since our last dismemberment: Zero.* She winced, her anger fading in the presence of Sesshomaru’s absolute fury. She could feel his youki rising, twining around them both and urging her to step back into his space. She wondered for a moment how long scent stayed in a daiyoukai’s memory. *At least 500 years,* she guessed. Before Hojo could even react, Sesshomaru was joined by Masahiko on one side and Junichi on the other. Kagome had to push back with a little reiki just to get breathing room from all of the energy her sons were throwing around.

“Sir,” Hojo drew himself up to his full height, which would have been respectable in any office environment in Japan, but was laughable in comparison to the three youkai that towered over him. *Great, Kagome thought, because Sesshomaru just loves it when people tell him no.* “I have known Kagome-san far longer than you, and I think that friendship deserves some of her time. Don’t worry, Kagome, you don’t have to say anything in front of him, just come with me.”

He actually tugged on her hands, as if she was going to leave her family and follow him off to – *what exactly?* She wasn’t sure. *A life with him? The milk-toast pharmacist?* “Yeah,” she drew out the word and pulled her hands from his. It was a struggle. “I don’t think so.”

“But-”

“She said no, dingle-dork, or can’t you hear nothin’?” Inuyasha appeared around the side of the house and leaned on a support column for the porch, the juice stain on his shirt doing nothing to soften his murderous glare.

“Dingle-dork!” Saburou called out happily from Sesshomaru’s hold. Kagome reached around to take him, scowling at her best friend.

“Thanks, Inuyasha, he’ll be saying that all night now.”

Shippo peeked around the other corner of the house, “I thought it was pretty accurate.” He shrugged.

Kagome herded her family back inside, completely ignoring the man still standing hopelessly in the yard. Her determination caused her to miss the pointed look and push of youki Sesshomaru sent toward his brother and adopted son.

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The door to the house closed behind Kagome, and Inuyasha cracked his knuckles. He had been waiting five hundred years for the go ahead to beat the stuffing out of the little panty-waist that had always followed Kagome around. And while he normally chafed a bit at commands from Sesshomaru, who was he to argue when the Saidai Mao told him to get rid of someone?

“Listen up, dude,” Inuyasha liked that modern word, dude. He had learned it during the sixties in America and it still sounded good. It was particularly degrading if spoken with the right tone. “I ain’t gonna say this more than once. Leave Kagome the hell alone. Don’t touch her, don’t talk to her. Don’t even fuckin’ think about her, got it?”

“Or what?” Hojo asked, pale-faced, but obviously trying to find his balls. “You’ll send some of your gang members after me? I’ll call the police!”

“Hojo-san,” Shippo smiled disarmingly and threw one arm around Hojo’s shoulders, walking him towards the gate with more pressure than was really necessary. “I apologize for my uncle’s behavior, but you understand, we are all very protective of Kagome. What with her unfortunate childhood illnesses, and everything. Surely you understand?”

Inuyasha watched a master manipulator at work and huffed to himself. He almost never got to kick the crap out of anyone anymore. It was disappointing. Hojo was nodding, but also trying unsuccessfully to get Shippo to turn around. The kitsune wouldn’t let him get a word in edgewise.

“That’s right, I thought you would. From the moment I first met you, I felt a real kinship with you, Hobo.”

“It’s Hojo,” the human interjected.

“Yes, forgive me. Hoko. As I was saying Hoyo, we all care for Kagome. And so we should all try to do what she asks. Can you do that, Hobo, can you give Kagome what she needs most?”

The idiot was lapping it up like a kitten with cream. Inuyasha followed them through the shrine grounds, right up to the tori gate, and leaned against a column.

“Of course, if she would just let me-”

“Good, that’s good, Holo. What Kagome needs is to be with her family, whom she loves. What she wants is for you to disappear. Forever. Can you do that Hobo?” The man blinked, struggling to understand what he was hearing. “I hope so, I really do. Because if you can’t...” Kitsune magic winked, creating a blue-green haze in the air. Suddenly, Hojo found his face within a foot of unnaturally bright green eyes and a wicked grin that displayed sharp fangs. “If you can’t, Hobo, then I will make you disappear. Forever. And Hojo,” he gently picked the man up, as though he weighed nothing, which to a youkai he did, and set him down on the first step that led to the street. “Don’t bother making that phone call.” He leaned even closer, and Inuyasha had to hold back a laugh at the

sweat rolling down the idiot's pale face. Shippo bared his teeth and made a growling sound, "I am the police."