Summary

Book 2: A Tie Amongst Rivers. Chihiro has found herself back in the Spirit World. But is it her forever home? Will she be able to stay in the Spirit World and remain by Haku’s side as new feelings begin to bubble up inside her? Meanwhile, new developments and obstacles await Chihiro and Haku’s future that could change the fate of the Bathhouse.

Notes

Character Designs for original characters in the story can be found on my deviantArt page:
Rumi was more than a little thankful that she left her job before they left for the Spirit World, because gods knew that they would still be stuck there after a month. Her new routine consisted of waking up, brunch, socialize with her friends or with some of the staff, helping set up the Bathhouse, dinner, work the Bathhouse, socialize over after-work (super early) breakfast, sleep, repeat. She couldn't complain about the work and weird schedule. It was work and it kept her distracted.

At the moment, she was sitting out in the garden in the morning air, with the view of the water. She liked this spot because it was out of sight and gave her room to think. It was always a good feeling to get away from the noise of the Bathhouse and the gossiping of the yuna. She quickly learned the first time around the Bathhouse not to get involved in their gossip circles, it was more drama than it was worth.

Rumi wouldn't deny that she enjoyed her time in the Spirit World. There was a lot to explore and learn and she was making plenty new friends. Since they discovered that they were stuck in the Spirit World, it left her time to ponder on the idea of being stuck there for the rest of her life. The last year had been a hard pill to swallow, especially with all the knowledge she'd learned about her family. She had come to realize, she had nothing left in the Human World. What was the point? She had nothing to live for there. She could keep her dream career and start a family, but who would she be able to share it with? Her family was gone and despite the party personality she had back in college, she really didn't find any of the men she ever met attractive or by any means husband material.

Unlike Chihiro, she couldn't quite see herself optimistically living the rest of her life in the Human World. The Human World had become a dark place for Rumi. Did Chihiro even have optimistic outlook on her Human World future? When was the last time they really had a conversation together about their fate in the Human World?

If she were to be honest with herself, since getting spirited away a year ago, she hadn't been the best friend she should have been to Chihiro. She could take it even back further to her move to Tochinoki and when she was possessed by Yuuka. Yeah, honesty was something she dropped the ball on and always felt like she had to keep Chihiro at a distance. But even when the truth was thrown out onto the table, she still felt distant. She felt cold and fake. She didn't know if it were possible to fill that void that continued to spread in her mind.

Then there was Yuuka.

She was on speaking terms with the Yosuzume spirit. And when she found out her human form was that of a child, her actions almost seemed valid. Then again, she couldn't be sure if she put that appearance out of pity or a reflection of her state of mind. Isn't that what Haku mentioned when they first met? That his state of mind at the time was what caused him to take on the shape of a child? Maybe that was the way Yuuka saw herself. It would explain, not justify, her actions in trying to hold hers and Chihiro's lives together by false memories. Rumi didn't agree with it, but she could see
the purpose in it.

What's the phrase? Time heals all wounds? Well, sometimes Rumi wished that some wounds healed faster than others. She wanted her friends back. She wanted the good ol' days back, when there were no cares except work and school and when she'd find time to see family. Or when she stressed over stupid things like fashion and boys. The days before… before when? Moving to Tochinoki? The car accident? Yuuka? The issues with Yubaba? The earthquake? Getting spirited away? The days before when? When would she go back and start over? Would she go as far back as to when she met Chihiro? Would that change everything? Would she have become wound up in all this?

No. She wouldn't deny her friendship with Chihiro. She needed Chihiro. Whether she expressed it or not, Rumi needed Chihiro as her friend. She was the last family she had. She had Yuuka and Makoto of course but Chihiro was all she had.

"Nice place to think, huh?"

As if on cue, Rumi spun around to find Chihiro coming out of the bushes. She was dressed in the pink uniform, having done some work around the Bathhouse after closing. She looked tired and distracted, a look that wasn't uncommon on the Ogino's face as of late, especially after getting stuck in the Spirit World.

Rumi chuckled as Chihiro sat beside her. "Yeah. And then after all those times I chastised you for thinking, here I am." She made jazz hands in a presenting motion.

"Hah. Yeah, funny how things turn out." Chihiro looked out over the waters. "You probably thought alone like this by yourself a lot…” She looked back at her. "I'm sorry… You had to face it alone…”

Rumi shook her head. "It wasn't your fault, you didn't know. You couldn't have." She wasn't really convincing herself but Chihiro seemed to take it. "Besides, I had Makoto and Yuuka." She smiled lightly.

Chihiro nodded apologetically yet understanding. Rumi didn't know how that work? "Speaking of, Makoto left this morning. Seems Haku sent him off to the river. Routine check that Haku didn't need to be there for, so Makoto went."

"Ah." Rumi replied, staring off to the horizon again.

Makoto.

She didn't know quite what to think of the okami-inu spirit. Something about him always made her feel safe. He was the only one she felt she could trust and confide in. Although he did withhold a lot of the truth from her, he never once lied to her and was always honest. He made her feel secure when her thoughts wandered to dark places. It'd be a bit lonely without him around to keep company.

"Well, I hope he returns safely and soon. I've noticed that Haku goes a little crazy if he doesn't have his three musketeers at his side." Rumi laughed.

Chihiro's brows knit together before she laughed, catching onto the joke late. "You're right! I've seen that too! He gets all serious and starts micromanaging everything! I find it funny!"

Rumi nodded as she tried to catch her breath from laughing. "That poor guy. When's the last time he got to sit back and just relax with no cares?"

Chihiro breathed and shrugged. "I wonder…” She drew her legs up and hugged her knees. "I
wonder…” She mumbled again.

"He's not the only one that needs rest." Rumi said, eyeing her.

Her friend looked at her and Rumi smiled, softly. "What?" Chihiro asked, absently.

"When's the last time you got proper rest? C'mon! Up to!" She hooked her hand in the crook of Chihiro's elbow and hoisted her up as she stood. They wobbled as they stood, then laughed like there really were no cares for a blissful, fleeting moment as they headed back to the Bathhouse.

Makoto felt the wind blow through his fur as he ran north east towards the northern mountains of the eastern region. He dodged meticulously through the trees of the forests that surrounded him, finding his footing effortlessly as he followed the path he always took to the Kohaku River.

Haku had Makoto on constant errands since Chikako and Rumi's semi-permanent residency in the Spirit World. Now that his focus was not completely on Chihiro's safety twenty-four seven, he had time to take care of some Bathhouse errands and visits to Haku's river. The river had become his second home in the Spirit World, the first being the Bathhouse as of late. He could not honestly count his birthplace as home… It always left a poor taste in his mouth.

Haku would have him go to the river to check on the borders whenever he could not himself. Haku's river resided in the forests at the base of the northern mountains, running along the base and through an underground portion of the mountains. It was his job to check the borders Haku's territory. The land that surrounded the river was mostly forest and marshes. At the base of the mountain laid the dragon's den.

Makoto slowed to a trot as he approached the river. The forest was alive with the song of his resident spirits. Birds sang in the trees, the wind rustling through the branches of the tree spirits, the clicking of *kodama* filling the air. Makoto walked along the edge of the river that opened widely next to him. As his routine, he would find a clearing and wade into the waters of the river to let the river know of his presence, the river would then welcome him and let him know of anything that needed to be done around the territory. Now, the river never spoke literal words to him, per se he more got feelings and memories that were not his own placed in his mind.

As Makoto waded into the water, the river welcomed him with a fury of excited emotions. Makoto never understood how the river sucked all the optimism from his humanoid counterpart. After the energetic welcome, the river started to radiate an unsettling feeling of distress, images of a shadow lingering in the forest flashing in Makoto's mind.

A low growl rumbled from deep in his throat as his eyes scanned the forest's line. He had not noticed any signs of intrusion before, but suddenly it was very apparent. It almost felt as if he were simply paranoid, the instinctual feeling of alertness was so strong.

Makoto continued up the bank of river, his ears twitching around at every sound the forest had to offer. The river's flow continued downstream as he made his way upstream toward the mountain. The river flowed out from within the mountain, where a spring came up out of the ground. The resources of the mountain with a combination of rain and snowfall kept the river plentiful and healthy. Haku's river was not just named "amber" for no reason. The forests that surround the banks were, more often than not, covered in golden foliage, feeding off special mineral and energy within Haku's waters. His river was home to many spirits who petitioned to stay in his territory and, more often than not, Haku excepted them as long as they returned what they took to keep the land at balance. Many spirits that lived there with several generations old.
Makoto did not always agree with Haku's ways but who was he to judge a god who was a few millennia years old. He himself was a stranger whom Haku took into his land. Haku may have been too trusting sometimes, but it was what saved his life. It allowed Makoto to start over and meet Chihiro and Rumi and everyone at the Bathhouse. But he would never openly admit it, of course.

As he headed upstream, the wide river started to narrow and thin as the water started to ripple down rocks and cliffs, causing Makoto to detour out of the river waters and up the rock ledges. Though he was still on guard about the river's distress, he saw nor felt any signs of threats as he looked about the territory. A few curious animal spirits and water spirits would poke out every now and again but posed to viable threat, in fact he had come to know many of them in his time there. But the unease…

A draft of wind came through the gurgling river pass and Makoto caught the aroma of ashes and wildflowers. He knew that scent and he was not sure if he liked what it accompanied.

Looking towards a section of amber clad trees, they were not too far from Haku's home in the mountain, a place he was not to reveal to anyone. He sneered, glaring into the forest. "Come out!"

There was no immediate movement, but soon a large bird like shape started to make its way through the forest. The sound of flames filled his ears, but no flames were present. When he blinked, the figure was a woman and standing in the clearing with him.

"Well hello." She said, a slightly wanton look in her smile. "Is that a way to speak to a lady?"

"My lady!" Makoto yelped and bowed lowly.

The woman chuckled and shook her head, approaching him. "Oh Makoto-Kun, you know better." She knelt and touched his chin, pulling it up to look at her. Makoto looked into the rich gold eyes of the woman in front of him, her red clad lips curved in a kind smile. "How has my dear friend Kohaku been? I have missed him dearly."

"He has been well…" Makoto started. "He has been keeping himself busy with the Bathhouse and river."

"I see." She sat back on her heels and sat her chin in her palms, elbows on her knees. She was wearing a vibrant red kimono with deep blue trimming that seemed to fade into the red, a gold and silver embroidered obi tied around her waist. Her brown hair was pulled back in an elegant bun, adorned with a floral pin to hold it in place, her hair framing her oval-shaped face. The crouched pose she sat in completely counteracted the image she was portraying as a noble. "Well I do hope to see him soon. There's been a lot of rumors going around about him lately."

"I hope with the best of intentions." He replied.

The woman laughed, covering her mouth. "Of course, you, silly wolf."

Makoto grunted, sitting on his hind legs. "Is there a reason you are here?"

"Well, I was thinking that Kohaku-Kun would come here to visit when he found out a… intruder came upon his land." The woman touched her palm to her cheek in mock forlorn. "But alas, he is nowhere to be seen. He must trust you a great deal to send you instead of coming himself, Makoto-Kun."

He grunted again, choosing not to reply.

"You certainly haven't changed much." She tilted her head as she looked up at the large wolf towering above her.
"There is nothing to change."

"Hm. True." The woman looked to the water that streamed past them and smiled. Makoto instinctively placed a paw in the water, reading the river's emotions. The woman touched her hand to the water. "I do hope to see you again soon, Kohaku-Kun."

Makoto got a warm feeling bubbling up from the water and rolled his eyes when he realized the river was blushing. The river definitely made up for any sappiness that his humanoid form lacked. No wonder it liked Chihiro so much.

Her eyes shifted to Makoto as she rose from her crouched pose, dusting off her kimono. "Let your master know I'd like to see him in person soon. Make sure he sticks around the Bathhouse for a while. Okay?"

"I will be sure to relay the message." He replied.

The woman smiled and gave a wave before disappearing, leaving a pile of ash in her wake.

Makoto grimaced. "Kohaku-Sama is not going to like this." He turned and continued his border patrol.

Visits with her cousin were always interesting. It always left Yuuka wondering how she ended up with a giant for a cousin. Visits with Zeniba were always comforting though. She no longer tried to hide from her but instead learned from her. She'd spent her whole life running from her father's name. She felt it was time she learned more about her past and how she could benefit her friends in the future.

Her aunt was almost always in the kitchen, something that hadn't changed one bit since she was taken into the cottage. She had fond memories of helping Zeniba with the spells and cookies she'd always be working on. Yuuka was always a bit of a misfit and had a long, what humans would call, emo phase growing up. She looked back and would think of how ridiculous that time was, ignoring her aunt who was just trying to be the mother she never got to be.

Now, she was helping her cousin learn to read. Boh was over a century old but with the way Yubaba had coddled him, his mental and emotional development was stifled. He was a baby by appearance because he had the mentality of one half the time. Boh had the potential to be smart but they could thank his mother for his longing for instant gratification. He had of course gotten better over the years since he met Chihiro, but the effects still lingered.

Yuuka glanced about the kitchen area as she slid her finger under the words that Boh was reading. He was starting to get reading a lot more clearly now, but she still had to help him pronounce certain kanji characters. Her eyes wandered the room and fell on Zeniba, who was bustling about the kitchen pouring different color liquids into little flask tubes. She promptly corked them and placed them in bags inside a basket and made a beckoning motion towards the door. Moments later the gloved lamppost hopped through the door, taking the basket of bags and out the door again to wait for the postman to take them away. More important packages would be taken by shikigami.

"Taiyō ga…" Boh stuttered as he sounded out the different characters. "Yuuka-Neesan. What does this one say?"

Yuuka looked down briefly. "Umi, ocean. You can tell by the way the kanji makes a window here. And think of these as waves."

"Ooooh." He muses before continuing his reading aloud. "…umi ni… kagayaite iru…"
She went back to watching Zeniba moving from one counter to the next. Did she ever take a break? Yuuka wanted to be of use and ease the burden. She'd been helping with errands and simple spells she'd refused to learn when she was younger, since it would just further her connection with her father, but she wanted to do more. The last month back at the cottage was a breath of fresh air and though awkward at first, she'd gotten back into the routine of things from her childhood.

"Oba-San, how are you doing on ingredients?" Yuuka called over to the old witch.

"Hmmm." Zeniba hummed, looking about the kitchen, opening several cabinets. "Maybe a few more herbs, salts and river's kelp. Did you want to go with Kaonashi to the marketplace later? I was planning to send him with a list."

Yuuka nodded. "Sounds good to me." She glanced around and noticed the masked shadow wasn't around. "Speaking of, where is Kaonashi?"

"He should be out in the garden." Zeniba replied, coming to the table with snacks and a paper for her shopping list.

"Okay." Yuuka chirped in response, taking a snack from the tray. "I wonder how the others are doing?"

"I'm sure they're doing fine." Zeniba continued to pen down her list. "Haku probably has them helping around the Bathhouse to keep them busy while they figure out what's going on with the gate."

"Do you know why it's blocked?" The yosuzume questioned for the umpteenth time that month.

"I wonder." The old witch replied with a mischievous smile. The answer changed everytime, making it very unclear if she actually knew or not.

Yuuka huffed and rolled her eyes. "Never gonna give me an answer huh?"

Zeniba simply shrugged.

She nodded and started thinking about her friends back at the Bathhouse. She was planning to go back to the Bathhouse for a visit soon and see how things were. Then Rumi's face flashed in her mind. Her heart sank a little at the thought. I wonder if they'll ever forgive me… She thought.

"You dwell too much on the past dear." Zeniba said.

The yosuzume spirit yelped and covered her mouth, not realizing she said it aloud.

The old witch looked at her above her glasses. "If you continue to dwell on things of the past and on things you should have done, you'll never see what's in front of you now. You'll never see the possibilities of your future."

"But I screwed up. Worse than ever." She looked down. "Especially for Rumi…"

"Stop that." Zeniba chastised, causing both Yuuka and Boh to flinch. "I don't want that sort of attitude in my home. Both girls will come around. Life is too short for humans to live in the past. If they haven't forgiven you after a year, they're wasting their time." She smiled and held out the shopping list. "If you keep thinking like this, you obviously don't know your friends as well as you think you do."

Yuuka's lips tightened in a thin line and she nodded curtly. "Right." She then smiled and took the list.
with both hands. "I'll go get Kaonashi and head to the market then."

"Alright, be careful dear." Zeniba patted her head as Yuuka hopped off her chair and out into the garden to find Kaonashi.

Chapter End Notes

With some new perspectives in addition to Chihiro and Haku's, the story will begin to broaden over the course of this book. There will be more of Rumi, Makoto, and Yuuka as we hear the story from their perspectives as well! I hope you all enjoy the next installment of the Written Rivers trilogy!

Also the sentence Boh is reading roughly translates to "The sun is shining on the sea." 太陽が海に輝いている。(Taiyō ga umi ni kagayaite iru.)

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

If you haven't read Book 1: A Home Amongst Rivers, please stop now and check my profile to find the first of the Written Rivers trilogy!

God bless! KawaChou
Something Stolen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Written Rivers

Book 2: A Tie Amongst Rivers

Chapter 2: Something Stolen

Every week since their scheduled return date to go home, they tested the tunnels to see if there was a chance they had opened. However, there was no such luck.

Haku had his suspicions on who was blocking the tunnels to the Human World. Since it was Seiryu who guarded the tunnels of that region he was starting to think the Four Holy Beasts were plotting against him to get him to take on the role of Seiryu. But what confused him was what Chihiro had to do with it. Were they holding her hostage as ransom for taking on the name Seiryu? That would be extreme even for the Holy Beast. If not them, who? It made no sense.

All those thoughts wandered through the dragon's mind as he watched Chihiro, Rumi, and Makoto walk through the tunnel for what felt like the thousandth time that month. Chihiro and Rumi were practically stomping their way into the tunnel, grumbling incoherently as they went. He did not blame them. It was getting quite aggravating and he was close to giving into fate's hands.

Soon the girls and Makoto disappeared through the tunnel. Did it work? The answer soon followed when they emerged one by one from the tunnel on his left.

"Argh!" Chihiro shoved her bag off onto the ground as she exited the tunnel, crossing her arms aggravatedly. Under different circumstances, Haku may have thought her angry pouting face was endearing, but it was neither the time nor place to have such thoughts.

"Chihiro…" He started, clearing his throat.

"No." Her eyes flashed intensely as she pointed to the tunnel. "I'm not going through that tunnel until I can guarantee I'll come out the other side."

"I have to agree, Haku." Rumi said, much more calmly than her friend. "Honestly, we're tired of going through that tunnel and having our hopes crushed. We're not going back through that tunnel without a guarantee of coming out the other end."

Haku considered them and sighed. They were tired, he was tired, they were all tired. He nodded. "Agreed. I will continue to look into the cause further."

Chihiro's expression softened and sighed, running her fingers through her bangs. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell but if we're here now, let's make the most of it. I'm not saying we give up, but I suggest we don't spend every waking moment trying to figure this tunnel out."

Rumi echoed a nod of agreement.

Haku nodded again, absently. "Well, now that that is settled, let us head back to the Bathhouse. There is plenty to be done before opening."
As they headed back to the Bathhouse, they walked in silence, giving Chihiro the time to cool off. Haku lingered a bit ahead of the group with Makoto, who had shifted to his human form, leading the way to the empty riverbed and offering their hands to help the girls across the river's rocks. Makoto had told him about his visitor at the river and he was not looking forward to seeing her. He had made a special effort in avoiding the woman and the party she was involved with since he regained his identity. The okami had warned him of her future visit to the Bathhouse, causing him to be on high alert to her unwelcomed arrival.

The woman was not the only one he was trying to avoid either. Ryujin's visits had only become more frequent in the last month and Haku had exhausted every bit of energy either entertaining him or, quite frankly, running away from him. He avoided him like the plague. And Ryujin certainly had not shut up about the romance supposedly budding between himself and the human girl. He was mentally drained. What he would give to return to the river.

The two spirits now walked behind the human girls. They had sparked up a conversation since they had taken the lead and seemed to be enjoying their talk. Though his hearing was quite keen, Haku chose not to listen in on their conversation. He simply listened to the sounds of nature around them as he watched them interact with each other. The way they nudged each other and laughed together was so naturally comfortable that one would think they were sisters. Chihiro's smile caught his eyes as she moved her hands expressively as much as she could with the bag she was carrying. Makoto and himself had volunteered to carry the rest of their bags, causing them to wonder what they possibly had to pack to make them so heavy. But his eyes just followed the human girl's movements, from the gleam in her eye when she was excited about something to the way she put a little skip in her step when walking along uneven road, hopping over lines as if it were superstitious to do otherwise.

Haku sighed inwardly. Ever since her stay was extended, he had become more hyperaware that the girl who captured his vision had stolen something from the Spirit World with every visit she had and, each time, made it harder to tell her goodbye. Now that she was stuck in the Spirit World, it had become much more obvious to him that what she stole had everything to do with him. And Ryujin's pestering over the last month had not helped.

Ogino Chihiro had stolen the one thing he had always kept close to him and cut off from the world: his heart. He finally admitted it. Chihiro, the girl who gave him his name, the girl who had given him his river, had stolen his heart. He would now admit that she had stolen it the moment she fell in the river after a shoe but between then and now, he had mistaken it for sibling love. But he was far from wrong. The girl who had saved him twice now, had him wrapped around her finger now.

"Makoto..." He said lowly, gaining the other's attention. "I have run into a dilemma that I officially have no idea what to do with." He raked his fingers through his hair.

Makoto seemed to smirk at the confession, as if he already knew what the dilemma was. "Have not all..."

Chihiro and Rumi had gone ahead of the men to talk about memories of their friendship. They had spent a lot more time together as of late, trying to rekindle their friendship. Their conversation felt so comfortable that she felt like she was back in elementary school, before all the events of the Spirit World happened, and when things came naturally. Since they got stuck in the Spirit World, they decided to take the opportunity to explore rather than let it suffocate them.

Honestly, Chihiro should have been excited about the fact that she didn't have to make the decision on whether she stayed in the Spirit World or not, however, when she first heard the news, she was more confused than ever. Not only was the decision stripped from her, but it had left her feeling even
more vulnerable. She wanted this. She wanted to be with her friends. She had found a place to belong where she didn't.

But what of her family. It had been far past the return date of her "going abroad" trip that she had told them. They would probably be getting worried by now and her cell phone definitely didn't break the walls of time and space. She would have to see if there was some way to let them know she was ok. What if she ended up being stuck there for the rest of her life? She honestly wasn't opposed to the idea, but she had family to consider. And work… Oh gods, she just left her job without notice. She told them she would be back, but it's way past the day she said she'd return. She was definitely terminated from the position.

Would staying be worth the risk of leaving everything she knew and loved behind?

Now, despite all her worries, she was oddly at peace with it all. She couldn't give an answer why but despite everything going on over the last month, despite everything that should be causing her anxiety to come back at full speed, despite it all, she was okay with it all. It had taken her a month to come to terms, but if she really sat down and thought it all through, there was nothing she could possibly do about the situation but roll with the punches and see where it lead her. If there's anything she'd learn in the last year, was how to go with the flow instead of having everything planned and set in stone. She'd admit that she always had to be in control in the past, it's what always got her anxiety acting up back then. It still came up but not as often.

As they walked across the bridge to the Bathhouse in the afternoon sun, Chihiro suddenly heard Makoto growl something to Haku and then Aogaeru the frog spirit came hopping towards them.

"Haku-San! Haku-San!" The small frog called as he approached.

Haku came to the front of the group, rather alert. "What is it?"

"We-we have, we have a guest. A sp-special g-guest!" Aogaeru stuttered as he gasped for air.

"Ugh… No…" He grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Where is she?"

"I-Inside. She requested a bath, but we had to decline. But we didn't know if- if we should since she is from-"

"Where are Ame and Rin?"

"Rin is inside handling some broken pipes inside with some of the engineers. Ame is on errands! What do we do? What do we do?"

"Calm down, Aogaeru, this isn't the first time this has happened. Move aside." Haku started toward the entrance, the rest of them following briefly after him.

After they all got inside, all Chihiro remembered seeing was a blur of red running past her and latching itself on to Haku's neck, practically screeching "Kohaku-Kun!" as it went.

A woman with brown hair pulled back in an elegant bun and golden eyes accented with sophisticated makeup now clung to the neck of Haku, who didn't look pleased in the least. She wore an elaborate red kimono accented with jewels and the primary colors, a gold band around her left wrist. Chihiro's face contorted slightly at how friendly she was acting towards the dragon.

"Oh Kohaku, it's been too long!" The woman squealed, her arms draped over his shoulders as she hugged him. "Why don't you come visit anymore? I have to go out of my way to come all the way east to visit you!" She complained coyly.
Haku leaned away, exasperated. "You do not even have to travel far, Ayame-San." He rolled his eyes. "Now will you let go of me."

Ayame pouted but let him go. "When'd you become so mean? I thought we had something." She whined.

Chihiro raised a brow. "Had something?"

"You are delusional, Ayame-San. There is nothing between us." Haku insisted, stepping away to put a little distance between them.

"Well there once was." She said with her hands on her hips.

"And it will stay in the past." Haku retorted.

Chihiro wasn't sure how she felt about this confrontation. A part of her was a bit angry at the way Ayame was acting and how they once "had something." She didn't know why she cared but for some reason she did.

She cleared her throat and Haku finally made eye contact with her. His eyes almost seemed panicked.

"Ah. Ayame-San, please. Please, let me introduce you to Chihiro."

Chihiro gave a small bow. "Nice to meet you."

Ayame stared at her for moment then grabbed her hands, enthusiastically. "So, you're the one everyone has been talking? It's a pleasure to finally meet you!"

"Everyone?" Chihiro looked over the woman's shoulder to look incredulously at Haku, who only shrugged empathetically in reply.

"That's right!" Ayame chimed. "You're the talk of the palace! Especially after Chimon-San talked to you!"

Chihiro watched Haku visibly flinch and his eyes flash with concern. The human girl looked into Ayame's golden eyes. "What are you talking about? Why would they be talking about me?"

Her eyes lit up like a fire. "Well, of course, they'd be talking about you silly! You're part of one of Chimon-San's latest prophecies. Though I must say, you caught him at a time where he had few words to say. Usually he goes on and on with his stories and prophecies, he's such a story teller, no wonder he was chosen to be Genbu-"

"Ayame-San." Haku interceded.

"Oops." The woman covered her mouth. "I did it again. I went and started rambling."

Chihiro gulped as she tried to get her head back on straight after Ayame's wind of conversation. "So… Who exactly are you, Ayame-San? You're from the palace and close with Genbu-San?"

"Hm?" Ayame blinked, then smiled. "Oh, silly me, I'm Ayame. I'm the current Suzaku of the Four Holy Beasts."

Chihiro froze and gaped. They just kept coming out of nowhere. Should she bow? Or was she already in too deep? "I- I- umm…" Great, Chihiro, just stutter.
Ayame laughed. "Don't worry about formalities, dear, I tend to avoid the formalities whenever possible."

"She is the rogue one…” Chihiro heard Makoto grumble beside her.

"You could say that Makoto-Kun, or you could call it free spirited, or wild hearted, but rogue sounds rather primitive for a phoenix such as myself."

"So, you're really a phoenix?” Rumi finally chimed in.

Ayame regarded the girl with a smile. "You're certainly correct. They wouldn't have asked me to be the Suzaku if I weren't." She laughed. "And you might be...?"

"Oh!" Rumi exclaimed. "I'm Rumi. Chihiro's friend."

"Well it's a pleasure to meet you both." Ayame smiled. "Any friend of Kohaku-Kun, is a friend of mine." She leaned against Haku, who grimaced at the contact. "Isn't that right, Kohaku-Kun?"

Haku had his arms crossed and a rather displeased look that Chihiro had to suppress a giggle from. Instead of answering the Suzaku's question, he grunted and tried to shrug her off his shoulder, which was unsuccessful as Ayame wrapped her arms around his neck.

Something about this didn't sit right with Chihiro. Why was she being so friendly and clingy to the dragon spirit? If she remembered correctly from her Asian mythology and culture class, according to myth, the dragon and the phoenix were often paired together, for the two represented both conflict and wedded bliss. In both China and Japan, Dragon and Phoenix symbolism was associated closely with the imperial family - the emperor being the dragon and the empress being the phoenix. She wasn't quite sure why she felt threatened by this bout of knowledge and how she was seeing it develop in front of her, but she just wanted it to stop.

Ayame glanced at her and a smirk played at her lips. Chihiro openly gaped. Was she messing with her? Was she trying to tease her with her relationship with Haku? She was threatening her!

Rumi must have caught on to something because Chihiro felt her gently take her wrist. "Chi-Chan." Suddenly, Chihiro felt herself fall back on her heels, not realizing she’d rose onto her toes. Why was she getting so defensive?

"I'm fine…” She mumbled to her friend, who didn't look convinced.

Rumi didn't reply and turned to Ayame. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Ayame-San. I hope we get to know more of you in the future. Chi-Chan and I have some things to take care of before opening, so see you later." She waved at the phoenix and went to Makoto to get her bag, eyeing Chihiro after to get her bag from Haku.

Chihiro started and approached Haku, not able to make eye contact with him, especially with Ayame clinging to him. "Thank you, Haku." She turned to Ayame, still not making eye contact. "It was nice meeting."

Before either could say anything, Chihiro bowed and turned to follow Rumi down the hall to their room to unpack, hearing the padding of Makoto's feet following after them.

Haku watched Chihiro and Rumi head down the hallway. Makoto watched after them then looked at Ayame with a frown then gave Haku a knowing look that said, "I hope you know what you have got yourself into." After that, Makoto headed down the hall after the girls.
He scowled and shrugged Ayame off his shoulders. "Let go of me." She promptly got off without a fuss. He brushed his kimono out and was silently grateful that the staff were not up and around yet. After he situated himself, he transferred his scowl to Ayame. "You. Me. My office. Now."

Being classic Ayame, she shrugged and willingly complied.

Haku led the way to the office in silence. Well that was a lie, he was silent, she went on and on about telling her whole life story since the last time they saw each other. While she was a dear friend, he did not want to have Ayame's influence troubling the staff or Chihiro, but he had to question if he could handle her influence.

Ayame was a great person, he would not disregard her of that, but she tended to be, what she called, quite free spirited. Now that he thought about it, she was much like Ryujin. He had known her for quite some time, in fact, she was young for a spirit, just barely a thousand years since her last resurrection. She was right though, they had a… connection at one point but it was from a time when he was a bit free spirited himself. It was not really a time he was at all proud of in hindsight. But her free spirit led her to trouble sometimes or even gave poor influence just because of her personality leading to discord in order. He finally got the Bathhouse in order, the last thing he needed was a chaotic influence on them.

However, where she lacked in order, she made up for her ability to strategize. She was not the traditional elegant phoenix, known for their poise, but she was strategic in war and leadership. Her appearance also represented a change in power. Which left an unsettling feeling in Haku.

When they enter the office, they sat at the table and Haku served tea, listening to her continue to go on about things happening at the palace. It was entertaining at best but after a while it became draining. Soon, the mood chilled when Ayame placed her cup on the table.

"So." She looked Haku in the eye. "I'm pretty sure you know why I'm here."

"And I am sure that you know my answer." Haku replied, sipping his tea, not breaking eye contact.

She leaned on the table. "Kohaku-Kun, you know that Naoyuki-San doesn't have much time left. There is no one else that fits the prophecy that Chimon-San told."

"Last I checked, I do not bare the scorch of the serpent. I may be one, but it does not mean I am the next Seiryu." Haku took another drink of tea, setting his empty cup down.

Ayame promptly filled the cup. "The scorch only comes to the fated. If it is fate's will, the scorch will show itself."

"Then why are you pestering me, there are plenty of other dragons who might bare the scorch. What about Ryujin? He has not been Seiryu yet." Haku offered.

Ayame gave him a deadpan expression and replied. "Really? Do I have to explain? It's Ryu? And he's not exactly qualified. He's been around since the beginning and there has been no record of the scorch on him."

Haku rolls his eyes in annoyance.

The Suzaku continues. "You can't ignore your fate forever. It will catch up with you sooner or later, you might as well meet it half way."

Haku rose to his feet and walked over to the book shelves.
"How about the other part of the prophecy? How many dragons can be called 'lost,' out there?" Ayame reasoned.

"Quite a few on the contrary. And it really does depend on your definition of 'lost.'" Haku replied.

She deadpanned him again. "Well aren't you stubborn as ever?"

Haku smiled, taking a book off the shelf. "Thank you." He thumbed through the book idly and put it back.

"Seriously, Kohaku-Kun, all four of us agree that you are meant to take over as Seiryu." She exasperated.

"Ayame-San." Haku snapped. "I ask this as a friend, please tell them to give up this senseless notion and to stop bothering me. Find someone else, it is not me you should be trying to persuade."

Ayame considered him and sighed. "As your friend, Kohaku-Kun, I'll see what I can do. Until then, I'll stick around for a bit. I kinda like your new girlfriend." She grinned coyly.

Haku felt his face heat up as his fingers traced over the spine of the book with his best friend's name on it. *Spirited Away. Ogino Chihiro.* He cleared his throat and composed himself. "I can assure you she is nothing of the sort." He said looking back at her.

She eyes him suspiciously. "Uh-huh. Is that what you're telling yourself?" She stood and let out a light laugh. "Well, I for one know you, Kohaku-Kun, and if there is one thing I know about you, you are a horrible liar." She winked at him and disappeared into a pile of ash, leaving him alone in his office dumbfounded with the smell of burnt wild flowers.

Chapter End Notes

Is our dear duo realizing that they may have feelings for each other? Oh, let the romance begin! (You guys don't know how long I've been waiting for this development! T^T)

If anyone has read Fruits Basket by Natsuki Takaya, Ayame's interactions with Haku pretty much remind me of how Sohma Kagura is with Kyo. Just putting that out there. I also posted a picture of what she looks like on my deviantArt, so go check that out!

Btw, since the myth of the Phoenix is different across cultures, I decided to kind of mix them together rather than stick with the traditional Chinese myth of them, since that is where the Japanese version of them is derived. I've done this with a lot of the myths in this story, so many of them are loosely based off their original story. But ya'll were warned of this early in book one so I think you guys know this already. SO you'll hear more about Ayame later. :D

My goal is to have updates every Friday, if not, Saturday. However, I'll be working more a lot more hours and going to school starting September, so I'll do my best to keep up and post regularly.

God bless! KawaChou
Chapter Notes

*reader warning: talk of mental illness and mentions of suicide ahead for those who aren’t comfortable with it, just a heads up*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Written Rivers

Book 2: A Tie Amongst Rivers

Chapter 3: Tamatebako

Rumi sat across the table from Chihiro eating late breakfast after unpacking their things. The Ogino seemed to still be stewing over her encounter with the Suzaku of the Holy Beasts. Rumi had seen Ayame’s playful smirk geared toward Chihiro and all she had to do from there was watch her friend start overthinking the implications and rise onto her toes out of heated habit.

“What's got you all riled up?” Rumi questioned, already knowing the answer, but looking for conversation.

“Haku… and Ayame-San…” Chihiro bit harshly on the next bite of food.

“Is this cuz they’re a protentional power couple and you don’t know what to do with it?”

Her friend gaped like a fish out of water. “N-no.”

Rumi gave her a knowing look, eyebrow raised. Chihiro pierced her lips.

“Well… maybe… I don’t know. Something just doesn’t feel right. And didn’t you see how uncomfortable Haku looked?”

“Then why are you so worried? He obviously isn’t interested and even if he was, why would it matter to you? We’re stuck now, but not forever. As soon as we leave, last I checked you’re letting all of this go. Unless plans have changed?”

Chihiro’s face fell at the mention of their permanent leave and her prior decision to let it all go. It was almost as if she were reconsidering the whole thing as she gnawed at her inner cheek. Was she considering staying? What changed?

“Chi-Chan?”

“I… No… Of course not…” Chihiro stuttered over her own thoughts.

Rumi nodded as her friend contemplated with herself. She looked up when her eyes catch someone walk in through the door to the food hall. It was the Ayame chick. Chick… she was a phoenix… immortal firebirds… immortal baby chicks… Well, at least she cracked herself up.

“Ah.” She said aloud as the Phoenix spotted them and approached.
Chihiro paused her mumbling and gave her a quizzical look. She turned to look over her shoulder where Rumi had been looking and blinked just as Ayame came around to the side of the table into view.

“Hey ladies, I was wondering if you wanted to chat for a bit.” She smiled.

The thing that always got Rumi whenever the Phoenix smiled was that it always seemed like she had some ulterior motive. Like the ones characters made in tv shows. The ones with closed eyes and creepy smiles that screamed ulterior motives. Yeah, that one. Something just always felt off. Rumi looked over to Chihiro to gauge her reaction, especially after what had happened the when they first met. She had to step in last time before Chihiro could explode in Ayame’s face. She had to admit, it did almost seem like the woman was teasing her with the way she was hanging herself off Haku. But she hadn’t expected such a potentially explosive reaction from her friend.

But Chihiro seemed calm enough today and considered the spirit. “Sure. Do you want to go somewhere else?”

Ayame tilted her head. “If you don’t mind.”

Chihiro looked at her friend and Rumi shrugged. If Chihiro thought she could handle it, why not? Heh. Famous last words.

Chihiro and Rumi cleared the table and made their way upstairs to their room. Their room had a balcony area, so they thought it’d be a nice place for tea. It had a nice view of the river, so it wasn’t a bad alternative to their usual garden spot.

“Well isn’t this quaint.” Ayame glanced around their living room space, walking along the bookshelves decorated with books and ornaments.

Chihiro seemed to eye her. “Thanks.”

Ayame hummed and continued to look through the books until one caught her eye. “Ogino… Chihiro…” She sounded out the characters and her eyes widened. “No way! You have a book?!?”

The sudden attention caught Chihiro off guard and she blushed. “Uh… yeah…”

Rumi watched her play with her hair tentatively. Rumi rolled her eyes. Now she was shy? “Yeah, she wrote it from the perspective of humans and spirits getting along and humans respecting nature and the spirits once again.”

The Phoenix let out a light scoff.

“Do you think that’s wrong?” Rumi asked, raising a brow.

A forlorn smile adorned her lips. “Humans haven’t changed since their creation. They’re selfish and destructive. There’s little hope for them. We spirits have done our best to intervene and give them the benefit of the doubt… Most of the time, it falls on empty hopes.”

“Creatures of habit…” Chihiro said under her breath next to her at the table.

Rumi looked at her empathetically, “Chi-Chan…”

“No, Rumi-chan, she’s right,” Chihiro said confidently. “But we learn. We fall, but we get back up. We fall and forget but we get back up and relearn. It’s why I wrote that book.”
Ayame smiled. “And that’s where our hope is placed. In humans like you, who try to understand and change. Who try to revolutionize the world back to its roots. It only takes one human, Chihiro-chan, to make a change. Maybe your book will stir something up.”

Chihiro seemed to blush again, but she was confident in her stance. Rumi smiled at that. Chihiro was starting to get her place. She remembered helping Chihiro through high school find out what she wanted to do with her life. She remembered how much Chihiro struggled and how anxious she would get over her future that it caused her to have anxiety attacks. She was the one that helped her through her attacks through high school.

Since she had all her memories, she remembered Chihiro’s attacks clearly and the triggers. The first one she was there for was triggered by a spirit in their homeroom classroom and she started to panic when she saw a pretty scary spirit. Now, Rumi only knew what she saw because since the car accident and Yuuka took her as a host, she could see spirits as well. Fortunately, she had Yuuka and Makoto to seek comfort in, but Chihiro had no one. Yuuka and Makoto had forbidden her from talking to Chihiro about what happened or that the spirits she was seeing weren’t just her imagination. All Rumi could do was comfort her and fight off those that bullied her. But she had been no better than the bullies. Rumi had hated herself during the whole time Chihiro struggled with her bullies and ability to see the spirits alone. She felt at fault. So, she did the only thing she could do, help her through it.

“It's okay. We're going to figure this out. This too will pass.” Rumi recited those words to Chihiro after witnessing the first attack since their reunion. Chihiro had run out of class and into the hallway and Rumi chased after her and held her hands as the young Ogino found difficulty in breathing, her tear-filled eyes searching around as she looked for the spirits that hid in the shadows, watching them. “Chi-chan. Look at me. Listen to my words. It's going to be okay. They can’t hurt you. We’re going to figure this out okay? This too will pass. Breath with me.” She guided Chihiro out of her mind and back to reality. But the unfortunate thing was, that Chihiro was already in reality. It was reality she couldn’t escape, not her mind.

It was after that, Rumi wrote the words in a small notebook, helping her friend however she could to push through the bullying and spirits. She had spent quite a few nights at the Ogino household, talking Chihiro out of her attacks, helping patch up after cutting too deep, and suicidal thoughts. Rumi was the one that found her friend after Chihiro tried to overdose on her mother’s pills. Chihiro had already been going through therapy but it just tipped from there. Even Rumi felt helpless and alone at that time, especially watching her friend get taken to a mental hospital. But she had to put aside her own impending dark thoughts, so she could be there for her friend.

It was around then at the end of their first year in high school, Yuuka started messing with Chihiro’s memories, altering the space and memories around them so the spirits disappeared and Chihiro’s anxieties started to fade. Therapy sessions started to become few and far between. Chihiro still had anxiety attacks, but no longer because of the spirits she once saw, they were more about her future and where she belonged. Rumi was no different. Lost… They were both lost… And now that she knew the truth of her family, she was more than ready to let go of the Human World.

“Rumi-chan?”

Rumi blinked and met the eyes of Chihiro. “Hm?”

Chihiro chuckled nervously. “You kinda blanked out for a bit. You okay?”

Rumi’s eyes briefly shifted to Ayame, who was sipping her tea, eyeing her with mild concern. She looked back at Chihiro and smiled. “I’m fine. Just thinking about some old memories.”
Chihiro bit her lip and nodded. “Anyway, Ayame-san and I were talking about the efforts the Phoenix makes to bring peace.”

“Per se, I don’t bring peace, I announce it. I can sense when trouble or peace is near, and I bring the awareness of it. However, you humans often mix it up and I can’t really do anything about it from there.” Ayame shrugs.

The girls nodded and then Rumi asked a question she’d been wondering about since they met Ayame. “So, are you really immortal? Or do you really get reborn from your ashes when you die? Can you lay eggs or are you the egg? Wait! Did the egg or the Phoenix come first?”

Ayame blinked with wide eyes at the sudden barrage of questions and glanced at Chihiro. “This is normal,” Chihiro replied, nonchalantly.

“I see.” Ayame placed her empty cup down and Chihiro refilled it. “Well, to answer your question, Rumi-chan. Yes, I am immortal but not yet exactly.”

“Not yet?” Rumi questioned.

“Yes, I go through a cycle of rebirth until I become a fully mature Phoenix,” Ayame explained. “Phoenix must meet a level of maturity to gain true immortality where we no longer have to go through the rebirthing process. Until we do though, we continue to resurrect. We have vague remembrances of our past life. I’m rather young in comparison to others.”

“There are others?” Chihiro chimed.

“Of course! I’m not the only one, however, many of us will continue to the heavens after a time of true immortality. My mate and I have been switching the role of Suzaku every time we go through a rebirth since we’re the only two Phoenixes at present—”

“Wait! You have a mate?” Chihiro interrupted.

“Hm?” Ayame blinked. “Of course, I do. I’ve just always been a bit rebellious as far as elegant Phoenixes go.”

“But Haku?”

“Kohaku-kun? Oh, that.” Ayame kind of brushed it off. “Before my mate and I were official, we had a small thing, but it didn’t go anywhere. And that was a few lifetimes ago, I hardly remember it. I just like to goad Kohaku-kun sometimes cuz he does.”

Chihiro looked astonished, an ecstatic look in her eyes. Rumi eyed her friend. Was her friend…

“Oh my, do you fancy Kohaku-kun?” Ayame asked for Rumi.

Chihiro’s jaw slacked, then her whole face turned an unnatural shade of red. “What?!”

“It’s okay, hun, it happens to all of us eventually. It’s called love.”

“Nun-uh. I don’t know what you’re talking about. We’re friends! I think we have both made it very clear,” Chihiro persisted, waving her hands frantically in front of her in denial.

Rumi simply bit her lip to keep from saying anything, desperately wishing she had popcorn at the moment as her eyes darted between the two’s interaction.

“Friends?” Ayame scoffed. “I don’t know what delusion you’ve been living in, hun, but I have never
seen Kohaku-Kun act so friendly toward anyone. Not even myself from what I remember of our brief relationship. You two are such stubborn creatures, I honestly don’t understa-

“It’s not like that!” Chihiro exclaimed, standing up. Her face was beet red and Rumi couldn’t tell if it were from anger or embarrassment. “Haku was the first friend I made out here in the Spirit World. He saved me on several occasions and has been like a brother to me. And even if on some off chance, I did like him, like you say, I’ll be returning to the Human World someday and I won’t be coming back…” Her words faltered at the end as if remembering and doubting her original resolve to leave the Spirit World behind her at her return to the Human World. Rumi had seen her resolve waver over the last month, and with the gates closed, the likelihood of their state being indefinite was getting higher. She shook her head after a pause. “So, even if I did, I couldn’t.”

Ayame looked her over then Rumi. “Why are you so afraid?” She asked.

“What do you mean?” Rumi almost stuttered after the sudden attention.

“Why does the Spirit World scare you?” Ayame clarified.

Chihiro sighed and looked to Ayame and her friend then the table. “Y’know, in the Human World, we have a fable about a fisherman who came to the Spirit World after saving a turtle who was the friend of the princess, Otohime. Thankful for his good deed, she invited the fisherman to the Dragon Palace in the Spirit World. He stayed there for a mere three days and decided to return to his family. The princess granted him with a box as a gift when he left and warned him not to open it. Upon return to his village, his family and friends were nowhere to be seen, having died a hundred years ago. And even though the princess warned him not to open the box, he lifted the lid and a puff of smoke aged him to his lost years, making him a white-haired old man. He died a lonely man…”

Chihiro sighed. “I’ve come to learn that that’s not how the time thing works between the two worlds but it’s a scary thought that my family may be long dead when I see the Human World again…”

Ayame hummed. “I can reassure you that you will one day see your family again. You are right about the time relations, and you won’t become like the old man in your fables. However, I do believe you will see your family again.”

Rumi narrowed her eyes. “What makes you so sure?”

“Something tells me that the one that closed the gate isn’t that cold-hearted.”

“You know who did it?” Chihiro said, placing her hands on the table.

Ayame shook her head. “Not officially, but I can assure you it is none of us Holy Beasts.”

Chihiro gaped at her, her eyes blinking before she sat down and crossed her arms. “Well, that’s no help.” She grumbled.

“Sorry, dear, I may be able to sense peace and trouble but I’m not all-knowing. Even as Suzaku, I still don’t have that kind of knowledge.” Ayame shrugged. “But technically only the Beasts can control the gates, so it really doesn’t make any sense.”

Chihiro laxed her arms and stared at her. “I keep hearing ‘Holy Beasts’ this, ‘Holy Beasts’ that, but what is the purpose of them? And why are you so desperate to have Haku as your Seiryu?”

“Yeah, what’s the big deal?” Rumi echoed. Admittedly, she had very slim knowledge of the details in the stories of the gods, at least in comparison to Chihiro.

Ayame blinked. “Ryu-san and Kohaku-kun haven’t told you?”
“I’ve heard the story of the Four Holy Beasts from myths, Obaa-s- Zeniba-san, Ryujin-san told me Genbu-Sama’s prophecy and all Haku has told me is that you all want him as the next Seiryu… Well, actually he’s barely told me that…” Chihiro said, correcting herself. “I just want to know why it has to be him?”

Ayame tapped her finger to her chin as if considering her words. “Well, you’ve heard the prophecy, no?”

“Yes.” The girls said at once. Chihiro had told Rumi the prophecy, though she couldn’t say she understood any of it.

“The lost dragon shall rise with the sun, the scorch of the serpent bared on their skin.” The Phoenix recited. “The prospective dragon must be lost and bare the scorch of the serpent. While Kohaku-kun bares no scorch, he has been lost in a way few dragons have…”

“Him losing his river…” Chihiro muttered. “But rivers get filled in all the time? How many can be called lost?”

“Yeah, can’t that just be a coincidence?” Rumi asked. “Aren’t there plenty of other dragons in Japan? Haku-san is a river god, right? Aren’t there plenty of other river gods that are dragons? What makes him special?”

“You both sound just like Kohaku-kun.” Ayame shook her head. “You’re not wrong, Rumi-San, but the fact that he’s been lost and has so many redeeming factors that he’s accumulated over his lifetime, makes him such an excellent candidate. And Naoyuki-san has personally met him and he believes he’s the next Seiryu.”

“And how does he know?” Chihiro scrutinized.

She blinked. “Because he met you.”

“Excuse me?” Chihiro gaped.

Ayame reversed the conversation. “What was the prophecy that Chimon-San gave you, Chihiro-chan?”

Chihiro seemed taken aback and sputtered her response. “You... You must find your path and follow it without falter. Your friend will have to make a decision soon and you will have to be their anchor. You must convince your friend of their duty.” She scowled. “But what does that have to do with anything?”

“Naoyuki-san knows who you are and has spoken very highly of you. Saying how you helped clean his river and many others in the Human World.”

“Cleaned his river?” Understanding dawned her face. “The stink spirit?”

“No way…” Rumi mumbled.

“Ding ding ding.” Ayame chimed. “You saved his river. Didn’t you go back when you were older to clean his river and many others?”

“Well, yeah. I and the Environmental Club went around and started cleaning out the rivers and restoring them. It wasn’t easy, but it was the least we could do. I never realized he was Seiryu. He remembered me?”
“Of course. And that’s why he thinks you are the innocent in the prophecy. ‘The innocent shall make a final say, marking the path set before them.’ The prophecy that Chimon-san gave you only confirmed his suspicions. You are to convince Kohaku-kun of his duty.” Ayame explained.

“Chihiro-chan. That’s your role in all of this.”

Rumi’s eyes darted to Chihiro for her reaction. Chihiro was just staring at the Phoenix, a cross of shock, anger, and confusion on her face.

“My role?” She finally said. “That’s it? Are you kidding me?” She scoffed. “And why is it my job to convince him? He clearly doesn’t want the position. Why is it my role?” She seethed. Clearly, she didn’t like her appointed role.

“Chimon-san’s prophecies are never wrong, Chihiro-chan. And it’s not uncommon that some correlate.” Ayame said. “And Naoyuki-san doesn’t have much time left. He needs a successor and all arrows point to Kohaku-kun, whether he wants it or not. If fate wills it, it will be done.”

“But why?” Chihiro exclaimed. “It’s his life. He can decide what he wants to do! Who cares about fate?” She crossed her arms. “I’m not convincing him of anything. If that is the role I have been striving to know, I wish I’d never been given it or the personal prophecy.”

Rumi watched the Phoenix’s expression harden. “I don’t think you understand the importance of this role, Chihiro-chan. This is a sacred tradition and if Kohaku-kun does not take part there will be an imbalance in Spirit World and we will be short of a beast. Have you ever tried to make a four-legged table try to stand with three legs? It lacks balance and stability, which is what will happen if Kohaku-kun does not take on this role.”

“Then your system is fragile and flawed if it can be taken down by the incorrect assumption of a specific dragon for the title.” Chihiro bit back. “You’re barking up the wrong tree, meanwhile, your real Seiryu candidate is off wondering how he got a stupid mark on his back. Leave Haku be!”

Rumi could see her friend visibly shaking with anger, causing her to gulp. Chihiro was always the passionate time, it’s how she got things done in the Environmental Club and with her book. Introvert as she was, without leadership she was not. She glanced over at Ayame, who fumed just as much, the smell of burning wild flowers hinted the air. How did one diffuse this?

Here goes nothing.

Rumi cleared her throat, earning herself almost immediate attention. “Well… I think we need a break to cool off. Maybe some time to think things through before we all say or do something we regret—”

“There’s nothing to think about,” Chihiro said abruptly, crossing her arms. “I want no part of the Holy Beasts’ plans. And as much as I admire and commend you, Ayame-san, I cannot do as you ask. If Haku does not want to participate, then I will stand on his word. If fate,” she emphasized, “so wants it, then it will get what it wants, but let it be his will first, stop trying to force him.” She stood. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we have things to take care of before it gets too late.” Her stiff posture screamed ‘get out.’

Ayame narrowed her eyes and assessed the girl before rising to her feet. “I presume Rumi-chan is right. We do need some air. She softened her expression. “Chihiro-chan, I respect your stance, but must warn you that fate works in mysterious ways and always get its way.” She then smiled. “I do wish you the best of luck with Kohaku-kun though. He’s a great catch if you can get him.”

Before Chihiro had a chance to even exasperate a blush, Ayame winks and vanished, leaving nothing but the smell of burnt wildflowers.
Chihiro glared at the place the Phoenix once stood. She huffed. “I don’t know if I like her or not.”

Rumi shrugged. “Neither do I…”

Chapter End Notes

A/N:
Sorry guys! This last week kicked me in the butt with my new job, family stuff, and car troubles so I had literally no time to work on the chapter. I had it 75% finished on the scheduled update date. It’s been a rough last week but I’m readjusting to my new schedule and I should be able to get back to our regularly scheduled program. lol

Tamatebako- is the jewelry box from the fable Chihiro tells.

Btw, I love writing from Rumi’s POV. She’s so sarcastic and sassy, I love it! It makes me find my inner Percy Jackson. XD

Note about the timeline… So, I noticed that there’s a discrepancy in the timeline that I have written wrong on several accounts. I guess that’s what happens when you write a story for this long no matter how planned out it is. Rumi and Makoto came into Chihiro’s life when she was fifteen, near the end of middle school. Chihiro has been mentally unstable, seeing spirits, and being bullied throughout most of elementary and all of middle school. She was pretty unstable and suicidal when Rumi finally came into the picture. Rumi pretty much held her together the whole time until Yuuka altered Chihiro’s memories their first year of high school. Note that the only memories Yuuka altered in Rumi’s mind are the memories of her family (which is a lot to alter if you really think about it) nothing with what Chihiro went through. I just wanted to make this clear since I know I’ve messed this up in the past and will have to go back and fix it.

Thanks for reading and don’t forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

God bless! KawaChou
Needless to say, Makoto hated going to get tickets for the train. It consisted of a lot of haggling and threatening that he was no particular fan of. The ticket sellers were often hard to find and stingy beyond belief. He absolutely despised the overall experience. However, he loved the human girls he did it for, so despite how frustrating it was to get them, he did not mind making a few threats to see the smile on their faces when he returned with tickets.

Makoto ran up the hill across from the Bathhouse and felt the wind blow through his patched fur. He loved this time of year, though admittedly he loved the warmer months of fall but something about mid-spring always appealed to him. Maybe it was the end of mating season. He shuddered at the thought. He dreaded that time of year, even during his time in the Human World, it left him hating existence itself.

He let out a sigh and padded down the side of the hill toward the small town that surrounded the Bathhouse. It was late afternoon and he had spent the good part of the last two days hunting down the ticket sellers and purchasing the tickets for none too cheap. It had been three days since Ayame had come to the Bathhouse and every time he had been around Chihiro since, had been less than pleasant. She was sullen and irritable and at the simple whisper of the Suzaku spirit, she would snap. Rumi was not much better, but for different reasons. Chihiro, on the other hand, had told him and Haku of her encounter with Ayame shortly after. It was a rather humorous and scary interaction with the human girl, especially since Makoto had still been bitter for the way Haku had let Ayame cling to him at her introduction.

Shortly after Chihiro had her said encounter with Ayame, she had stalked straight up to Haku's office where Haku and himself had been discussing where train ticket vendors would be at this time of year, with Rumi not far behind. Makoto could smell her emotions from a mile away and it felt like a rock dropped at the pit of his stomach at the sudden realization of the circumstances.

"Chihiro?" Haku looked a bit alarmed. "Is there something wrong?" Makoto watched his nose twitch.

"Haku." She huffed, her cheeks flushed from the exertion up to the office and anger. "We need to talk."

Where Makoto was familiar, Haku was not. After spending the good portion of over six years with two human females, he had learned more than he had bargained for when he took on the position Haku had assigned him. Inwardly, he could not help but laugh at the outright expression of concern that crossed his master's face.

"Um…" Haku stuttered, causing the okami spirit's lips to twitch. "Of course. But first, are you injured? I smell blood?"

As if on cue, Rumi had rushed in after just as realization dawned Chihiro's face, causing her face to
turn an unnatural shade of red as Rumi whispered something in her ear. With her ears a new shade of red now, she sputtered an incomprehensible reply and waved her hands in front of her.

"D-do-don't worry about it! I'm fine!"

"Since when was it fine if someone was bleeding?" Haku questioned, taking a step toward the human girls. This only caused Chihiro to wave her hands more frantically.

"Since I was born a human!" She exasperated. "I promise you, I'm completely fine!" Makoto did not think the girl's face could get any redder.

A quizzical look crossed Haku's face as he glanced between the two girls then to Makoto, who was quite enjoying the confusion that dawned his master's face. He was still quite upset about him letting Ayame flaunt herself all over him upon her arrival, especially in front of Chihiro.

"That does not make any sense."

Rumi waved her hand dismissively. "It's a human thing. It lets us know that we can still bear children."

"By bleeding?" He replied, appalled.

Completely embarrassed, Chihiro simply covered her face and nodded.

Rumi rolled her eyes, slinging her arm across Chihiro's shoulders, who just wanted to shrink away from existence. "Since we're stuck here for who knows how long, we might as well warn you so you don't keep freaking out every month-"

"Every month?" Haku emphasized.

She nodded and continued. "Human females go through a thing once a month that prepares us to bear a child. If we don't get the male necessities, our body ejects what was prepared and the cycle starts over. It pretty much lets us know we're still able to have kids. It's also a pain because we get emotional. Some more than others." Her head leaned on Chihiro's, who was still as embarrassed as before, if not, more so.

Her explanation was so blunt and nonchalant, Makoto almost lost it.

"Can we please refocus on the original topic?" Chihiro bit out.

Haku blinked and nodded, still shaken. "Of course… What was it you wanted to discuss?"

Chihiro suddenly straightened and crossed her arms. "I wanted to discuss your friend who visited today. I have the right mind to turn her to ashes myself."

Haku's eyes widened in interest, glancing toward Makoto then back at her. "I would mind my words, Chihiro, you might make a permanent residency here in a way you would not like."

"Oh don't give me your sass now, Kohaku Nushi." Chihiro snapped back. "She comes over here all high and mighty trying to tell me my only role and purpose here to convince you that you're the next Seiryu. Who does she think she is?"

Haku seemed to doubletake at her words. "I beg your pardon?"

"My role, she thinks it's to convince you of your role. Who does she think I am? Her maid? Delivery girl? What's the point of Seiryu, anyway? Why are they all so headstrong on this notion of you being
"part of the Holy Beast? Will someone just explain their purse to me?"

"Slow down, Chi-Chan, one question at a time," Rumi muttered, getting a side glare from Chihiro.

Chihiro recounted what happened with her conversation with Ayame and continued. "All I want is a straight answer. No more beating around the bush. No more 'you don't need to worry about it.' I need a straight answer about this whole Four Holy Beast thing and why it's so important that you be a part of it?"

"Very well," Haku replied, tapping his pen to the desk. He cleared his throat and sat up in his chair. "To start..." He began. "The Four Holy Beasts are the council of advisors in the Capital who protect and oversee the Spirit World, advising the Emperor where needed. They keep the balance of the Spirit World with their gifts and experience, each unique to their incarnate and specialties. I just happen to fit their prophecy and they refuse to accept the fact that they have the wrong candidate."

Chihiro seemed to be caught off guard as if she did not expect such a straightforward answer. "That's all? Ayame-San made it sound much more drastic."

"She tends to exaggerate things." Makoto deadpanned.

"Yes, but she is not wrong," Haku replied. "If there were to be an imbalance in the Beasts, there would be a disturbance in the lands. Each Beast rules over specific regions of the Spirit World and if one were to fall without a replacement, there could be an upset in the balance and the regions could become misguided, no matter how self-sufficient they are by themselves."

"So, it really is a fragile system," Chihiro grumbled, distastefully.

"When you put it that way in the worst-case scenario, yes, it is." Haku agreed. "But it rarely has ever gotten to that point. And the fact that they have been tracking me down tells me they have either stretched their resources or are just not broadening their search well enough. I have qualifications they desire, and many have gotten to know me personally. I never asked for so much attention, but I earned it one way or another."

"I see..." Chihiro mumbled. "So, the prophecies are meant to prevent this rupture between switching of Beasts?"

He nodded. "Precisely. It normally happens within a century or two of the Beast's death, so preparations can be made for the new Beast. The former Beast's death is never specified but it has always been expected that it would happen within at least a century. They technically still have a while until the century is up, so the reason for their fretting is null."

"..." Chihiro did not say anything and hummed to herself. "Well... I'll always be on team Haku whether you take it or leave it. Whatever you choose I support, I don't care what fate or Ayame say. It's none of their business and I won't make it my job or role, to change your mind from whatever you chose." She smiled genuinely and gave a slight bow.

"Thank you, Chihiro..." Haku replied. "I appreciate it."

"Of course."

Rumi took this an opportunity to jump in. "Well, I'm glad all that is sorted out. Chi-chan and I have to take care of something, so we'll be taking our leave."

As if on cue, Chihiro's face paled at the recollection of the prior topic and promptly turned on her heels to leave the office space. "See you later." She said curtly and out the door she disappeared.
"I'm glad we're going to Obaa-San's this week… I'd hate to be around the guests like this…" Makoto heard Chihiro mutter to Rumi as they left the room.

The okami spirit looked to Haku, who slouched defeated in his chair then gave Makoto an exasperated expression.

"Monthly bleeding?"

Makoto smirked at the memory of his master's confusion. It was not often one saw the flustered side of Haku. Chihiro and Rumi had remained in hiding in their room for the last several days from his understanding. Something about not wanting to cause a scene with the guests. Rin had gone in to ask twenty questions galore and apparently still was from what Makoto could tell as he walked past their room upon his return to the Bathhouse.

He had gotten in the habit of shifting to his human form upon entering the Bathhouse to keep guests comfortable and to save the hassle getting in the way. He could not say it was favorite form, it felt like a denial of his true nature. The same for his Shikoku form. Though he was part Shikoku, it was not the pride of his existence. The godliness that did run through his veins was what he took pride in, no matter how little it did, he would own it.

Makoto sighed as he entered his room, brushing the thoughts to the back of his mind. His room was not much different from the girls', if anything it was just bland. It did not have much décor or color, it simply held the necessities and some scrolls and books that he deemed necessary to keep on hand.

He still was not used to having his own space in a permanent residence. He spent most of his life migrant, never needing to make any one place feel like home. The Bathhouse, Haku's river, and Chihiro's home were places he had stayed the longest in. Or at least, long enough to call them home. Long enough to allow himself to become attached to it. He had traveled alone most of his life, taking the term "lone wolf" quite literally. If there was one thing he learned during his time as a lone wolf, just how difficult it was for wolves not to be in packs. He had not had a pack in years until Haku picked him up, half dead…

"Makoto!"

The muffled sound behind his door was followed by a slam of his door swinging open, which he could have sworn he had locked. Rin came barging into the main living space where he had barely been able to start heating up tea.

"Makoto! I thought you'd never get back! Maybe you can confirm some of this monthly business these girls keep talking about?!!" Rin exasperated.

"Hmmm…" Makoto looked behind her to see Chihiro and Rumi running after the weasel spirit. Chihiro almost instantly shook her head and he could tell she had already answered every question under the sun. "Hm. Rin-san, I can neither confirm nor deny any information that I may or may not know about whatever it is that you may or may not be talking about."

"I taught him that one!" Rumi exclaimed with pride, in which was replied with an arched eyebrow from both spirits.

"Riiiiight." Rin drawled.

"Can we just drop it?" Chihiro grumbled loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Gladly." Makoto and Rumi replied in unison, causing them to both blink at each other.
"Fine." Rin huffed. "Well, I have work to do. Don't play hook for too long ladies!"

"Kaay!" The girls chimed as they watched her leave the room. As soon as they saw the door close, they let go of a breath that may have been holding since the beginning of their conversation with the weasel spirit. Three days ago.

"Finally…" Rumi fanned her face. "I thought that'd never end."

"She wouldn't stop…" Chihiro said, presumably traumatized from the vacant look in her eyes.

"I am glad to be of service," Makoto said, suppressing a chuckle. "Tea, anyone?"

"Please." The girls said in earnest.

They all sat at the table and talked, catching up on the events of the last few days and the days to come as they prepared for their trip to Zeniba's. The girls seemed eager to see their friends once again. He would agree that it was odd not having the spirited yosuzume spirit around, but it was also peaceful at the same time. Something that he liked and did not get enough of. But they would see Yuuka soon enough, the trip to Swamp Bottom would be a long and quiet journey as always. A reunion of friends.

Yuuka bounced on her heels as she waited anxiously for her friends to arrive. She really did feel like a child despite her years. Maybe it was from being around Boh that caused her to actually act her age… well… her physical age? Mental age? Whatever it was, being around Boh was definitely bringing out her inner child. Currently, she was pacing the kitchen on her heels with Boh at the table coloring and munching at snacks while Zeniba and Kaonashi were sitting at the table knitting, not baking for once.

Zeniba's eyes flitted between the two and she lowered her needles and yarn. "Oh, would you two stop? You're giving me anxiety."

Yuuka paused in her pacing and came to the table. "I'm sorry, Oba-San, but I'm just, I don't know, excited. I'm not exactly joined at the hip with them as I used to be, it's still weird being apart."

Zeniba chortled. "After a month?"

"Well, of course!" Yuuka said excitedly, sitting at the table across from her aunt. "They haven't exactly had a chance to really come and visit since they got stuck. Although they've had plenty of time and opportunities to come. Then again, Makoto would have to go find tickets and everyone knows how much he dislike getting the tickets. The only reason I really know this much alone is thanks to Ame-kun, since he comes and visits and gives the letters the girls send."

"You and Ame-Nii talk too much." Boh suddenly interrupted, earning a glare from Yuuka.

Zeniba chortled again. "Now, now, Boh, don't be mean. As she said, she's excited. I'm surprised you're not jumping around."

"Well, I have other things to be worried about." He replied quite matter-a-fact like.

"What? Coloring?" Yuuka scoffed, placing her chin in her palm.

Boh turned red with anger. "Sh-shut up!"

"I beg your pardon. Not in this house." Zeniba chided sternly.
"Sorry." They said in unison.

The sound of a squeaky hop distracted them from the argument and without hesitation, Yuuka practically flew to the door and swung it open.

"Chihiro! Rumi!" She ran straight at them and wrapped her arms around their waists. "I missed you guys!" Suddenly her mind filled with any doubts she had about their friendships and she let go. "Sorry. I was just excited…" She brushed her hair out her face and mildly avoided eye contact.

"What are you talking about?" Chihiro laughed.

Rumi came down to her eye level and smiled kindly. "We missed you too." At that she pet her hair down affectionately before bringing her into a hug. "I missed you, Yuuka…. And I… I forgive you."

The words caused a weight to lift off her shoulders. She'd been holding it for so long that she forgot what it felt like to have such a freedom in her being. Yuuka melted into the hug and held Rumi ever tighter, a tear slipping down her cheek.

They stood there like that for who knew how long, Rumi petting her hair as she felt her body rake with tears. It felt otherworldly as if she had been watching herself in that moment from outside her body. Every worry she had about this moment, every regret leading up to this moment, almost felt worth it.

Her tears began to subside, and she slowly released herself from Rumi's arms. She sniffed and looked up at Rumi with a smile. Rumi returned it affectionately.

"Ready to go inside?" Rumi winked.

"Yeah." Yuuka wiped the tears from her cheeks and led the way inside where they greeted the Swamp Bottom residents. They all say around the table and caught up excitedly about what had happened in the last month that hadn't been talked about in letters.

Apparently, the Holy Beasts and the fate of Haku's future had been a consistent hot topic at the Bathhouse because it was somehow brought back to the little cottage miles away from it. It also seemed to cause Chihiro a lot of tempered moments at any mention of Ayame or her supposed role in both prophecies she'd been told. She'd be even more so tempered when the names Ayame and Haku were used in the same sentence, regardless of context.

Zeniba seemed to be on the same wavelength and asked what was on her mind as well as probably everyone else's. "You seem to have a lot to talk about regarding this matter. Do you have insight on things that some of us don't?"

Chihiro was caught off guard by the question. "Excuse me?"

"I think her emotions are merely clouding her judgment," Rumi replied matter-of-factly.

"What are you talking about?" Chihiro exasperated.

"She has been a bit more dazed lately." Makoto decided to chime in.

A blush started to creep onto Chihiro's face. Whether from anger or embarrassment was still up in the air. "Are you just going to talk around me?"

"Chihiro, dear." Zeniba started. "Have you fallen in love before?"
The blush crept further and brighter. "What's that got to do with anything?" She started to fidget with anything and everything.

"It has everything to do with anything." Yuuka chimed with a smirk.

"Not really..." Chihiro muttered. She looked like a cornered animal under the pressure of the implication.

"Chi-Chan..." Rumi smiled. "I've taken notice lately but hadn't said anything but..." She paused. "Are you in love with Haku?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N:
Sorry guys, time and motivation have not been on my side recently. My personal life has been really hectic lately. I was also trying to figure out this POV thing, since I didn't know if I wanted to stick with a particular order or if I wanted to go free for all. It's been rough but reading your feedback on the story always cheers me up and gives me a boost of motivation. So, I know I say this at the end of every chapter but thank you so much for every comment. I read them all and I treasure them! So, for now, I'll post when I can until things settle into a good rhythm. I haven't forgotten about you guys and will finish this fic no matter what.

I also had to add the whole girl thing for attempted humor purposes. It's been tense for a minute and I've seen it done before in a few other fics and found it hilarious how they implemented it. I was also in a rut and remembered that this was a scene I wanted to do.

(someone noted about the three green heads and Yubird.... I HONESTLY COMPLETELY FORGOT ABOUT THEM. Let's just say that Yubird is somehow with Boh and the green heads are... I literally don't know what purpose to give them in the story... help Haku bookkeep? Honestly, don't know...)

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

Okay, let's end this too long author's note.

God bless! KawaChou
Chihiro's face seemed to drain of all warmth. *What? Was she what?*

Chihiro sat there, mouth opening and closing but no words really being able to form on her lips. Was she in love with- oh for the love of all- were they serious? Sure, she'd heard them tease about forever now, but for them to ask so blunt now was just unnerving.

She finally found words that came out awkwardly. "You can't be serious?"

Rumi looked toward the rest of the table with an unimpressed look. "Did I stutter?"

Chihiro gaped again and took in the reactions of everyone at the table. Yuuka and Makoto seemed to be in on some joke that she was oblivious to, Zeniba… well, she was being Zeniba with her knowing watchful eyes, continuing her knitting while Kaonashi helped. The most impressive look was from Boh, he sat staring at them all, appalled by the sudden turn of conversation and somewhat lost.

"Why would she love Haku?" Boh asked, the disappointment and slight disgust in his tone was a combination of uncomforting and comical.

"I-I don't, Boh! Don't worry. They're making assumptions that aren't there." Chihiro said, trying to divert the conversation.

"As much as assuming leads to rumors, assumptions can be based off truths as well," Zeniba added, sipping her tea.

"Obaa-Saaan." Chihiro grimaced.

"Hm?" She replied innocently.

Chihiro rolled her eyes. "Seriously though, what would be the point of falling in love with Haku? I'm not staying here and I'm disconnecting from the Spirit World anyway." Once the words left her mouth, a rock dropped in the pit of her stomach. Is that how she really felt? No…

"You want to leave?"

The small voice made her realize the other reason for the sick feeling in her stomach. Boh. She'd told him that she wasn't planning to ever return during their visit before their supposed return to the Human World anyway." Once the words left her mouth, a rock dropped in the pit of her stomach. Is that how she really felt? No…

"You want to leave?"

"Oh, Boh… I didn't mean it like that…" She tried to console him, but there really was no point. He was smart, he knew she wouldn't return, but the way she stated it wasn't right… "I'm sorry…"

He shook his head and sniffled. "Sure… I understand…" Boh turned his attention back to his
coloring, effectively shutting her and the rest of the conversation out.

Chihiro winced and shifted her attention back to the rest of the table, who seemed to be waiting for her confirmation of their assumptions. "Guys, I really think you've misinterpreted everything between Haku and I. And besides, I can't fall in love with him. We're from two different worlds. It's just not possible even if I could."

"Girl." Rumi chided, shaking her head and leaning back in her chair. "For someone who can write novels and articulate facts about gods of ancient times, you suck at articulating your feelings. There are just so many plot holes and contradictions in your words and actions that it hurts. You've really always been a terrible liar."

Chihiro gaped in response. Her friend's bluntness would be the end of her one day. Plot holes and contradictions? Liar? What was that supposed to mean? She couldn't even respond with intelligible words.

Yuuka looked away, trying to look uninvolved. "She's not wrong…"

"You too?!" The Ogino managed.

"Hey, we kinda lived in the same head for six years," Yuuka said tapping her head. "We're bound to agree on some things." Rumi nodded to that.

"They're both right, Chihiro." Zeniba finally said.

Chihiro stared wide eyes at her grandmother figure, resisting the urge to groan. "Am I missing something here?"

"I believe you told Haku something similar, didn't you?" Zeniba said, unfazed.

"Excuse me?"

"Didn't you tell Haku that you couldn't tell if he wanted you here or in the Human World? That one moment he talked about you leaving the Spirit World, then the next befriending you and talking to you like you'd never leave?"

Chihiro gulped. "Well yeah, but what's that got to do with this?"

"Again," Yuuka exasperated. "It has everything to do with anything."

Chihiro shot her another glare.

"What it has to do with this," Zeniba continued. "Is that you are doing the same thing now and I don't believe you realize you're doing it."

Chihiro paused. Was she? Was she giving wrong impressions? She grimaced and thought of all the moments she's shared with Haku and all the moments she persisted that she was leaving... Was there really a contradiction between her words and actions? Was she being a hypocrite? She told Haku not to do this... now she was doing it herself...

Zeniba observed her and gave her an empathetic look. "Chihiro, it's okay to feel this way. It's okay to love someone."

This caught her off guard. What was she talking about? Of course, it was okay to love somebody, but usually the one you love is from the same world as yourself.
"What are you getting at? Of course, I know that. I can love somebody, just like anyone else. That's the way the world is."

"I don't think you understand, Chihiro," Zeniba said. "You've never tried to love anyone because you feel unlovable."

The words sank so deep into her being that she could audibly hear a crash in the abyss of her mind. The crashing sound of truth breaking down a wall of stubbornness and insecurities. She was beginning to feel vulnerable. Her voice was barely audible. "What?"

"Chihiro," The old witch started. "I want you to look around you."

She complied shakily, looking at every one of her friends in the room, each meeting her gaze with warmth. Even stubborn Boh.

"All these people, all these friends… they love you."

Chihiro began to shake a little. "I… I know that…" She said instinctively.

"Do you?" Rumi asked, a warm but sad look in her eye.

"What?"

"Chi-Chan… You need to let go of this. You need to realize that we're all here for you and that we all love you. If we can love you, you can find it somewhere in that stubborn mind of yours to maybe possibly love yourself." Rumi smiled, gingerly putting her hand over hers.

Kaonashi decided to chime in with a few grunts and a smile, causing Chihiro to smile unconsciously and chuckle, wiping a tear from her eye that she didn't realize fell.

"I'm sorry guys..." She started, not sure where she was taking it. "I never… I never realized I'd been pushing you all away..." She let out a wry chuckle. "To think I thought I was the one holding everyone together… You were all..." She shook her head.

"Chi-Chan." Rumi smiled. "We all love you. You gotta love yourself too."

A tear slipped past Chihiro's eye and nodded, wiping it away. "Yeah..."

"And..." Yuuka added, clearing her throat. "If we can love you… what makes you think Kohaku-San can't..."

Chihiro considered her. Did she love Haku? And, more questionably, did he love her? Because it would be one thing if she loved him and that was it. Unrequited love and she left at that to go back to the Human World… Yeah, the Human World.

OR. She loved him and he loved her back… What happened then? Did they tell each other and live happily after ever? Yeah. That would be the day. What then? She lives out the rest of her days in the Spirit World? Leaving behind everything she ever knew, her family, her career, everything? Was that possible? Was all that possible?

Or, they both love each other and live out the rest of their days in two different worlds. Forever star-crossed lovers that would never be. Forever apart, never knowing if the other loved the other...

Did she love him?

She shook her head. "Sorry, Yuuka. As much as you may like that to be the case, I don't love
Haku." She shrugged, a suppressed feeling of dread coming over her mind as the words fell from her lips. Words were becoming hard to say. "It's just not possible and the feelings aren't there. I love him, Yuuka, just not like that."

Yuuka looked downcast and disappointed, like her dreams had been crushed. "Right…"

"Are you sure about this Chihiro?" Zeniba pressed, like she wasn't exactly convinced.

Chihiro sucked in a breath and nodded. "Yeah… I am…" She rose to her feet. "If you'll excuse me, it's getting late… I'm going to head to bed now." She thanked Zeniba for the food and cleared her part the table to clean her dishes and left.

When the sound of the door to her room clicked, she pressed her back against it and let out a sigh. She thought over the conversation she'd just been through. Some parts she could smile at, others she felt guilty about, and others… She sighed and slid down the door to the floor.

"I don't love him…" She recounted aloud. She grimaced and covered her eyes, letting out a silent sob from the back of her throat. "I can't love him…"

Upon Chihiro's return, something seemed… off. Haku could not quite place what it was, but it was there. He decided to brush it off and save it for another time. Now he had been hoping to ask her something since she left, for old time's sake. He wanted to have dinner with her as they did in their dreams. When he approached her about it, she seemed hesitant and seemed to intentionally avoid eye contact. This bothered him, and he could not help but feel that he had done something wrong or something happened during Chihiro's week away that changed things.

Whatever it was, it was pushed aside long enough for Chihiro to agree to dinner. They decided to have a pre-sunset dinner before opening on the terrace of Haku's room. He would have the chiefs cook them something special and ask that they not be bothered. They both needed a break from everything going on and he felt that he owed her this much. Especially after a month's worth of being sent through a defective tunnel and helping tirelessly around the Bathhouse.

It was also for himself… A type of closure for himself. Any day now, the gate would open again and she would be gone forever. He needed to bring closure to his mind and take advantage of every last minute left with her.

He cleared his schedule for the afternoon the following day after her return from Zeniba's. He would spend the morning getting all his work out of the way and the afternoon preparing for the dinner. He could not remember the last time he was this excited about something. No… He could. Every time he had to wait for a chance to dream with Chihiro, the anticipation would just boil within him. This felt no different. Loneliness had slowly become his companion everytime her presence was outside his reach. Another reason he wanted closure so that his new companion might leave.

When everything was set up and he was in the waiting period before the official dinner time, he sat at the table and took in his work. He was quite proud of his efforts and could not wait to show it off to Chihiro.

He paused. Was this the love that had drawn him to Chihiro? The feeling that pained him now that she was leaving? He let out a small laugh and readjusted some of the tableware, keeping himself occupied. He still needed to change into one of his nicer kimono- well not too nice, this was not particularly a formal dinner or anything. He was just...

He sighed and went to change before he thought himself to death. Why was he acting like this? It
was getting ridiculous how cautious he had become around the human girl.

The sound of a soft knock on his door caused him to come out of his thoughts. He straightened out his attire and went to the door. Behind the door was Chihiro, fussing nervously with her yukata. She looked… beautiful. Her yukata was a dull forest green, decorated with simple sakura petals. Her hair was pulled back in a loose bun. Her make up was simple yet it accentuated her already beautiful features. He about closed the door to restart the scene in disbelief.

"Um…" Chihiro played with some of her loose strands of hair. "I didn't know how casual or formal to dress up… Is this too much? I mean, I can change."

"No," Haku said without thinking. "You look stunning."

Chihiro blushed and came into the room, following Haku out to the roofed balcony with a view of the waters. There he had a nice table set up with a small bouquet of Chihiro's favorite flowers, with a mix of a few of his own language. He had learned early on that Chihiro by no means knew the art of flower language, so alongside her favorite flower, the orchid, he mixed in his hidden words of affection for her with flowers such as yellow tulips and sweet peas amongst others. The yellow tulips expressed his love for her, no matter how one-sided, and the sweet peas said a gentle goodbye to his dear friend, though when the goodbye would come was unbeknownst to any of them. He would not say it aloud, but he was grateful that Ayame introduced him to the world of flower language during their brief time together.

The rest of the table was adorned with fine china, which he would also unwillingly thank Ryujin for introducing him to the fine art of pottery and china. He seemed to have a lot to be thankful for in the making of this moment, but seeing Chihiro's awed expression made every lesson with the intolerable worth it.

"Haku, I…" Chihiro blinked in the sight, looking rather astonished at best.

Haku almost faltered a frown and looked back at the table. Was it too much? "Do you not like it?"

"What?" She said peeling her eyes from the setup. "Oh, no, it looks nice. I… I just wasn't expecting this much." Then she began to mumble as she always did when unsure how to phrase things, picking at her nails. "I mean, it's no different from some of the nice dinners we had in our dreams, but I'm still a bit shocked. It's a good thing I didn't dress too casual, I'm sure glad I was able to get ahold of this yukata. Why Rin had such a nice yukata, I have no idea. Am I talking too much?"

Haku stared in amazement and almost chuckled. What a curious woman she was. He had never met such a spirited person in all his years. She had some effect on others just by being in the room or speaking to them. Even in her mumbling.

He simply smiled and cleared his throat, catching her attention, as she was admiring the floral arrangement. "Shall we sit?"

Chihiro blushed once again and complied a nod.

They sat at the low rising table and soon one of the chefs from the kitchen downstairs came to provide them with cups of tea and started passing out the food entrees. It was a simple traditional meal, but by way of preparation, it looked like the most eloquent meal one had ever laid eyes on. As soon as all the food was set out, they clapped their hands with an echoed "itadakimasu," and began eating.

After a moment of eating, Haku placed his chopsticks down and sparked up a conversation. "How
was the visit with Zeniba?"

"Good," Chihiro answered, placing her own chopsticks down and smiled. Then she added apprehensively, "there was certainly a lot to talk about."

"Oh?" Haku replied. "Would you like to share?"

Chihiro looked off in a pensive manner. "Oh, you know, we caught up on the last month, talked about what Yuuka had been learning now that she lived with Obaa-San…" She paused. "And the future…"

He nodded. The future had become ever a touchy and confusing subject as of late. He himself did not know what the future held for any of them with all that was going about. "I understand," he said simply. "Well, there is no telling what the future may bring, and we should not be fussing over it as much as we have. Right?" This was almost more for himself than Chihiro.

Chihiro nodded and went back to drinking her miso soup, nonetheless content with the situation. This brought him back to the earlier feeling that something was wrong. Instead of addressing it though, he changed the subject to something with a little more life and Chihiro seemed to gladly move on with him. They continued to eat and talk, laughing and enjoying each other's company. It was a wonderful feeling of deja vu and warm memories of the dream visits flitted his mind as they continued on.

After some time, Haku decided to switch back to a topic that had been bothering him since she got back from Zeniba's. It seemed like an appropriate time, with Chihiro in some better spirits. He cleared his throat. "Is there anything bothering you?"

Chihiro seemed a bit caught off guard. "Excuse me?"

"You have been acting a bit odd since you came back. Did something happen at Zeniba's?"

She gnawed at her lip for a moment then looked him in the eye shyly. "If I can be honest?"

"I would not expect anything less." He replied, lacing his fingers in front of him.

She drawled out a sigh. "Well then, honestly, it's the ongoing issue I've had since our unplanned permanent stay…" She was skirting the actual answer, but he understood what she was saying.

"Whether you can stay or not, hm?" Haku insighted.

She grimaced and nodded, looking off to somewhere nearby. "No matter how much we talk of not fussing over the future and… fate."

"Not much? Then let us break down what has." He offered, absently rubbing his temple at a slight ache in his head. Probably just the food.

A blush seemed to dust her cheeks, but why she would blush was beyond him. "Well…" She started. "Well for one, of course, the gate… and then there's how the whole idea of letting everything go is becoming quite bothersome, especially since instead of growing distance, I'm getting closer with everyone."

"I see," Haku replied, his voice sounding faint to himself.

However, as much as he tried, he was actually finding it hard to focus on the conversation. A dull
pressure had begun to form in the back of his head from earlier and was beginning to feel like a pain he had not felt in a long time. He had chosen to ignore it, marking it up as a headache or his body telling him he was full or maybe he should have chosen a different meal. He tried to return his attention back to Chihiro, who was still talking about her dilemma, but he was finding it hard to even focus on her words, let alone her.

The dull ache in head seemed to seep into the rest of his body, nausea began to take over and he could see everything around him begin to blur and double. The blurred concerned look of Chihiro was the last thing he saw as he felt gravity pull him towards the ground and hit his head hard on something. Effectively putting him under in a dark abyss.

Chapter End Notes

What happened to our dear Haku? Will he be all right? Should we be concerned? Did our author kill him before progress could be made?! Pshh. Now why would I do that?

Chihiro is an overthinker when it comes to love like I am. Lol

I've had to catch myself several times since I noticed the writing style has changed ever so slightly after I started rereading The Chronicles of Narnia. Thank you, CS Lewis, thank you sooo much for your British influence on my writing. XD

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

God bless! KawaChou
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Written Rivers

Book 2: A Tie Amongst Rivers

Chapter 6: Toxic Hope

Rumi was with Makoto when she heard a scream echo through the Bathhouse in the late afternoon. She knew it all too well and so did Makoto. Makoto didn't hesitate to shift to his wolf form and Rumi instinctively climbing onto his back before he raised to find their friend.

They could hear Chihiro crying out for help as they skidded down the hall towards Haku's office, shoving past curious staff as they went. Makoto stopped in front of the door and Rumi scrambled off to allow him to shift back to his human form. He burst into the room and found a panicked Chihiro over an unconscious Haku.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she held his face in her hands, crying for him to wake up. Her eyes flitted to them and her panic escalated. "I don't know wh- wha- what h-happened!" She stumbled. "We-were we were eating… a-and t-talking and he k-keeled over and h-he won't- won't wake up! He won't wake up!"

Rumi could see her physically shaking as she held onto Haku. She hadn't seen her friend's anxiety rise to this level in years. She was scared, terrified. What could have scared her this much? She slowly approached her friend, Makoto close behind her, even though she could tell he wanted to be by his master's side.

"Chi-chan…" She spoke softly. "It's going to be alright."

"N-no it's not!" Chihiro bit back behind tears. "He-he's getting cold and he won't wake up! He won't wake up! I-I- I didn't get to tell him! I didn't tell him and- and- it may be too late! Oh gods! He w-won't wake up!"

"Chi-Chan. We're here to help."

Makoto tried to approach the two of them, but Chihiro screamed and gathered Haku into her lap. "Stay away from him!"

Makoto hesitated but froze, a small, barely audible, whimper sounding from the back of his throat.

Rumi tried again. "Chi-chan…" She got Chihiro's petrified attention. "That's why we're here. Remember? You called for help, and look, we came. Makoto needs to look at Haku… Will you let us?"

Chihiro faltered slightly in her panic as if she were caught between two life or death voices in her head and she was struggling to choose which one to listen to. The voice of logic seemed to breakthrough because she grimaced and nodded absently.

Makoto took this as his cue and approached them slowly, trying to keep Chihiro calm, Rumi not far behind. He carefully took Haku from Chihiro's arms and laid him flat on the ground, beginning to
examine him.

Rumi took Chihiro's hands carefully, whispering to her what she was doing, guiding her away from where she sat. Chihiro struggled slightly but the familiar warmth and voice must have brought a small level of comfort because she ultimately leaned into Rumi's arms, mumbling and tears just streaming down her cheeks. She cradled her friend, shushing and petting her hair as she cried. She could feel Chihiro shaking and heart race. She tried to keep her own breath even and heart rate steady to give Chihiro an anchor to match.

There was something Zeniba had said after Chihiro had left the room when they were at the cottage.

"Love is always tested. Fate can't help it. If she truly loves Haku, despite all she says, Fate will test it whether she believes her own words or not. True love cannot be found where it does not exist, nor can it be denied where it does."

Was this a test? If it was, it was a rather cruel one.

Rumi let her gaze flicker to Makoto who was looking over Haku. He met her gaze and concern filled his eyes, a look she wasn't familiar with on his face. If he was able to give her that kind of look then it must have been bad. She whispered words of comfort as she continued to smooth over Chihiro's hair in calming motions. Rumi wouldn't let her feel her worry. Memories of their high school days fluttered into her mind, this closeness of calming the other down, Makoto laying close to them as they rocked. Who knew this would happen after all this time...

Makoto managed to get Haku onto his back and shifted into his wolf form, efficiently getting Haku onto his back without him falling.

"I will take him to his room and call for Zeniba." He said.

"Wait!" Chihiro suddenly scrambled out of Rumi's arms and grasped Haku's hand as Makoto began to head inside. "I wanna stay with him."

Makoto made eye contact with Rumi and nodded. With that, he started inside, Chihiro holding onto Haku's hand tight as they made their way to his futon where they lied him down carefully. They all looked amongst each other and toward Haku. Finally, Makoto spoke.

"Unfortunately, this is beyond me. I will go and consult Zeniba and then head to his river to see if there are any signs of tampering. It may not have even been the foot he ate."

Rumi nodded absently. She certainly didn't know what to do with a sick dragon, maybe a sick human, but not a sick dragon. "That sounds like a good idea. I'll let Rin know and watch over these two-"

"I'll keep an eye on Haku," Chihiro said aloud, her voice practically detached from her body.

Rumi grimaced but looked down at Chihiro's shaking hand, stilling clinging to Haku's as if some sort of lifeline. She nodded. "Okay. He'll be in good hands with you watching him."

Chihiro nodded herself, vacantly.

Rumi looked to Makoto with concern and he only replied with a sad look and shifted to his wolf form for his long journey ahead.

Makoto searched up and down the banks of the Kohaku River, looking for something that might
have caused his master to take a sudden turn in health. Whatever it was, it was not the food poisoning that they were playing it off to be.

Why would someone want to poison Haku? Was it an old upset guest? Yubaba? Did someone think he was the next Seiryu? Was it to throw off the balance of the Holy Beasts if he really were Seiryu? An old war enemy?

There were too many questions and not enough time or resources to ask, answer, and fix them.

Hopefully, by now, Yuuka was on her way to the Bathhouse. Before he went to Haku's river he went to Zeniba's cottage to ask for her assistance. Zeniba ended up sending Yuuka in her steed, who then prepared to take off in her bird form with the necessary tools to the Bathhouse.

Now he was checking the river, up and down the banks, checking into his master's cave. Nothing. Even the river itself was of no use. It was also partially affected by its dragon counterparts illness. The waters were practically stagnant, algae beginning to form along the rocks that lined the river. The river itself was not even its energetic self, the only thing Makoto was able to make of it was mumbled feelings of bubbling groans.

Even the spirits that normally occupied the river shied away from the waters, a vacant look in their eyes that echoed the feeling of the river and Makoto's racing heart. He could not stay in the water too long. A stagnant river usually meant a dying river and a dead river was a poisonous one without a god to govern it, leaving it to be a poisonous void for the rest of eternity.

Makoto continued his search without any fruits. The river was not poisoned... So it had to be the food. But who would poison Haku within the Bathhouse? Was Yubaba's influence still there? Did she send someone to poison him? But why?

"Is Kohaku-Sama alright?"

Makoto turned to a small voice behind him. A young kappa spirit edged toward him. He repressed a grimace and nodded. "He will be alright, he is just unwell, he will be back to normal soon."

"I hope so." Another kappa spirit piped. "Before the fish go bad!"

"We don't even like fish?" The younger one said.

The older one scoffed. "It doesn't matter! All that matters is that Kohaku-Sama is well again. This better not turn into what happened fifteen years ago!"

Makoto frowned. He was referring to the time Haku lost his Human World counterpart. "It will not be. And I would watch the way you speak of Kohaku-Sama. He could have you leave for such insolence."

The younger kappa shied away but the older one looked at him unphased. "And who do ya think ya are, eh?" He crawled toward him, almost threateningly. "Ya come around here all high and mighty like ya own the place even though ya only been here about ten years! Nah! Ya haven't even been here that long! And on top of that, ya haven't even been here the last six! Off doing whatever ya do in that Human World." He said with disgust. "Just because ya found easy favor in Kohaku-Sama's eyes, don't think ya can go around bossing us around!"

An involuntary growl escaped Makoto's throat as anger bubbled up inside him. No matter where he went, they just would not accept him-

"Makoto-San."
The kappa spirits and Makoto looked to another spirit who had come to the scene. It was a ningyo, a water spirit with long black hair that had green algae laced through it, and dark luring eyes. She was dressed lightly in a light blue yukata, carrying a small box decorated with different shells. If he remembered correctly, she was the one who usually took responsibility for the water spirits within Haku's territory. She was one of the oldest spirits to take residence in his river.

"Masumi-San." Makoto bowed his head. "I apologize if we disturbed you."

"No worries, Makoto-San. This one just doesn't know when he's bitten off more than he can chew." Masumi smiled looking at the older kappa. "You are always welcome here no matter what they say. Kohaku-Sama chose to let you stay here for a reason, just as he did for everyone else in his territory. So don't let this old fool discourage you now, okay?"

Makoto let out a sigh and nodded. "Of course, Masumi-San." He looked at the box. "What is that? If you mind me asking?"

"Oh!" Masumi blushed and held out the box for him. "It's for Kohaku-Sama. I've only seen his river like this once before back in war times. It usually means he's been poisoned. So, I prepared some herbal medicines for him."

"Thank you, Masumi-San. Kohaku-Sama will surely appreciate it."

Masumi nodded a smile and placed the box in an oversize bag and slung it over his big head to rest around his neck. "Don't be a stranger now." She grinned. "And make sure to take care of that dragon of ours."

"Of course. I would not have it any other way." He glanced at the kappa and bowed. "Until next time." He turned to continue his search before heading back to the Bathhouse but stopped. "Please let me know if you see anything suspicious going on here. I would appreciate it."

"You betcha!" Masumi and the younger kappa pipped.

Yuuka's flight to the Bathhouse was more than exhausting. Makoto spontaneous arrival back at the cottage, not two days after they left, was alarming. What made it more alarming was the news of Haku fainting not earlier that day. Now, Yuuka found herself flying to the Bathhouse in Zeniba's steed with one of her aunt's shikigami. Zeniba found it would be a good opportunity to put to practice all she had learned so far since she started living with her.

It was early the following morning when she got to the Bathhouse. She soared directly into Haku's window, not wanting to fly all through the Bathhouse to get to his room. When she got there, she found Chihiro, Rumi and Rin huddled around Haku's futon, which was in an alcove in the wall of his room.

"Hey everyone." She panted as she shifted into her human form, practically stumbling into the room. "How is he doing?"

"He's… worse? Better?" Rin skepticized. "He started off super cold now he's heating up. I guess it's his dragon instincts fighting back but whatever is attacking him is stronger. What could do this?"

Yuuka felt a drop of sweat drip from her brow. Could she do this? A sudden urge to swallow the knot in her stomach came and she almost felt like throwing up. Zeniba must have been pretty confident in her to send her on her own, she had to prove herself to the old witch, who was the closest thing to a mother she ever had. She swallowed down the knot and approached the three who knelt beside the fallen dragon. Rin and Rumi seemed under control but with the dark circles under
her eyes, Chihiro looked like death warmed over. It must have been tough on her.

"Well let's take a look then," Yuuka said, typing back her sleeves as the Bathhouse workers did. She started to examine Haku, taking samples, asking for the meal he had eaten, and making observations about his abnormal healing time in comparison to his normal healing abilities. The shikigami Zeniba had given her would nudge at her occasionally about checking something she'd missed, but never took on her aunt's form. Only watching.

Sometime while she was examining the dragon, Rin left the room to prepare for opening, leaving Yuuka alone with Rumi and Chihiro. She sighed and gently took Rumi by the elbow, pulling her away from Chihiro so they were out of earshot. The likely hood of Chihiro hearing though was low though since she was hardly even paying attention to either one of them.

Yuuka looked at Chihiro from across the room and whispered to Rumi, "I believe he was poisoned…"

"Poisoned?" Rumi hissed lowly. "I mean I could have guessed that but who would want to poison Haku?"

"Well judging his position and prompting to be Seiryu, he probably has some enemies. Not to mention anyone from his past from wars and what not." Yuuka replied. "He's a powerful dragon god, he's bound to have enemies that want him gone."

"But why now? He hasn't done anything as far as we know to earn this as of late. He doesn't even want to be Seiryu."

Yuuka shrugged. "Only he would know that. We should just be thankful they didn't swap the dinners on accident or else Chihiro would be very dead right now."

Rumi gave Chihiro a worried look.

"Don't worry, she'll be fine. And so will Haku. After a few days rest, his body will have cleared out the toxins by itself with the help of the medicinal herbs I gave him. It seems as though his immune system processed the poison fast, so it took effect faster. But it also slowed down his healing after it had time to take effect. I would just watch him because he does have a fever." Yuuka tapped her chin. Rumi's question from earlier was valid though, why would anyone poison Haku? It almost had the same symptoms as food poisoning, it should have taken longer to take effect… Was it because it processed through his system too fast? A dragon's immune system works faster than the average being, whether spirit or human...

"Thanks, Yuuka." Rumi's voice interrupted her thoughts. "We couldn't have done it without you."

"Of course." She smiled. "What are friends for?" She paused and thought for a moment. "Let's not let anyone know he's been poisoned. Tell them he had a very bad case of food poisoning that only affects dragons or something. The staff around here aren't all that bright to begin with."

Chihiro's days seemed rather dull after Haku's collapse. According to Yuuka, it was food poisoning but Chihiro hardly believed it even through the numb state of her mind. Her mind was just foggy. Numb. She found her thoughts just screaming all at once and it made it hard to think straight. All becoming white noise as she tried to claw her way back to reality.

But one thought screamed above the rest and it scared her half to death with the worry of unsaid words. She had words that she never said to Haku running at high speeds as anxiety told her that he was dying and he'd never wake up, while logic and reality told her he'd wake up any moment. He was going to be okay. He'd make it through this...

She breathed in deeply as she reached to change his compress again. His temperature had gone down considerably. When he first collapsed, his temperature dropped to the point that he was cold to the touch, but soon after it skyrocketed to temperatures beyond even the normal temperature even for a dragon. The past two days, she never left his side. She wanted to be there when he woke up. To tell him sorry. To tell him... well, she really wasn't sure, with how jumbled her brain was and the thing she wanted to say most... it wasn't possible...

Rumi, Rin, and Yuuka came in to help care for the dragon interchangeably, but Chihiro knew they were mostly there to check on her. To make sure she was eating and taking care of herself as well as Haku. She appreciated it in one aspect but if felt degrading all at once.

Now, Rumi was at her side once again. She had gotten in the habit of coming in to make sure she was eating properly, but Chihiro genuinely just wasn't hungry. Her appetite was just gone. But that didn't stop Rumi from trying.

If Rumi wasn't trying to convince her to eat, she was asking how she was handling the current situation or tell her how the Bathhouse was handling Haku not being there. Apparently, Haku had built enough of a respectable rapport with the staff that they were causing no trouble with him being gone. That was good, they could handle themselves now. Just what Haku would want.

There was a pause in the strained conversation. Rumi hadn't pressed her much about her feelings as she normally would have since Haku collapsed and Chihiro was grateful, because she really didn't want to talk about it. Especially after the talk at Zeniba's, she really avoided it. But now she felt the need to decompress, even it was just a little.

"Y'know Rumi-Chan." Chihiro let out a breathy laugh. "If I didn't know better, I would have thought he'd taken me on a date with the way he set up dinner."

"What makes you think it wasn't?" Rumi asked. She was trying to act uninterested, but the way her body turned toward her at attention said otherwise.

"Because he's not the type." She said solemnly.

"You really are clueless." Rumi shook her head and put a hand over her eyes. "And it is getting aggravatingly annoying."

"What?"

"How can you be so obtuse?" Rumi snapped.

"I'm not." Chihiro snapped back.

"We both know that's not true. Even Ayame-San said she'd never seen him act this way. Maybe it's
because he's never been in love before."

"Rumi. Just stop." Chihiro insisted.

"Then admit that you love him." She demanded.

"I don't though."

"Don't or won't?" Rumi glared.

"Won't? No, I can't- I mean don't." Her mind and words were fumbling again, too many thoughts screaming at once.

"Pick one Chihiro!" She yelled in a hushed whisper. "Why can't you just say it!"

"Because then it would make it real!" She yelled back. Angry tears slipped down her cheeks. There. Would that satisfy her friend?

"What? Make your feelings real?" Rumi frowned. "Chihiro they are already real. It's a matter of deciding to do something about them."

Chihiro said nothing.

Rumi let out a heavy sigh. "Chi-Chan. Remember that one time I had a crush on some stupid boy in elementary school?"

Chihiro nodded. "Yeah, he was the first boy you ever confessed to." Her voice was distant and almost detached from the conversation now but Rumi had caught her attention with the memory.

"You're the one that encouraged me to go tell him. You told me it was better that I went and told him or regret never knowing." Rumi paused and looked her in the eye. "Chi-Chan. I'm gonna tell you the same thing. I've watched you over the years, you've never gone out with anyone. I thought it was because of the bullying or the fact that you were looking for Mister Right or just trying to focus on school. But as Zeniba-San said, you feel unlovable. So now that Mister Right is literally right in front of you, and literally looking at you with eyes that see you as the only person in the world that matters, you refuse to see it!"

Chihiro flinched slightly at her words. She didn't know what to say. She looked down at her hands, her eyes flitting to Haku briefly in transit.

"Am I allowed to love him?"

The words fell from her lips before she caught them. She grimaced at her own cowardice and insecurity. She knew that she had the worst self-esteem and the most insecurities. She couldn't let go of anything for the life of her. To think she had been telling herself that she'd be able to let go of any of the Spirit World was a joke. She couldn't love anyone in this state, and no one could love her either.

"Chihiro we already went over this-"

"Did you see the mess I was when Haku fainted? I haven't had an attack in how long and I fell apart when he needed me to be calm and collected. Who would love someone like that?" Chihiro stressed, she could feel her heart rate start to pick up. She had to calm down but. "Look how easy it is for me to regress back into old habits. I… I…” She couldn't talk anymore and took that moment to try to control her breath again.
"That means you care, Chi-Chan."

Chihiro looked up at her, shocked. "But-

"Would you have reacted so strongly if you didn't care? What if that was someone else? Like a client? You care that they won't be hurt as a fellow living being, but with Haku, you two are so close that it was almost like you're linked. Like you felt his pain." She took Chihiro's hand. "It's alright to feel this way. You just need to remember that you can be in control. This anxiety doesn't own you. It doesn't define who you are or who you will be. And I doubt that it's what Haku sees when he looks at you. Whether he returns your feelings or not."

Chihiro took a shaky breath and nodded, considering her words. Any tears that she'd shed she wiped away. She took another breath and smiled. "Thank you…"

Her friend smiled and pet her hair down. "Of course. Are you sure you don't want anything to eat? I'm gonna go down to the mess hall." Rumi asked as she got up to leave.

"No, I'm fine for now. Thanks though."

Rumi turned to leave when Chihiro had another thought.

"Wait." She called after her.

Rumi stopped and looked at her from the hall.

"What about the Human World? And Oka-San and Otou-San? If, IF, I loved him and he loved me… where would that put you and me?"

Rumi smiled, gently. "We'll just have to wait and see… I hear fate works in funny ways."

With that she turned and left the room, closing the door behind her. Chihiro turned to Haku and watched his sleeping form. She gently brushed his hair out of his face. He looked so peaceful even if he was in pain. He hardly showed weakness even in his sleep.

Chihiro chuckled lightly at that and bent down close to his face and rested her forehead against Haku's, breathing in a sigh.

"What am I going to do with you, Haku?" She inhaled sharply. She had to say it. For herself and maybe, just maybe, one day for him. "I don't understand it… but I think I love you…"

There. She said it out loud. The river that saved her as a child, the boy that helped her when she got lost in the Spirit World, the man that gave her a second chance, the dragon that protected her; she loved him. Raijin and the others had made a habit to mock and make fun of their relationship but there seemed to be some truth behind their teasing that neither cared to admit.

That made her stop. Maybe the feelings weren't mutual. Maybe she was overthinking her own feelings, regardless of the conversation she had with the Swamp Bottom residents with Rumi just then. Maybe she was just mistaking worry and sisterly affections for love.

She looked at him again. But a sister wouldn't see him the way she did now. She wouldn't notice the tension in his jawline, or the broadness of his shoulders when he walked ahead of her. Would she notice how his eyes changed ever so slightly in hue depending on his mood? Or the way his body strode gracefully as he walked as if floating? Would she notice these things? Did she ever notice these things before? And when did she start noticing them?
She moved so her arms were crossed over the low elevated futon and her chin rested on her arms. His olive-alabaster skin was beautiful in the dull light of the fireplace.

"Dammit, Kohaku Nushi… you've stolen my heart…" She laid her head down, facing away from the dragon, and closed her eyes, succumbing to sleep.

Haku woke up with a dull pressure in his head. He pressed his hand to his forehead to find a wet cloth and attempted to blink away the pain. He slid the cloth off his head and tried to collect his bearings. The last thing he remembered was having dinner with Chihiro and the sudden feeling of nausea and then falling and hitting his head hard on something. He pressed gingerly at the sensitive spot of impact on the right side of his head. There was no swelling, but it was still sensitive and hurt with enough pressure. He was not healing as fast as he normally would with these kinds of injuries. It was a little jarring. What happened?

He glanced around his surroundings and found himself lying in his futon, the blinds open to moonlight as a gentle breeze came through an open window. He attempted to sit up, but a voice whispered a warning from across the room.

"I wouldn't sit up if I were you. You'll wake her." Rin said walking up to his bed.

Haku looked down and found Chihiro sleeping on the floor next to him, her upper body lying on the edge of his futon. He could not see her face but her brown tresses splayed across the covers, her shoulders rising and falling gently in her sleep. Seeing her there sent any pain away.

"How long has she been here?" Haku asked, looking up to Rin.

Rin shrugged. "She's been by your side since you collapsed. She's been sure to give you medicine and to change your compress."

He looked back down at Chihiro. "I see…" He smiled and began to lift his hand to pet her hair out of her face but caught himself before he did. He flinched slightly when Rin talked again.

"You should really be careful, Haku. Food poisoning? Really? Since when did you become so vulnerable?" Rin snarked, mockingly.

"Food poisoning…?" Haku murmured thoughtfully. "Is that what that was?"

"Yeah, it surprisingly took you a couple days to recover, which is unusual for a dragon. Chihiro ate the same thing and miraculously didn't get food poisoning. Judging how bad you got it, it would have been lethal for her. Must have been a real bad batch."

Haku quirked a brow. "Hmm…" If it were just food poisoning, why was he affected so severely? He grimaced. Was it poison? He would have to look into it further later. He turned back to Rin. "Thank you, Rin. I hope my being away has not caused you too much trouble with the Bathhouse?"

"Do you doubt my ability to run the Bathhouse?" Rin gawked, putting her hands on her hips. "I'll have you know that I am completely capable of running this business on my own and the Bathhouse has been flourishing just fine the last few days without you!"

Haku gave a small chuckle. "Then thank you, Rin. I never doubted you for a moment."

Rin smirked. "Of course, you didn't. Who would?" She turned to leave, waving as she went. "I'll be taking my leave. I just came to check on you. I'll be back with food later." With that, she disappeared.
down the hallway and he could hear the door opening and closing behind her.

Haku's eyes fell back down to Chihiro, where the sudden urge to brush her hair out of her face came. She looked so peaceful, even though he was not able to see her face. She lay close enough that if he sat up he would be able to see the profile of her face. He carefully brought his body to an upright position, careful not to move or disturb her. When he found himself comfortable, he peered down at the young woman and simply observed her. From where he was, he could see her eyes fluttering lightly in a dream, her brows brought together somewhat in concern yet still looked peaceful. Her lips were parted slightly as they moved to her silent mumbling as she lay on her crossed arms. He never noticed just how much she had grown. She was not the child he had once met, she was a strong, capable woman now. Maybe she was right, maybe she could stay. Or at least now he was considering it a possibility, it was certainly not something that was set in stone. Yet at the same time…

His mind wandered as he watched her sleep, leaning back into the pillows that supported his back. He thought back to what happened over the last few days. He remembered having dinner with Chihiro and then watching the ground draw closer into his sight until he was met with darkness. He had awoken a few times to see Rin, Makoto and Chihiro come through. He remembered seeing Chihiro talk with Rumi before going under again. The last thing he saw was Chihiro watching Rumi leave and looking back to him and brushing hair out of his face.

"I don't understand it… but I think I love you…"

"..." Haku's eyes refocused on the young woman. He lifted his hand and smoothed gently over her head, the contact making any uneasiness go away. "I wonder…" Was it a dream? Then his lips twitched in a smile.

He was happy. Of course, he was happy, in fact, overjoyed as the thought of those words slowly became more real to him. If she really had said those words, Chihiro's feelings were then mutual to his own. The only problem was… was that she loved him.

It was not supposed to happen like this. He was happier than anything to have his feelings for Chihiro reciprocated. But that was not the plan. She was supposed to return to the Human World and live out her life there, away from him and the Spirit World. She was supposed to move on, allowing him the breathing room to move on as well. That whatever feelings he had for her would wash away with the waves of time.

She was not supposed to fall in love with him.

He leaned forward again, and his hand hovered over her head once more as she slept. He bit his lip and clenched his fist, covering his eyes with his arm as he sunk back into the pillows. A smile played on his lips. *She loves me…* He looked at her from underneath his arm.

Haku's smiled faded. Why couldn't he have this one thing? Was it asking too much of fate? Surely it would allow him to love who he so chose…

Sleep still plagued his mind and he decided to let sleep ease his mind and take over once again. Letting the worries and joys of this moment fade into the darkness of sleep.
A/N:

"What's this? What's this? There's magic in the air! What's this? What's this? I feel it everywhere!" It's a ship getting ready to set sail!

Ya'll don't know how long I've waited to fricking write this chapter! I've had it written down for almost a year now knowing that it will come to fruit! Y'ALL. It's happening! I'm excited! Are you excited? You SHOULD be excited! (Y'know until I start breaking my readers' hearts, which I can neither confirm nor deny that it may or may not happen #nospoilers #evilrickriordanlaugh)

I legit didn't realize how long I made this chapter. Pretty proud. (°_°)

Zeniba's quote: "True love cannot be found where it does not exist, nor can it be denied where it does." Is by Torquato Tasso.

kappa are these water spirits that look like deformed ninja turtles and love eating cucumbers. I really don't know how else to describe them. \(\_\(\_\)/\)

And ningyo are fish-like spirits aka mermaids.

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

God bless! KawaChou
Compliancy at its Weakest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rumi was getting annoyed. She had been watching those two stubborn star-crossed lovers long enough. Why wouldn't they just-?! Ugh! She literally had no words for them and was ever so grateful when the great Ryujin came to visit the Bathhouse. Maybe he could help slap some sense into them.

Haku's recovery was apparently longer than average according to Yuuka, and well Haku. His overall time in bed rest was a week, which included the two days that he was unconscious. The rest of the week were firm orders from Yuuka to stay in bed until she was sure the toxins were cleared from his body and he was healing normally again. She also knew that Haku probably hadn't had proper sleep in sometime and thought it appropriate to use the bed rest as a way to catch up on any sleep he had overdue.

News that Haku caught a bad case of food poisoning filtered throughout the Bathhouse rather quickly, rumors and gossip filling the building before anyone could stop it. The chef who prepared the dinner disappeared before he could be questioned. The reason being was that he was found at the bottom of the water on the side of the Bathhouse, his entrails spilled from the act of seppuku. Why he would commit seppuku under the pretense of such an act was beyond everyone that knew what really happened. All they knew is that it made the situation that much more suspicious.

This brought back the topic of the great sea god's arrival. He had heard about the poisoning and came to check on his dear apprentice. After finding that he was fine, he went about his usually pestering of everyone of importance in his mind. Rumi, however, had an idea that would be in the interest of all parties involved. Well… maybe not two of them, but they would thank her eventually.

During the night shift of day… what day was it? Forty? Fifty? She had honestly lost count, but on whatever day it was, Rumi found Makoto to pitch her plan. Maybe he saw what she saw and would play along. Much to her surprise, he complied. Maybe a little too quickly.

"If it gets him off my back, I agree. However, after recent events, he may be more reluctant…"

"I understand that, but the safest place may be by his side."

"You will just have to convince him of that." Makoto replied skeptically.

"When I'm done talking with Ryuijin-San will you try to be there when he talks with Haku?"

Makoto simply nodded and went off to take care of his own duties before he would ultimately make his way up to Haku's room. Rumi bit her lip, praying that the sea god would be on her side and that Haku would be open minded about the whole thing. She was tired of watching them skirt around their feelings. Neither had directly admitted it, but dammit, they loved each other and she was going to get them to talk about it.

Rumi had come to the conclusion that they were never leaving the Spirit World and she was going to make the most of it. So if it meant settling down with a spirit or god then she had no qualms. She was going to make the most of her second chance with life that the gods had given her by keeping her out of that tsunami. As much as it had left her guilt ridden, she had come to the conclusion that if she wasn't meant to die in Tokyo with her family then she was meant for something else there in the
Spirit World.

Her first order of business would be to play matchmaker.

She went about the Bathhouse in search of Ryujin. She knew where he was ultimately but she needed time to formulate her speech for the sea god. He always seemed pretty laid back, even though he was one of the oldest and wisest gods in Japan, but she didn't know how he'd feel about playing matchmaker for his apprentice.

She finally wandered into the upper levels of the Bathhouse where all the important guests stayed and took a deep breath when she found his room. When she mustered the courage and had her plan of attack down, she knocked on the door. Not long after she knocked, the tall, lean god stood before her in the doorway.

"Ah, Rumi-San." Ryujin greeted her with a smile. "What brings you up here?"

"Um…" Why was she nervous? "I need to talk to you."

Ryujin nodded with a smile and opened the door wider to let her in. He guided them to a table and offered her tea. The room he was staying in was much more exquisite than any of the other rooms in the Bathhouse, even more so than Haku's but Haku had a much more subtle taste.

"So, Rumi-San, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I have a favor to ask you and I don't know if you'll be up for it?"

Ryujin raised a brow. "Color me intrigued. Do tell."

"We all thing that Haku and Chihiro are in denial of their feelings and would love it if you helped us convince them otherwise." She finished with a nervous smile, taking a breath after rushing the words out in a single breath.

The sea god considered her, then nodded. "Done."

Rumi blinked and stopped playing with her teacup. "Excuse me?"

"You wouldn't believe how long I've been trying to get that fool to actually admit that he has sometime of feels for someone. If this will finally set him off and get him to admit it, then by all means, I'm in." He said raising his hands.

"You're…" Rumi started, skeptically. "You're taking this way better than I expected."

He shrugged. "What can I say, I'm a romantic at heart." Ryujin smiled. "And I want what's best for my pupil. He's gone through a lot and if fate is giving him the option of whom he can love then I'm glad it's Chihiro-Chan." He sipped his tea.

"Ryujin-Sama-"

"Please." He put a hand up. "Hold the formalities."

"Ryujin-San… were you there when Haku lost his river?"

Ryujin put his glass down. "Yes, I was."

"Why didn't you help him? When he lost his name?"
"Some roads you're meant to walk alone." He smiled, sadly. "It also allows unexpected things to happen. You can't be bold if you've only had good things happen to you. Especially if you let others do everything for you. Some things you have to let your apprentices learn on their own. It's hard to watch but they usually come out stronger and wiser on the other side."

"Usually?" Rumi asked.

Ryujin smirked. "Yes, but in this case, Haku found a potential mate."

Rumi grinned and laughed, raising her glass. "To matchmaking."

He clinked his glass to hers. "To matchmaking."

Makoto was talking with Haku in his human form about numbers when Ryujin burst ostentatiously into Haku's room. Obviously Rumi had had her talk with him, his eyes a storm of excitement. The look of disgust that was on Haku's face was almost comical as he leaned back into his desk chair. Yuuka still had him under bed rest until further notice, so he was confined to his room to mule over Bathhouse affairs from afar no matter how much he insisted he was fine.

"Oh, my dearest brother, Kohaku!" Ryujin started as he approached the younger dragon. "When I heard you were ill, I rushed to be by your side. However when I found you to be well, I was a little disappointed. However, I do hope you are feeling better now?"

"Never better." Haku side-glanced Makoto. "If only I could convince everyone else of it."

Makoto rolled his eyes and retorted, "it is better to be safe than sorry, Master."

Haku scoffed with a grunt. "Well as you can see, Ryujin, I am fine. You need not waste your precious time on me. I am sure you have much more important things you can be doing."

"What could be more important than the wellbeing of my favorite pupil?" Ryujin replied, aghast.

"A lot of things..." Haku mumbled.

"Well, since I am here, I ought to tell you of the other news I heard during my visit here, that may be of interest to you, Kohaku."

"Do enlighten us, Ryujin." He replied, exasperated.

"Well, some little birdies told me that you are in denial." From the look on his face, this caught Haku off guard, leaving him slightly confused. Makoto knew very well what this conversation was to be about and it could go two different ways, if he knew his master.

"What are you talking about?" Haku finally said.

"You love Chihiro-San." Ryujin said in a matter-a-fact tone, his eyes dancing with amusement.

If Haku was impartial to this statement, he did not show it. His expression still exasperate, he let out a sigh. "Is this what this is going to be about?" He glanced between the two of them. "You two accusing me of something that is not true?"

"Accusing isn't the word I would have chosen but yes. Essentially that is what we are doing. However, it is not a lie." Ryujin mused. "You do love her."
"Stop." Haku put his hands up. "I will stop this right now."

"Kohaku." Ryujin deadpanned. "You're an open book. I know you. You may not speak with emotions or words, but you definitely speak with your actions. You wouldn't put yourself out so far if you didn't love the girl. This dinner you had with her before you were poisoned, is example one."

"Will you stop it? It was a simple gesture of kindness!" Haku exasperated once again.

"The scene was rather romantic." Makoto noted to Ryujin, who nodded to him in agreement. Haku shot him a look.

"She's safest by your side." Ryujin added.

"And I also thought the Bathhouse was one of the safest places she could be, but I was sadly mistaken." He retorted. "She was in the Bathhouse and by my side when the possibility of her being poisoned occurred. She is not safe here."

"Is that all you care about?" Ryujin asked. "If her safety is your only concern, then you may as well removed her from existence. Nothing is safe. Human World or Spirit World, nowhere is safe. What's the real reason-"

Haku pounded his fist on the table. "I don't want to risk losing her!" He was starting to break.

Ryujin sighed and looked at Haku empathetically. "Everyday is a risk, Kohaku. But very few of us chose to take that risk into our own hands." He paused. "Sometimes the greatest risks are those we take with our hearts. If you love her then spend every moment with her, watching her, holding her, loving her, instead of worrying over the risks of tomorrow that may or may not come."

"My mind cannot be changed. As soon as the gates open again, she and Rumi-San will return." Haku concurred.

At the mention of either girls leaving, a feeling sunk in Makoto's chest. What was this?

"Do you really want the girls to leave?" Makoto said without thinking.

Haku glanced at him and sighed. "Does it matter?"

"Yes. Because you have a say in that decision!" Ryujin said.

Haku clenched his fists and practically snarled, "you know I cannot."

The sea god raised a brow skeptically at his friend. "Cannot or will not?"

Makoto watched Haku stiffen as the hair on the back of his own neck rose. They could both feel the anger that pulsed off the sea god. Because of his childish personality, it was easy to forget how much older and powerful he was. Ryujin was one of the last gods anyone would want to anger.

"Kohaku." Ryujin said with a stern voice that Makoto had never heard from the sea god before. It even seemed to startle Haku. "We spirits, we gods, don't always get the opportunity to choose who we love. We dragons only get one chance in a lifetime. We mate for life and while it is more convenient to love or mate that that will be able to live alongside us for more than a century, we cannot help who we love. Kohaku, don't screw this up for yourself. An opportunity to love and choose who you love is not a luxury spirits of our status always get. If you love her, grasp it with both hands and fight for it until the bitter end."
Ryujin stood rigid, looking Haku in the eyes. His ice blue eyes were cold yet held a hint of empathetic warmth. Haku looked small and sheepish for the first time Makoto had known him. The tension and warmth of the two dragons' bond was strong and palpable. A bond he would find one day…

"So." Yuuka started as she and Rumi walked through the corridors of the Bathhouse. "How are we gonna do this? Good cop, bad cop duo? Subtle confession? Reverse psychology?"

Rumi raised an eyebrow and shook her head. "We watched way too many crime shows. But no. She's already implied her feelings we just need her to admit to them and act on them. She's not good at holding her strong feelings in for this long. She'll snap eventually with enough prodding."

Yuuka nodded. "So what is the plan then?"

"Ryujin-San and Makoto are with Haku right now so that means that Chihiro isn't occupied with caring for Haku. So-"

"That means we can get her not while her guard is down and get her confession cut and clear!"

Rumi just stared at her. "I don't think that means what you think it means. And even if you did, you didn't say it right."

Yuuka sweat dropped and stuck out her tongue. "Sorry, it's been a while since we did something like this. Reminds me of our days in high school."

She watched Rumi smile with a bit of reminisce. "You're right.. We were always interrogating people for information." She laughed.

"We were rather good too." Yuuka giggled.

Rumi paused. "I want Chihiro to be happy. She deserves that much."

"What about you?" Yuuka stopped in their walk. "Don't you deserve to be happy?"

Rumi stopped but didn't turn around. The sag in her shoulders said it all.

"I know you like him." Yuuka whispered, loud enough to be heard.

The human girl stiffened.

"Look who's in denial now…" Yuuka said.

"It's not that…" Rumi said. "I do like him but how long will it last…"

"Isn't that the same question we're getting out of Chihiro?" Yuuka asked as she stalked to be in front of Rumi, who averted her eyes. "Do I have to be the one that pulls the teeth around here? Gods, Rumi, I've been in her head, I know when you're in love and I know when you're in denial. You and Chihiro need to get out of your own heads and just go!"

"And my answer is the same as Chihiro's has been." Rumi bit. "We don't know when or if we'll re-"

"Oh, shut up." Yuuka snapped, receiving an astonished look from Rumi, but she hardly cared at this point. "You are such a hypocrite. You hear the exact same thing from Chihiro and refute her but the moment it comes to your own feelings you start ranting off the same excuses. Will you two get a grip? If you love someone, tell them. There's no greater time like the present. Stop living in the what
ifs and the whens. If there's one thing I've learned since I started living with Oba-San again is that you have to take things one day at a time and take chances. You two need to just jump and pray that fate will take you where you're meant to be."

Rumi just blinked. "Did I just get told by a twelve year old?"

"I only look it, darling." Yuuka winked. "C'mon, let's go find Chihiro."

"Right." Rumi said. "She's probably in her room."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Yuuka grabbed her hand and started towards the closest elevator.

Since she arrived back at the Bathhouse, even though she was caring for Haku, she felt at peace with being back amongst friends. Issues that they had had were now smoothed over and she was able to have normal conversations. Which also meant girl talk. She didn't get to put her two cents into those conversations when Rumi and Chihiro were in high school and when she did Chihiro never got to hear her input. But now she could voice her opinion loud and clear. Needless to say, she was excited for this conversation.

Just as Rumi had predicted, Chihiro was in her room prepping for her shift for the night. Rin had finally convinced her that Haku was well enough that he didn't need her watching over him and said it was about time that she got back to work to distract her from everything going on. Since Haku awoke three days ago, the last two days Chihiro was back at the bathing floor again, checking in on Haku during breaks and for a couple hours during the day. Her helicoptering wasn't gone but it was definitely dwindling.

Chihiro looked up when they walked into the main living area, knocking being a forgotten habit for the three of them. "Hey, what are you guys doing here?" She smiled, finishing off the last twist of her hair tie in her ponytail.

Rumi shrugged. "Oh, we wanted to come hang ou-"

"We came to talk about Haku!" Yuuka blurted out, which she shortly followed with a mental slap to the head. What was going on with her?

Chihiro laughed nervously. "Haku? Why is something wrong?" She glanced warily at Rumi.

Yuuka could feel the dagger like gaze from Rumi before she spoke. "No, nothing is wrong. Yuuka just got a little excited about something she-"

"We." Yuuka interjected, receiving yet another glare and confused stare.

"We," Rumi grit, "wanted to talk to you about."

Chihiro raised a brow. "About Haku?" She said slowly.

Yuuka nodded and opened her mouth to speak but closed it when Rumi shot her a look.

"Yeah, it's about... you and Haku as a potential couple." Rumi insisted. "I know there's still the gates to consider and family at home but you seriously need to consider your own best interests."

"Chihiro, we think it's about time you admit to it." Yuuka said with ernes.

"I know." She said.

"You do?" They said in unison.
Chihiro nodded. "Yeah… I get it now…" She smiled softly. "I'm done running. I've had a lot to think about over the last week and I think it's time I owned up to it." She looked her friends in the eye one at a time, a determined glint in her eyes. "I've fallen for Haku."

Something bubbled up inside Yuuka and she squealed in a way Rumi would have if she were reading or watching some sappy love story that was finally unfolding. She glanced over to Rumi who was just staring in disbelief.

Chihiro laughed. "What is it, friend? Hard to believe?"

"Almost…" Rumi started. "It just seems so… sudden."

The Ogino shrugged. "A lot can happen when you slow your mind down enough to really think about what everyone has been saying all along…" She sighed. "I can't keep living in the 'what ifs.' I need to live in the now and stop trying to fix things that don't need to be fixed or haven't even happened yet. And if that means I never go home… I guess we'll just have to see where fate takes us. I hear it works in funny ways."

Rumi raised a brow at this, which Yuuka didn't completely understand but gave Rumi the best "I told you so" look she could muster. Rumi glanced and rolled her eyes in her "shut up" manner.

"Well then…" Rumi sighed. "What now?"

"We wait." Chihiro said. "If he returns his feelings, as everyone seems to be claiming, he will tell me… I don't know how… but he will in his own way." She smiled and tied back the white ribbon the held her pink sleeves back for work. "Until then, I have work to do." She rose and went to finish whatever she needed to do for work.

Rumi watched her go then looked at Yuuka incredulously.

"What the hell?" She mouthed.

Yuuka shrugged and continued to do her little mental victory dance.

"Kohaku." Ryujin continued, his eyes holding Haku's. "I say all this as your friend and as a god who has lived far longer than you. Things change quickly in this world, cultures rise and fall, opportunities come and go, lives live and die. Not even us gods last forever. If fate or the gods offer you something good before the storm, take it. Take it and hold onto it. Protect it with all you have through that storm. No matter the risks."

A bead of sweat formed on Haku's brow. He never knew Ryujin to get so serious in all the time he had known him. He had even been through war time with him and Ryujin had kept a smile through the whole thing to keep his troops motivated. But Haku also knew his dark past. He had had his own mate in the past and lost her. He always portrayed himself as some "player" and eccentric fellow but he never went through with anything, he always loved his mate and never gave his heart to another. Ryujin was one of the strongest gods Haku knew, and it was not because of his physical strength alone.

"Ryujin…" Haku looked away, hands clenched. "How do you do it? How do you keep up this facade?"

Ryujin's eyes flickered with humor. "Who said it was a facade?" He closed his eyes and stepped back to lean against the wall, crossing his arms.

"What?" Haku eyes flickered back to the sea god.
"Ryujin let out a wistful sigh and opened his eyes to look in the distance. "I made a promise to keep living, Kohaku. No matter what I'd keep living with a smile on my face and watch the world grow and change. It wasn't always easy." His eyes closed again and a smile played at his lips. "But that promise has led me to where I am." He looked Haku in the eye. "What will you do Kohaku?"

Haku cast his eyes down then fixed his sight on a book on a shelf. Chihiro's book. Chihiro was always trying to better the world, even if it was a little, she was trying to leave a piece of herself in the world. It was a completely human trait. Humans barely lived a century yet did everything in their power to leave something behind. Chihiro knew it would not last forever, her life, her love, but she was willing to embrace it. And what was he doing? Why was he acting so afraid?

The image of a woman with black hair flashed in his mind. What if… no that could not happen again. That was a time when he was young and reckless, it would never happen again. Chihiro's face came to his mind again and his body untended. He let out a breath. Just the thought of her could calm his nerves.

"I am going to chose to love her…"

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

… i'm sorry … T-T

Everyone. Give a hand to the great Ryujin. Who knows how to speak sense into his little brother and apprentice. *claps ecstatically*

I am constantly going through the struggle of remembering who calls Haku "Kohaku", "Haku-San", "Kohaku-Sama"... etc. it's rather vexing.

I like to think Makoto has a hidden sense of dark humor. It's subtle but present in the most unexpected times. Lol

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

God bless and Happy New Year! KawaChou

PS.

I found this quote and I hope I emulated this well in the first book. I didn't want the main focus of book one to be romance and I'm hoping that shows. I wanted more of a reflection of the movie. Romance is overrated anyway. Lol XD

“I've become skeptical of the unwritten rule that just because a boy and [a] girl appear in the same feature, a romance must ensue. Rather, I want to portray a slightly different relationship, one where the two mutually inspire each other to live - if I'm able to, then perhaps I'll be closer to portraying a true expression of love.” -Hayao Miyazaki
Chihiro sat in the corner of the break room. It was only earlier that evening she had told the girls of her feelings for Haku. It almost felt like a bluff… did she really say all that to them? Did she believe it? Maybe she said it just to get them off her back… No. She meant it. She had finally come to terms with herself. The girls and everyone were right, it was time she stop living in "what ifs" and start living for the now and tomorrow.

But maybe it was just her giving herself no expectations. If she didn't put up any expectations, then she wouldn't get her feelings hurt. If she just told everyone her feelings maybe she could finally let go of the silly notion of love.

But that wasn't what she wanted. She told them for accountability, she told them because she did have hopeful expectations.

"Hey, Sen!"

Chihiro looked up and saw a bun being tossed in her direction. She caught it and looked up to find Rin walking toward her, her mouth already filled with a bun of her own. She sat next to her and nudge her.

"Whatchu doing over her looking like kicked dog?"

Chihiro grimaced at the comparison as she examined her bun. "Is that a necessary analogy?"

Rin shrugged. "Probably not but you're definitely moping. What's up?"

"Hm? Really? Nothing really, just lost in thought." She said as she took a bite of her bun.

"I've heard that's a dangerous place to be." Rin laughed. "I hear Haku is supposed to be cleared from house arrest in the morning."

Chihiro paused before laughing herself. "Oh really? That's good. That means he's feeling better. I'm glad."

Rin didn't speak for a moment and Chihiro looked up to find her scrutinizing her. "What?" She laughed hesitantly.

"That's all?" The weasel spirit started. "That's good? I'm glad? After everything that's happened and the way you've reacted over the last week, all I get is 'I'm glad'?"

"Uuum…" Chihiro side glanced. "I'm excited?"

"Unbelievable!" Rin exasperated, throwing her arms in the air, almost losing the contents of her bun.

"What?" Chihiro laughed again. "I am overjoyed he's better. But there's only so much I can say or do. I'm not going to explode about everything that has to do with Haku."

Rin scoffed. "Right." She took another big bite of her bun. "Well anyway, with him outta the bin he'll be back to scrutinizing the place." She huffed. "But at least I won't be stuck in charge anymore. It gets tiring after a while. I don't mind it but doing long term is exhausting."
Chihiro nodded, eating more of her bun. "Has he found anymore names?"

Rin paused and lowered her bun. "Nah. Not yet. I have to wonder if there are anymore. If he hasn't found them by now they're probably long gone."

"I'm sure they'll turn up."

"Nah. There's no point in getting my expectations up. I'm Rin. And if I don't know who I used to be, it may be better off that way. What if I was the worst kind of villain or worse," she looked around and whispered, "royalty."

Chihiro laughed again. "That'd be the worst. So many responsibilities and rules."

"I know, right?"

"Mm..." Chihiro finished her bun. "Well I better head back. My break is over unfortunately." She stuck out her tongue and stood up.

"Alright, kiddo." Rin winked. "See ya around."

Chihiro waved as she left and headed back to going about the Bathhouse doing her usual chores and errands for other staff. Time seemed to go pretty fast as she made her way around the rest of the evening. It felt weird to walk around with a new sense of purpose. Whether it was good weird she didn't know, but it was definitely new.

Lost in thought, as always, she turned a corner and nearly jumped out of her skin when a hand reached out and pulled her into a dark side room. Before she could let out a scream, the hand covered her mouth and shushed her.

"Do you want to alert the whole Bathhouse that I snuck out?" A low familiar voice hissed.

Chihiro blinked as she adjusted to the dark lighting. "Haku?" She whispered.

"The one and only." The voice replied, the smile audible in his tone.

She could feel her cheeks burning up. Crap. "Aren't you still under house arrest? Couldn't this wait?" She flustered.

He laughed. "It could have but I wanted to ask you something and I did not want to wait any longer than I have."

Chihiro felt her ears burning, maybe she wasn't as confident as she thought. "Can't we do this somewhere else?"

"Hm? Oh, you are right... hmmm..." He hummed. "Meet me in my office."

"Why didn't you just do that to begin with? You could have just sent Makoto or Ame!" Chihiro huffed. "You're such a child sometimes."

"Why, thank you." She could hear his smug smirk. "And besides Ame is on an errand for me and Makoto would have told Yuuka."

"Shut up." She mumbled.

"I missed you." She barely heard him say under his breath, she almost thought she imagined it.
"What was that?"

"Nothing. I have just grown impatience and I am tired of being stuck in my room. I will see you in a bit."

He opened the door and pushed her out, leaving her slightly dumbfounded. "That is some serious cabin fever." She paused, then brought her hands over her face and muffled a scream. "Damn you, Kohaku… you're not making this easy, you childish imp!"

With that she composed herself, straightened and made her way up the few flights to Haku's office. She stood outside his office with a slight shake in her frame. Why was she so nervous? She felt like a total school girl. Did he always make her feel like this? This was more difficult than she thought, especially after talking head to the girls. She shook her head. She just had to act normal. It was going to be okay… What was normal again?

Chihiro took a deep breath and knocked on the office door, confident that her was there, even though she had just seen him downstairs moments before. She swore sometimes that he had secret tunnels running through the place so he could get places quicker.

A moment later, Haku opened the door, his face beaming. "I was wondering when you would show up."

"Impatient much?" Chihiro asked as she entered.

"I believe I have already confessed to that." He laughed. "Shall we have a seat?"

She complied. "What was so urgent it couldn't wait until morning?"

Haku paused and shrugged slightly. "I wanted to talk now. I have waited far too long to make this decision. I may be acting impatient but it is something that needs to be said."

Chihiro waited. "And?"

"Oh, not here. I want to make it special."

"Kohaku, this is really unlike you? Who are you and what did you do with Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi?"

"My mentor may have hit me in the head a few times." He chuckled.

"Haku…" She said warily. "Seriously, what's going on?"

He sighed. "I want to try and have dinner again. Last time it did not go too well."

"That's a bit of an understatement." Chihiro huffed.

"True, but this time I will cook."

Chihiro raised an eyebrow. "The great Kohaku Nushi can cook?"

"Is it that surprising?" He laughed. "It is also a guarantee that we will both be safe."

She pierced her lip. "Right…"

"Chihiro."
She looked him in the eyes, releasing her lip.

"It will be fine. I am not going to worry anymore, neither should you." He smiled.

Chihiro smiled and nodded. Everything would be alright…

"I will save what I really want to say till then."

"You're horrible, Haku." She chastised.

"Thank you." He smirked.

Rumi swirled the glass of sake in her hand, the appealing numbness of alcohol starting to take over her mind. She was starting to understand why her father used to turn to it when she was a child. Her biological father, not her… "adopted" father. No, he never drank a day in his life. No, her real father would drink whenever stress started to kick in. These are only things she remembered after she got her memories back. He wasn't abusive or anything of the sort but he certainly didn't spare the bottle whenever life was taking a nosedive. She was seeing the appeal in the liquid that burned her throat slightly as it numbed her mind.

She set the drink down. She was tired… she was so, so tired. She just wanted to rest. She felt worn. She just wanted everything to stop.

After Chihiro had told her and Yuuka that she had figured it out she, felt like something struck her. She felt like the thing that had defined her so far had been stripped from her. She was proud of her friend but something about the sudden maturity in Chihiro left her feeling… empty. She wasn’t needed anymore. After almost ten years of being the friend that Chihiro leaned on, she was no longer needed. She was happy that Chihiro was coming around. She deserved it.

"What about you?" Yuuka had asked. "Don't you deserve to be happy?"

She tightened her hold around her glass and tipped it back. She did like Makoto. She wanted to be a good friend. She wanted to genuinely smile for the first time in what felt like years. She wanted to be happy. She wanted to be herself again.

She went to pour another glass and stopped. This wasn’t going to help… Her father was wrong about this. The numbness is not what she needed. She needed air. She needed to think. She needed to get up and walk around in the cool night air.

Rumi got up and found one of her simple cardigans to go over her casual black dress. She left her room and quietly made her way down to the lower levels of the Bathhouse, avoiding the crowded hallways filled with guests and staff. It was late into the evening and she could hear the bustling of the Bathhouse as spirits rushed to and fro. It was her night off and she was spending it drinking her blues away… wonderful.

When she finally made it to the bottom floor and exited into the side garden area, she took a deep breath of the cool air. She wandered out towards the bridge, getting strange looks from spirits crossing the bridge and a tall frog spirit and Aogeru welcoming the guests as they came in.

"Rumi-San? Where are you going?" Aogeru asked.

Rumi turned to him as she passed and brought her finger to her lips with a smile. "Ssssh." Her steps stumbled slightly and she kept walking, leaving behind a very confused spirit.
She wandered into the large garden area where she'd usually go to collect her thoughts. She sat on her usual hill spot that viewed the Bathhouse and sea that went forever, a line of lights that just edged the surface of the horizon. She stared for a few moments, taking in the view, trying to come to terms with her swimming thoughts of emotions she didn't want to deal with. She sat there…

"Nope. Not helping." She stood suddenly and brushed herself off. Her mind was still running and the fogginess of the alcohol was making everything more confusing. Honestly she just needed to get out.

She started wandering aimlessly once again, with no point of direction. Probably wasn't smart but she didn't care. No one would care. No one needed her anyway. She'd been used and was of no use anymore. She wasn't needed.

Rumi stopped. "I'm not needed." A tear slipped down her cheek. "She doesn't need me anymore. None of them do… they wouldn't care if I simply disappeared."

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Yuuka wandered into Chihiro and Rumi's room where she found Chihiro taking her break before the final stretch of her shift before closing. She hadn't seen Rumi all night and was starting to get worried. It wasn't like her to disappear like that. It was her night off but for her to just not be around was strange.

She skipped her way over to where Chihiro sat at the table, who was idly looking at a set of sake cups sitting on the table, a bottle of empty sake not to far.

"Is it really wise to be drinking in the middle of your shift?" Yuuka asked, jokingly.

Chihiro glanced up with a furrow. "No, I just got back from talking with Haku-"

"He's still in his room right?" Yuuka asked. She told him he wasn't to leave until morning, he better not be so stubborn or impatient as to leave a whole four hours early.

"Huh?" Chihiro blinked, as if thrown off guard. She blushed. "Um. No. I mean, yes, ugh. Anyway I was just got back from talking with him and I found these glasses and the empty bottle when I got here."

Ignoring Chihiro's flustering for now, Yuuka focused on the issue at hand. "Do you think Rumi drank all that?" It wouldn't surprise her, but she hadn't shown this kind of abusive behavior toward liquor in years.

Chihiro shrugged hesitantly. "We're the only ones that come in here other than you, Haku, Rin, and Makoto. So unless Ryujin-San or one of the staff snuck in and decided to steal a bottle, there's no way anyone would be able to get to it." She pierced her lip. "Rumi isn't like this. Or at least hasn't been since our early college days. What would cause her to suddenly drink a whole bottle of sake?"

Yuuka shrugged, nervously. "Do you think she finally snapped? There's been a lot going on in her life lately? Do you think something finally tipped her off?"

"But what would set her off? I can't think of anything. Is there anything she would have told you that she wouldn't tell me? I know you two are close since, you know, maybe she'd tell you."

"Yeah but we really haven't been the same since she found out the truth. Sure she still tells me things, but it's not the same. She does still talk to Makoto." Yuuka gasped. "We have to tell Makoto."

Chihiro quirked a brow. "I could have told you that but why that reaction?"
"Because she likes him."

Chihiro blinked then looked down and whispered. "I knew it."

"You did?"

"Yeah, but I've been so self absorbed lately-"

"Really now?"

"Yeah, really, that I haven't really taken the time to acknowledge her feelings. She's liked him for a while now, she just hasn't put it out there. She's always kept things to herself."

"Sounds familiar." Yuuka scoffed, earning a sarcastic from Chihiro. "But I think right now the only one who can talk to her right now is him. I've seen the way she looks at him. She trusts him and respects him. They both do."

"Then let's find him before she gets in trouble."

Makoto raced through the forest, stopping to sniff the air every so often. He heard everything the girls said. He did not even wait for them to come find him when he heard everything from outside their door, he just left.

He had not told anyone but he did love the human girl he had come to know over the years. He had fallen in love with her courage and love for her friends and family, real or fake. He had fallen in love with her spite to all odds and the way she would stand up for her friends.

He had fallen in love with her the moment his eyes laid on her. Something about her fierce determination to live and be bold. It was what he wanted to be. The first day he met her was the day of the car crash. The day she should have died. The day he dragged her half dead body from the car and into the one with the still living family's car as Yuuka took over her body.

He had never told her of how he helped save her life. Maybe it was for better. He knew that she would one day need to forget him and return to her world. But as time drew on, she leaned on him when she could not lean on Chihiro. She carried the burden of knowing that the Spirit World still coexisted with the Human World and seeing between the worlds while pretending it was not there for the sake of her friend. She had no one else to lean on and confide in. So he took her in. He listened to her and shouldered her burdens. He took on what she could not.

He always suppressed the feelings, knowing he could never have her with their worlds so far apart. Besides Haku had wanted the ties to be cut, that would mean letting whatever bonds he had with her void. So when the gate closed, it was an opportunity for false hopes. False expectations. It was almost like a second chance. But at the same to it was a curse. If she did return his affections, he would bond more and have to let her go when Haku cut ties with them. He would have to remain by his Master's side, no matter his feelings. Haku's word took priority.

But he did it all of it anyway, because he loved her. He did stay, because he loved her. Not just because Haku ordered him and to protect Chihiro, but to protect the one he loved. The one he imprinted on from day one. The one he had been waiting for through all the trials of his life. He needed to tell her. He needed to find her. Protect her.

Makoto searched through the forest, the sounds of the late night filling his senses. It was terribly cold and he was beginning to worry if Rumi was dressed for the weather. He had grabbed some of his furs from his room on the way out to give to her if she needed it. He prayed under his breath as he
searched, straining his ears. Aogeru had said she went to the garden and looked like she had had one too many to drink. Why was she drinking? What happened? What changed?

No matter what, he would find her.

Rumi looked around and had the sudden realization she didn't know where she was. She was surrounded by forest. She found herself hugging her cardigan closer to herself, cowering from every sound she heard. The clicking of kodama filled the air as a cold gust of wind blew threw. She didn't know how to get out.

She walked through a bit more, everything in her that was still sober screaming to 'stay put,' but she kept going with heavy steps. She wanted out, but she felt drawn to something. A song, a wind. Something was drawing her deeper. She continued until she came to a clearing where she saw a single blue flame at the center of the clearing.

Something in her told her stay away, but whatever sensibility she had was out of reach as she slowly approached the small flame. It was a small flame, floating at eye level without a source in the air. A flame with no candle.

As she came closer she was able to see how pretty the flame was, the way it flickered like it was dancing. The closer she got, she noticed the bigger it seemed to grow. With each step, her feet seemed to be getting heavier.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw another dancing blue flame, this one a little bigger. She stopped and glanced around to find more flames coming from the edge of the forest. Her mind began to grow more tired and her mind seemed to be sobering. Something didn't feel right. Her mind started raking through whatever knowledge of spirits she had. She knew what this was. Her eyelids began to get heavy… what were they?

Rumi's eyes suddenly widened. Onibi! They were onibi! They would drain her of life and leave her for with nothing but a corpse for her name! She had to get out!

Her mind sobered quickly as more lights started to come out of hiding. No. This wasn't how she would go. She needed to tell Makoto that she loved him. She needed to figure out her next steps. She wasn't as confident as everyone thought. She was scared. She was terrified. She needed to tell everyone that she needed help too! She didn't want to die!

The familiar song of a yosuzume spirit made her scream. An okuri-inu was there to eat her next! She screamed and cried as she felt the energy in her begin to drain as the lights drew closer.

"Makoto!" She finally screamed at the top of her lungs.

The sudden sound of howling and gnashing teeth jarred her as she felt herself be scooped into a strong set of arms, dashing out of the circle of lights. Everything was a blur for a moment and as much as she wanted to scream and struggle in the person's arms, she felt safe and comfortable. She curled into the arms further and wept.

When the world stopped dashing by, Rumi looked up and found a clearing in the forest. She then looked warily up at the person holding her and found Makoto.

Fresh tears formed in her eyes and she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Makoto! Thank the gods. Thank you, Makoto!"

Makoto sat them in the clearing and squeezed her in his arms, cradling her as if to shield her from the
world. "I was so worried. I thought I would not find you in time."

"I- I don't know what happened. I was in my room and- and I was- Aogeru, the garden- lost- lights- yosuzume-"

"Rumi-San, Rumi-San." Makoto took her face in both his hands. "Sssh. You are safe now. I will not let anything hurt you. I am here."

"Makoto… I was so scared…" She went back to hugging him.

"I know… but I am here now and nothing else will get to you." He returned the hug, reassuring her of his presence.

They sat there for what seemed like forever before Rumi calmed enough to lean away and talk. Makoto's blue-green eyes examined her as he felt her face to check for temperature or injury.

"What were you doing out here?" He finally asked, pulling out a blanket of furs and wrapping it around her.

Rumi looked down. "I…" She wavered. "I don't know. Honestly everything is slightly blurry before I saw the light yokai…"

"What were you doing?" He repeated, not being fooled by half truths.

She sighed. "I was drinking…"

"Drinking?" He asked. "But why? I know it was your night off, which you are free to do as you like, but drinking to a stupor is not like you."

Rumi gnawed at her lower lip. She could tell him, no? She could tell him how she felt. He's the only one she has confided in for all these years besides Yuuka. He would understand, right?

No, he wouldn't. He wouldn't care. Even all the times he has listened in the past, he didn't care. He just listen out of obligation.

"Rumi." Makoto snapped.

This jarred Rumi out of her thoughts as she tasted iron on her lips. She had gnawed her lip to the point that it broke skin. His voice wasn't harsh but concerned. He genuinely wanted to know if she was okay. He wanted to know. She could confide in him as she always did.

"I… I'm no longer needed…" She said bowing her head again.

"What are you talking about?"

"The last piece that was defining me just left me. I'm nothing. I no longer serve a purpose…" Tears slipped down her cheeks. "There's nothing left to give."

Makoto was silent for a moment, the sounds of the forest around them to filling the silence. Finally, he ask, "where is this even coming from?"

Rumi's brows furrowed and she looked up at him. His eyes were stern and confused. "Excuse me?"

"Where is this coming from? I do not understand your logic. You are everything. You are well needed and well loved by all of us. Where is all of this coming from?"
"Understand my logic?" Rumi asked, dumbfounded but his bluntness. "Makoto, Chihiro has finally got her crap together and no longer needs me. I have no family to go to in the Human World, real or fake family. My whole life was a lie that I don't know how to live with. My future's so up in the air right now that if I tried to reach it, I'd suffocate in space." She took a deep breath. "Chihiro's crap was one of the few things that held me together because it made me feel needed... when she figured it out... it took the last piece of me with it..." She paused and shook her head. "Makoto, I'm just tired..."

"Rumi-San..." Makoto breathe. "Maybe it is time you let someone else take care of everyone else for once."

"What?"

"You have taken on the world for so long. I have listened to you cry by yourself for the last, almost, ten years. I am sorry I have not done more. You are more than a crutch for your friends. You do not have to take care of everyone. You have taken on so much you have forgotten who the most important person to take care for you is." He looked her in the eyes. "Yourself."

"But-"

"No." He interrupted. "You deserve better. You deserve to be happy after all you have given. Let someone else take care of everyone else, and let someone be your shoulder to lean on."

Rumi eyes widened and tears began to form again. She was tired. So tired. She leaned into Makoto's chest and clutched the back of his shirt as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

"I'm so tired Makoto. I'm so... so tired..."

"Then let me be your shoulder."

She paused then leaned away enough to see his face. His blue-green eyes gleamed in the dark, reflecting the stars of the sky. "What?" She said barely a whisper.

"Let me be your shoulder to lean on. Let me carry your burdens. Let me be the one that you come to when it feels like the world is caving in on you. Let me be the one that will protect you." His eyes stared into hers with an intensity she'd never seen in him. "I will protect and comfort you. Stay with me and be mine. Be my mate."

Tears rolled over and ran down Rumi's cheeks. She didn't know what to say. Was this his way of a proposal? At a moment like this? When she was a complete mess?

"Rumi." His eyes still held the same intensity. "Be my mate. I do not want anything else. I know what I want and I want you. I know you. I believe in you and I fell in love with you as you are. Even if you are lost and confused, I will be a guide out of this dark forest that is your heart and mind."

Lost in the forest and emotions taking over. She nodded. That's all she could do.

"Say it." He said in a low voice that almost sounded like a growl.

Rumi let out a shaky breath. "I'll stay..."

"What was that?"
A smile finally tugged at Rumi's lips for the first time that night. He was being coy. "I'll stay with you Makoto… because… I love you. And I have for some time now… I just…"

He smirked and brought his hand to cup her face. "And I you." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I love you." He nuzzled her nose, causing it to wrinkle. "I love you." He kissed her on the lips. "And I will say it as many times as you need. I will hold you whenever you need it. Just know I do not like to waste my words or actions." He breathed in her scent. "Rumi, even if the world tells you they do not need you, know that I need you no matter what. You were there at the beginning and I would not have you any other way."

"Thank you." She smiled and leaned in for a kiss again. "Thank you, Makoto…"

They kissed and fell back into the grass, entangled in each others' arms, furs, and blades of grass.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:
Y'all please don't read too much into the quote of last chapter. -.-'

Haku seems kinda out of character, but love makes you do stupid things, especially when you finally acknowledge it and you've been under house arrest for a week. Lol

Don't you hate it when you suddenly go through an identity crisis after the way you've lived for so long is slowly taken away from you until you snap? Don't worry Rumi, everything will be alright!

Not going to lie, Rumi and Makoto were one of those pairings that formed itself in the background of plotting the story. I never had intentions of the pairing and it kinda just happened on its own. I'm glad it did because I love them. They lean on each other for support so many times throughout the story they didn't even realize it happened, like second nature. I love them so much.

Onibi are the Japanese version of will-o-wisps, but much more dangerous. They are blue flames that attack in swarms and drain the life out of their victims, leaving nothing but a corpse behind.

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

God Bless! KawaChou
Chihiro waited impatiently outside the Bathhouse, her nerves frantic as she waited for some sort of news. It took everything in her to keep her mind from going to the worse case scenarios. Where were they?

Yuuka had flown out in her bird form after they realized Makoto had already gone out ahead of them. If they really were taking this long, they were probably safe and having a deep heart to heart conversation about why she ran off. Yeah. That was it. Nothing to worry about.

The image of Rumi’s dead body grazed her mind for a moment before a hand touched her shoulder. It was Haku. Chihiro reached up and gripped his hand, anchoring it to her shoulder.

"I feel so useless…” She mumbled. "I should be helping."

"And have two humans lost in the forest? No." He replied shaking his head. "It is best that you are here so that Makoto can search for her with a clear mind. If you went out, he would be worried about you. Have faith in your friends."

Chihiro took a deep breath. "You're right. They're fine." She stifled a yawn. It was around seven in the morning and she hadn't gotten any sleep.

"Maybe you should rest."

"No. I couldn't sleep with them still out there."

"Then we shall wait together." Haku replied, squeezing her shoulder.

Chihiro nodded and sat herself against the post of the bridge that led to the Bathhouse, her eyes were getting heavy and she could feel her body beginning to betray her as sleep started to consume her. Her eyes watched the end of the bridge. She could still feel Haku's hand on her shoulder. He wasn't worried, why should she?

Just as her eyes began to drift again, Haku nudged her shoulder and her eyes caught movement at the end of the bridge. She gripped Haku's hand as she stood. Coming from the other side of the bridge was Makoto in his full wolf form and Rumi, blanketed in furs, with her arm reaching over his neck. Yuuka sat comfortably on Rumi's shoulder.

"Rumi-Chan…” Chihiro whispered.

Rumi stopped at the end of the bridge, looked up at Chihiro then looked away. Makoto whispered something to her and she took a deep breath and nodded. She gripped his fur and stepped away, taking another look at Chihiro, who was shaking with anticipation now.

"Chi-Chan… I…”

Chihiro dashed across the bridge and embraced her dear friend, tears running down her face. "I was so worried about you!"

"What?" Rumi replied, as if taken aback.
"Don't act so surprised. You had me worried sick and I couldn't do anything about it!" She hugged the confused girl tighter. "Please don't do that again. Please don't bottle it up anymore. I can't understand everything, but I can try. You've always been there for me. Please let me be there for you."

Rumi didn't move for second before her shoulders began to shake and she wrapped her arms around Chihiro, returning the embrace. "I'm sorry." She mumbled. "I'm sorry... I can't do it all... I can't. I'm hurt. I'm afraid. I feel like a total hypocrite! But I feel so alone even when surrounded by all of you. What if you guys disappear too? You're the only family I have left. I'm scared of it slipping between my fingers. Chi-Chan, I don't know what to do..." Her voice trembled from crying. "I need help."

Chihiro felt her best friend's words cut deep. How did she end up like this? Had she neglected her as a friend? As a sister? She was so focused on herself that she didn't realize her best friend was suffocating from helping her when her own problems. She had to return everything Rumi had done for her and then some. "I'm sorry Rumi-Chan. I haven't been a very good friend-"

Rumi shook her head. "What? No, I."

"No. I haven't. I've been so self absorbed that I never took the actual time to check on you properly. I could see it. You've barely held on by a string and you've been taking care of me. I'm sorry. You must have felt so alone back in school... I'm sorry."

"It seems we both needed each other more than we realized." Rumi laughed softly.

"I love you, Rumi. You're my sister, blood or not."

"Love you too." Rumi gave her another squeeze before backing out of the hug and touch her forehead to Chihiro's. A smiled seemed to play at her lips as the tears on her cheeks began to dry. "There's something else..."

Chihiro's eyes gleamed with curiosity and whispered. "What?"

"Makoto may have just asked me to be his mate..." She said so low, it was barely audible.

And sleep that was fogging her mind seemed to fade almost instantly as Chihiro grasped Rumi's hands and grinned. "What are we still doing out here?"

Rumi laughed, whipping any excess tears left as Chihiro dragged her towards the door before she stopped and turned towards Makoto. As much as she wanted to have the talk with him at that moment, she needed to thank him. Thank him for saving her best friend, for being the anchor she couldn't have without Rumi, for being the future Rumi needed. She couldn't some up the words so she let go of Rumi's hand and approached the okami-inu. He looked bigger than usual, he hadn't grown any from what she could tell, but his presence was bigger. He was proud. He was happy. She could tell he was barely containing his excitement even though he was as stoic appearing as always.

Chihiro smiled up at him and hugged him around his large furry neck. "Thank you." Was all she whispered. She could feel him bow his head slightly in acknowledgment to her unsaid feelings. "What would we do without you."

"I can name a few things." He chuckled.

She swatted him playfully. "Way to ruin the mood!" She laughed.

"It was too tense." He said.
"That's funny coming from you." Rumi chide with a smirk.

"I am glad everyone is safe and returned." Haku said from behind them. They all turned to him, his expression was soft yet authoritative. "But I do think many of us could use some proper rest and there are somethings that need to be discussed." His eyes seemed to fall on Makoto and Rumi.

"Of course, Master." Makoto said, bowing his head.

Rumi glanced nervously to Chihiro before everyone started heading inside to their respective cooriders. Everything would be alright. Haku wouldn't be that stubborn or cruel. Would he?

No, he wouldn't. She held Rumi's hand as they walked down the halls toward their room, with Yuuka still perched on Rumi's shoulder. She squeezed her friend's hand gently as they entered their room and sat at the couch in the main room. Yuuka flew off Rumi's shoulder, shifting to her human form half way, and prepared tea for each of them.

Chihiro continued to observe Rumi, who seemed to have a dull look to her despite the news of Makoto's proposal. Rumi looked worn beyond her years, her eyes distant with dark bags and her usually well kept shiny black hair seemed to have lost its luster. How long did it take her to get to this point? When did Chihiro stop paying close attention? Did she ever?

"Where do we even start?" Rumi laughed sarcastically as Yuuka passed at the tea.

"We're sorry. I'm sorry, for everything." Chihiro said, bowing her head lowly.

Rumi panicked. "No, no! Raise your head! You know not to do that around me." She sighed, shaking her head. "We're too alike sometimes."

Chihiro nodded, raising her head. "Crazy really. Neither one of us can really get our stuff together, can we?"

Rumi shook her head, chuckling lightly. "No. No we can't. Neither one of us can admit we have a problem, neither of us can even see what's right in front of us."

"Yeah. You're both rather hypocritical." Yuuka nodded.

"Yuuka!"

"Oh, shut up!" Rumi pouted.

Yuuka laughed and shrugged. "You already admitted it yourself on the bridge. I can't tell you guys how many times I've heard you two go on about family, love and belonging here and yet you can't seem to walk the talk. Geez."

"She's not wrong." Chihiro admitted. "Honestly… I think it's time we both come to terms with it."

"Hm? With what?" Rumi asked.

"The Spirit World is our new home. I'm not waiting for that gate to open anymore and if it does, I'll go see Oka-Sa and Otou-San when the gates open again but until then, I'm fine with staying here." She then gave Rumi a mischievous side glance. "Especially if some of us are deciding to settle down. Hmm?"

"Eh? Uh, yeah." Rumi stuttered, looking everywhere but her two friends, whose eyes were just begging for information.
"Well? Details!" Chihiro pressed.

"Err… weren't we talking about staying or not?"

"She already accepted his offer to be mates." Yuuka recounted slyly.

"What!" Rumi blushed. "How did-

"I saw!" Yuuka said, sticking her tongue out with childlike sass.

The girl's ears turned red. "How much did you see?!"

"Enough. I left after you said yes. I didn't want to stick around to see what happened next." Yuuka stuck her tongue out again, this time with slight disgust. "Nothing I wouldn't have seen before."

"Y-Y-Yuuka!" Rumi shrieked, throwing a throw pillow at her.

Chihiro laughed. "I'm glad you're finding happiness. You've earned it after everything you've done and been through."

Rumi stopped trying to suffocate Yuuka with a pillow and looked at her friend. "Thanks. I still can't believe it happened. It's almost like a dream." She looked off into space, as if recounting everything that happened.

"You really do love him, don't you?" Chihiro smiled, leaning her chin into her palm.

Rumi blinked and smiled back, her cheeks still pink. "Yeah. I do."

"Then I'm glad it's Makoto." She tilted her head. "If it were anyone else we'd have a problem."

Rumi laughed and looked down at the sound of a pounding on the floor. Yuuka was still buried under her pillow and looking for air. Rumi laughed and released her. "Sorry, sorry."

"Were you trying to kill me!" Yuuka screamed.

"It felt appropriate in the moment." Rumi replied innocently, receiving a growl from the young spirit.

Chihiro watched as the two bickered and smiled. She chose well. She chose well in the people she surrounded herself with. They were crazy, but they brought out the best in her. She appreciated it. She breathed a sigh. Would Haku ask such a thing from her?

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Haku sat his desk, lacing his fingers together in front of him as he reclined in his chair and looked at the scene before him. "So you are asking for my blessing… but you have already asked her to be your mate?" He asked, looking between Makoto and Rumi, who was fidgeting anxiously with a scarlet face.

"Yes." Makoto affirmed confidently. However, his stance was stiffer than usual, making Haku know that he indeed was nervous.

He glanced over at Chihiro, who stood near the door as support for her friend. She was doing that nervous tick of hers where she bites her lower lip and picked at her nails. It was the small things like that that she did that he found endearing.

It was late afternoon after Rumi was found. Everyone had gone to their rooms after and gotten proper rest before sitting to talk about Makoto's proposal to Rumi. If he blessed their union, he was
sealing the idea of both girls potentially staying there in the Spirit World indefinitely. After fighting it for so long, he would be finally telling them it was okay to stay with this one phrase. He would be throwing the idea of going their separate ways out the window. He would be admitting that he wanted to ask the same of Chihiro what Makoto was asking of Rumi. Surely, *that* was what he wanted.

"You understand what you are asking of her?"

"Yes." Makoto replied.

"Do you understand what he is asking of you, Rumi-San?" His eyes shifted to her.

"Yes." She said with more confidence than her demeanor showed.

"Then you have my blessing." He saw Chihiro's eyes widen from the corner of his eye. "If you both understand the circumstances and still wish to mate, I have no qualms."

A light sparked in both Makoto and Rumi's eyes and Rumi jumped up and wrapped her arms around Makoto's neck, whispering her excitement to him. Haku smiled softly as his eyes shifted to Chihiro. She was watching her friends with a happy, yet sad look. What was going through her mind? What was hiding behind those brown gems that were her eyes?

"Now that you two have my blessing, I would like to talk with Chihiro alone."

"Hm?" Chihiro blinked, pointing to herself. "Me?"

"Is there another Chihiro here?" Haku asked.

Chihiro pouted, puffing up her cheeks and averting her eyes.

Rumi glanced between the two and seemed to grin mischievously. "Of course. We'll be on our way. Right, Makoto?"

"Hm." Makoto took her hand and walked Rumi out, leaving the two of them alone.

Silence filled the space between them as time seemed to drag. Chihiro was still avoiding eye contact with her cheeks dusted pink. She was leaning against the far wall, arms crossed. Haku leaned on his desk with his chin in his palm, admiring her sulking demeanor.

"What is it you wanted to talk about?" Chihiro finally asked, looking at him.

"You do not work tonight, no?"

She quirked a brow, unfolding her arms. "No? I don't believe I do. Do you need me to?"

He shook his head and stood. "The dinner. I want to do it tonight. Dress up and come back here before sunset." He walked across the room to where she stood, her cheeks were a bright red now. He inwardly chuckled at the fact that she was so easy to fluster. If this continued, he would have an interesting life ahead of him. "We will not have to worry about any disruptions this time."

Chihiro's legs started to tremble and she looked like she was about to buckle under his gaze. "R-right... I'll be here. Anything else?" She asked as she skirted toward the door ever so slightly.

"Yes."

She paused, listening.
"Just be yourself." He smiled. "No need to bring anything else."

She blinked then smiled that shy yet confident smile she managed to master. With that she turned to leave, leaving him to finish preparing for their dinner.

Haku was getting a horrible sense of deja vu as he waited for Chihiro to come back to his office. For some reason, he felt like he was paying more attention to every little detail, more so than last time. Everything was arranged the same, except for dinner entree and the bouquet of flowers, which consisted of red and white carnations, white anemones and simple greenery. These flowers' hidden message was one of devoted love and sincerity. Maybe one day he would teach her this art.

A knock on the door brought Haku's attention away from the balcony where he had everything set up. He straightened out his kimono. It was one of his simpler kimono, with a subtle deep blue and green palette, that still spoke of his status but did not intimidate.

He took a breath and started toward the door, each step seemed a bit heavier. Was this what it felt like to be nervous? It was quite the foreign feeling.

Haku opened the door to Chihiro. She was dressed as she was before only this time she wore a pale orange, simple iromuji style kimono, peach blossoms embroidered into the silk. Her hair was pulled back with a matching clip. She fidgeted slightly with the hem

"Beautiful." He breathed inaudibly.

She fidgeted nervously. "Are you going to invite me in?"

Realizing he was staring, he complied. "Of course." He bowed slightly and ushered her in towards the balcony.

Everything felt right, the only thing out of place was Chihiro's stiff and nervous posture. She stopped to admire the flower bouquet, touching each individual one as if to find out their secrets. She looked around the balcony, surveying the area for trouble. Haku gave her a had look to her back. She was still scared and unsure about their safety. He did not blame her, but he could and would reassure her that it was safe. He handled every detail this time around and left it out of everyone's hands.

Haku walked up behind her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She flinched but her body untensed almost instantly after. "$\text{You are safe. Nothing will harm you.}"

She took a deep breath and nodded. "$\text{I know.}" She turned to him with a bright smile. "$\text{Shall we get started?}"

"Hm. We shall."

They both sat at the table and Haku looked to the far side of the balcony and made a beckoning motion. Chihiro glanced over and grinned ear to ear.

"Ame!" She rose and dashed towards him to envelop the small boy in a hug. "$\text{I missed you! Where have you been?}"

Ame laughed. "$\text{Shishou has had me on a lot of errands to the river and main city lately since he'd been on bed rest.}"

"The main city?" Chihiro asked.
"Important errands that need to be done in the main city because of the Bathhouse. Nothing you need to be concerned with." Haku answered, not fully explaining to her the need to let the capitol know about the inmates they kept under Bathhouse supervision.

"Ah." She replied, nodding absentely. "Well it's great to see you Ame!" She hugged him again. Then there was a glint in her eye. "So what is his river like?"

"Ah! Uh, well..." Ame side glanced at Haku, who tended to leave any knowledge of his river between his closest associates and the spirits of his territory.

"It is fine." He nodded.

Ame beamed and began raving to her about the river and its residents. He went on about the river itself and how it talked but did not talk whenever you touched and of the different plants that grew there. Chihiro listened with earnest, her eyes the size of saucers as excitement danced in her eyes.

"That's amazing." Chihiro said. She glanced at Haku and she blushed lightly. "It would be nice to meet the river someday."

Haku shrugged. "That could possibly be arranged."

Her eyes lit up and she grinned down at Ame.

"But until then, let us have dinner. Ame is here to serve the food."

"Oh really?"

Ame grinned and bowed. "At your service, Milady!"

Chihiro laughed and bowed herself. "Then do please take good care of us." She turned and sat back down at the table, a new air of relief around her. She felt safe again.

The evening went on and dinner continued over small talk and updating the other on their lives, though there really was not much to update on due to proximities. As the sun began to set, he motioned for Ame to take his leave and began to rise from his seat, extending his hand to a curious Chihiro.

"Come. I want to show you something."

Chihiro nodded and took his hand, rising as he gently pulled her up. He guided her to the ledge of the balcony, the clock tower just in their sights.

"Watch." He whispered close to her ear.

Chihiro looked up to him then out at the tower across the green hills that would soon be the river. As the sun set behind the trees, the water that trickled through the rocks at the base of the small town began to bubble up and out into the grassy hills, filling it until dark waters stretched out towards the clock tower, where orange glowing lights lumped over the waters. The setting sun reflected over the dark water in orange hues causing the water to practically dance with the lights as water rippled around the luxury boats that sailed across.

Haku could hear Chihiro's barely audible gasps of awe as the sunset upon the beautiful start to the night.

"It's beautiful." She breathed, then she chuckled. "Funny how perspectives change overtime. I didn't
think it was beautiful the first time around. I was terrified."

"That you were." He chuckled himself. "But you made it out and you saved your parents. You were really brave. You still are."

Chihiro sighed a laugh. "Thank you. It doesn't always feel like it though."

Haku took the shift in conversation as an opportunity. "I will be honest…"

She glanced up at him.

"I have never really feared anything, until I met you."

"What?" Chihiro blinked, take a side step away from the balcony, as if to study his whole demeanor.

"I fear the day I have to say goodbye. I fear the day when I am unable to protect you."

Chihiro looked at him with empathy. "But Haku-"

He raised his hand to stop her. "But you are also the first person in my life that I do not want to see leave because I want you to see me better. I have gone through most of my life detached from the world and responsibilities. I was devout to my river, my work, the wars at hand, but always detached from relationships. But then a little red shoe dropped into my river and my whole world changed."

He looked at his hands. He could see the blood of many enemies and lives lost to his river. The many sacrifices made to his river in the early years. "Countless lives have been lost at my hands, in my waters. What was one more? What was different about the life of that one small child?" Haku looked her in the eyes, curiosity filling her eyes and what also looked like caution and concern. Another time.

"Fate and I have not been on good terms as of late, but I do believe fate dropped your little red shoe in my river, so that one day you would save me. So that one day I would come to find that I love you." He reached out and cupped Chihiro's face and touched their foreheads together. "Chihiro. You are my greatest strength and my greatest weakness and you hold my heart in your hands whether you know it or not. Allow me the honor of being the one to love you." He traced one of his hands down her arm and brought her hand to his face. "Chihiro. You are the reason I am who I am today, I want to show you just how much you affect this heart." He brought her hand closer and kissed it.

Chihiro's face turned a dark shade of pink. He could see the gears turning in her head but not responding. He brought her hand to his cheek and leaned into it. Her chocolate brown eyes began to glisten with tears.

"Haku. I..." She leaned her cheek into his hand that was still caressing her cheek, covering it with her own. She closed her eyes and let out a breath. "Haku I love you. And I wouldn't want anything more that to remain by your side."

Haku smiled, then chuckled. The range of emotions running through him at that moment were hardly familiar to him and he felt like a rushing river after a good storm. He felt like soaring high in the sky. He paused as he kissed the inside of Chihiro's palm. Maybe he would.

"Follow me." He said, taking her hand and leading her away from the balcony.

"What are you doing?" Chihiro mused.

"I want to show you how I feel." As soon as they were a good distance from the ledge on the small balcony, he shifted to his dragon self and nudged Chihiro to climb on. She quickly complied and
carefully hoisted herself up onto his long slender back. When he felt she had a grip on his horns, he ran the short distance of the balcony and soared into the sky. The crisp night air flowing through his mane and the full moon lighting their path.

He heard Chihiro gasp in wonder and he felt himself overflow with excitement until he could no longer contain a roar that echoed across the forests and valleys. Behind him Chihiro let out her own type of roar that only ended in a jumble of giggles. He chuckled but found it endearing. This would work out. He would treasure and love her. He would take care of her. Through the storms. Through the trials. Whatever fate would send him. He would provide what she needed. Everything and anything.

"Haku," Chihiro mumbled, baring her face in his mane. "I love you. Don't you believe anything else."

Haku breathed and let the back of his throat rumble like a pur. He would hold those words close.

They drifted in the sky until the winds became too cold for Chihiro. They returned to the Bathhouse, midnight still out of sight, they landed on the balcony outside of Chihiro's room. Once Chihiro was off his back, he shifted back to his human form and caressed her cheek once more and touched their foreheads together.

"Do not ever leave me." He said, his voice low.

She shook her head. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Haku smiled and breathed. He traced his hand down her arm and held her hand. He wanted to show her. He never was good with wording his emotions and he knew it. But he wanted to show her. "I want to take you someplace. Someplace I have never taken anyone. But since it is you." His smile brightened. "I think arrangements can be made."

"As long it's with you and you don't send me away." Chihiro replied.

"Never again." With that, he pressed his lips to her forehead and nudged her towards the door. "Good night."

Chapter End Notes

A/N:
You weren't ready. They weren't ready. I wasn't ready. We all weren't ready. But it's here.
Let the romance begin.

Since I could not find any real info on "spirit mating rituals" or how they worked (especially with humans), I took it upon myself to make my own rules on the topic. So please don't take it verbatim when it comes around.-(honestly think that verbatim is my favorite word lol)

Would you guys be interested in a Q&A?

Thanks for reading and don't forget to leave a comment! And for those that do, I thank you a bunches!
Blessings,
KawaChou
Chihiro was on cloud nine as she entered her room from the balcony. Was this what love felt like? She'd never really felt it until this moment. Even in school, she never really showed interest, though, no one really showed interest in her to begin with so it didn't really matter.

"Sooooo. How'd it go?"

The sound of Rumi's sing-song voice pulled her down from the clouds. "Hm?"

Rumi laid with Yuuka across Chihiro's elevated futon like gossiping school girls with their chins in their hands, eyes twinkling with excitement.

"Give us the details, friend!"

"Yeah! Spare no detail! What'd he say? How did he ask?" Yuuka chirped, practically elevating off the bed.

"What's to tell?" Chihiro said with mock indifference. "He only asked me to his river. No big deal."

"No big deal?!" Yuuka explained, falling off the futon. "Dragons don't just 'ask someone to their river!' You only go there to get eaten or to ma-"

"Yeah yeah yeah!" Rumi interrupted, waving her hand in a shooing motion. "How'd he ask? Did he finally say it? Was he as romantic or as unromantic as Makoto?"

Chihiro laughed, raising an eyebrow. "Was that an insult or a compliment to your dear mate?"

"Depends on the day." She shrugged. "Now c'mon! Tell us what happened!"

"It was just dinner like last time but we watched the sunset over the clock tower this time. I don't remember the last time I saw so many colors in one sunset. And he made dinner - which by the way, was amazing - and we enjoyed just talking, like old times in the dreams. It felt so surreal."

"Bleh!" Yuuka stuck out her tongue, mockingly. "Don't get all gushy on us now!"

Rumi laughed. "Oh, c'mon! She's never been in love before! She can be as sappy as she wants."

The sound of a slamming door caught all their attention and the turned to see Rin barge in the room. "I'm here! What'd I miss? She's not getting all gushy on us now, is she?"

"See?" Yuuka exasperated.

Chihiro felt her face heat up and she laughed. What a stupidly amazing feeling being gushy felt. She sat on the tatami mats with Rin as she told them about her evening and how everything had changed all in but one moment. How she really did love Haku and was mad that it took her so long to see. They spend the rest of the night gossiping and giggling about their new found loves and other secrets that kept them sane together.

Chihiro spent the next couple days stealing moments and glances with the dragon god. The simplest
brush of the hand while passing each other in the halls during work hours was enough to send
delightful chills up her spine. The way he'd steal a simple kiss to her forehead after a moment alone.
He hadn't taken the moment to kiss her on the lips yet, it almost felt like something sacred that wasn't
meant to be touch quite yet. But the feeling she got from hugs and whispered sweet nothings were
enough to sedate any longings she had for him.

Chihiro went about her work as usual, cleaning the stalls, catering to the guests, leading small groups
of yuna through their daily tasks, nothing in her schedule really changed other than the brighter pep
in her step as she went about them. She felt a bit more free, if that's how it were to be put. She was
even nice to the yuna who always seemed to cause her trouble despite all the time and efforts that
had passed.

At the end of her shift, after dealing with said yuna, she was carrying a basket of laundry down to the
lower levels to be cleaned when she felt her load get lighter and found her arms suddenly empty. She
looked up and saw Haku's eyes regarding her with a smile.

"Well hello, stranger?" She giggled.

Haku looked around, mockingly confused. "Stranger? Who? I will make sure they do not bother or
come near you."

This only caused her to giggle more as she tried to take the basket back. "C'mon, Haku, I'm almost
done."

He spun around as she chased after the basket, circling around in an endless game of tag. "Now what
would be the fun in that?" His eyes glistened with mischief. If they weren't alone in the hallway, he
wouldn't be acting so playful.

"Hakuuuuuu!" Chihiro whined, trying to mask her smile with a mad expression.

"Are you trying to be mad? Because if you are, I can rest assure you, it is not playing in your favor
right now." Haku laughed, coyly.

"Oh, shut up!" She made another grab for the basket and successfully retrieved the basket from the
dragon. She huffed defiantly. "Thank you."

"Mhm." Haku hummed as he walked alongside her down to the laundry room. "Do you have any
plans after this?"

Chihiro laughed. "Other than sleep?"

"It is still early."

"True. Then, no, I don't." She replied. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing." He said absently. "Just wanted to take you for a stroll." He smiled down at her.

"Ok." She nodded.

After they passed the basket off to the laundry staff, Haku guided her out of the Bathhouse and into
the garden. The night air was warm and refreshing as summer drew near. It was a subtle reminder
that Chihiro had been in the Spirit World for well longer than expected. It was well into May and the
flowers that bloomed around them were beautiful. Most of the flowers seemed to be sleeping in the
presence of night but they were still beautiful to look at.
"Walk with me." Haku said as he walked leisurely through the garden entrance. He seemed so relaxed, it was almost like he was a different person. Was this the Haku only she would see?

They walked through the gardens in blissful silence, just their presence seemed to be enough. She felt no need to fill the silence of the night air between them, there wasn't much to talk about anyway. All felt right.

"I will be out of the Bathhouse for the next few days." He said after walking around for a bit.

"Oh?" Chihiro replied, slightly deflated. She always hated when he was away before, now it just felt like a piece of her was leaving. Nothing more than words had been said to establish their relationship and she felt this way, what would it be like when their relationship deepened to more intimate levels? She inwardly slapped herself at the images that decided to dance around her minds eyes for that brief moment.

"I have to go to the river and tend to it. I have not had the chance to visit it since I was poisoned." He explained, unaware of what was going on in her own head. "From what Makoto told me, it was not in the best shape when he went to check on it the day I was poisoned. I have had him return to it a few times since I was put on house arrest, but I need to tend to it personally to make sure everything is handled smoothly. Yuuka refused me the right to my river despite my advise, as a river god, to do so. It is never wise to leave a river unattended to for too long, especially after last time, when I was without my name."

"I understand." Chihiro nodded.

"And Makoto will be out as well, but I trust the securities of the Bathhouse will make up for the short time we are both away. Ame and Rin will be in charge and I trust their judgement. Ame is ample protection too." He was starting to ramble, which was very un-Haku. Was he starting to pick up her rambling habit?

"Haku." She grabbed his hand earnestly. "I understand. It'll be fine."

Haku stopped and turned to her. He used his free hand to tuck loose hair behind her ear. He stared at her with a gentle smile, his green eyes holding a glisten of adoration. She felt her legs start to wobble under her as she melted underneath his stare. His hand was still brushing through the rest of her loose hair. His touch sent her to places she didn't understand. This was what love was? This is what she was missing all this time? To hold and be held. It was beautiful and overwhelming all at once.

"Why did I wait so long?" Haku mumbled.

Chihiro hummed and leaned into his hand, closing her eyes. "We both had things to do first."

"That we did." He brought his arms around her and pulled her into an embrace. She'd never felt to warm and comfortable in her life. This is what safety felt like. She wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed.

"Haku." She whispered, letting his name just roll off her tongue. It just felt right. "Haku." She squeezed gently with each mention.

"Say that and I will always come running to you." He said, gently squeezing her back. "I love you." He said rather airy.

"And I you, Anata."

They stood in silence for a moment, just letting time slip by before he released her and they
continued down the path, once again continuing to enjoy each other's presence and small talk.

Rumi watched from a distance as Chihiro hugged Haku good bye by the Bathhouse entrance. It looked so innocent as they tentatively walked around their new found relationship as if it were fragile glass. She would admit, she felt the same with Makoto, but she wouldn't not say there seemed to be a bit more maturity with her and Makoto's relationship. Even if it were by one day. Maybe it was just her imagination.

Rumi turned to prepare for her shift and ran into Makoto. "Oh. Hey there." She smiled.

Makoto smiled back warmly. "Do you have time before you start your shift?"

"A little, why?"

"Come with me." He took her hand and led her to the small side garden outside one of the halls.

"What's up?" She asked.

"Rumi." Makoto started, looking a bit uneasy. "I want to take you someplace. It will be far, but if you want to continue this, before me make it official, I want to show you where I am from. Who I am. I want you to know all of me."

Rumi blushed. "Of course. Where- When do we leave?"

"I already asked Kohaku-Sama and he said we could leave anytime in the next few days. He placed some spells on the Bathhouse to alert him of any incidents. Chihiro-San and the Bathhouse will be fine." He assured her with a smile, flashing his blue-green eyes at her in a way that always made her cave. "It will just be you and me for the next few days."

"I'd like that." She said lacing her fingers into his so that their hands swayed between them.

"Thank you." Makoto murmured as he kissed her forehead.

"Anything for you." Rumi replied, tilting her head up to lean up to kiss him. "I love you."

She felt him smile against her lips. "And I you." He murmured once more.

They stayed in that moment for a little while longer before Makoto parted to help elsewhere in the Bathhouse. Rumi ran into Rin on the way up to the upper levels and was told to head to the foyer to assist Chihiro with a special guest. Halfway down, she found Chihiro and they walked the rest of the way down. She was briefly able to explain to her friend what Makoto has asked her before they reached the bottom floor of the working part of the Bathhouse. Chihiro's eyes glistened with excitement and said that she was happy for her. Their relationship was deepening and for the better.

When they reached the foyer the mood seemed to shift to a tense air, the foreman looking ridged and in shock. He shakily gestured to a frail old man that was waiting calmly in the foyer.

"This is our most honored of guests, the Great and Wise Eastern River and Seiryu to the Great Holy Beasts, Naoyuki-Sama."

Rumi gapped at the sight before her. What luck her friend had to have, or bad luck, depending on perspective. Standing before them was none other than Naoyuki, the great Seiryu. He wasn't exactly what she expected. Not that she knew what she was expecting but whatever she did imagine at the thought of him this wasn't it.
Naoyuki was a frail old man, hunched over a branch-like cane with as many knots in it as his knobby, crinkly old hands. His face was nothing but wrinkles, his wise, grey eyes hidden under said wrinkles and bushy brows. Long white hair cascaded down in back in a low ponytail, his hairline receding so far back that you could see the dark sunspots that adorned his head. He seemed so fragile and gentle, she couldn't believe that this was once the great Seiryu that everyone feared. He was definitely at the end of his life.

"Naoyuki-Sama…" Chihiro breathed and bowed lowly to the ground. Rumi paused, startled, and followed her example.

"Rise, child." An old, hollowed and crackled, voice came from the spirit. "To the one that helped me in my time of need, I ask not of you to bow so lowly. Rise."

Rumi and Chihiro hesitantly rose, she watched him with curious eyes.

"How may I be of assistance to you now?" Chihiro asked, her voice clear and unwavering before the old god as they guided him a small private room off to the side of the foyer.

"I come with a message for you and Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi." He said gruffly.

Rumi saw Chihiro grimace from the corner of her eye as they sat and she prepared tea.

"With all due respect, sir, Kohaku is not here at present. We can find you a room until his return-"

Naoyuki raised his hand. "That will not be necessary, for my words will not reach him. He still denies his birthright, despite signs and prophecies. He will not listen."

Chihiro bowed her head, as if agreeing on the matter, but her eyes were also firm, probably mad about the fact she and Haku were still being bothered about the prophecy. "He won't listen because he knows that it is not him who is meant to take your place." She finally said, sitting after she finished serving the tea.

"And who are you to say?" Naoyuki asked. "You are not even a quarter of a century old and you are wiser that our prophecy? Wiser than Genbu the Wise?"

This flustered Chihiro. "Well… no…"

"Fear not, child, I know that your intentions are good. You keep Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi's best interest at heart. But mind this, I do not have much time and the next Seiryu will rise whether they want to or not."

"But how can you be so sure it's him?" Rumi finally chimed in. "The prophecy is so vague as far descriptions go. How are we to know it's not someone else?"

Naoyuki's grey eyes shifted to her. "When you get to become as old as I, you tend to see things and know things. If you knew Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi as well as I do from observing him from birth, you would know that he has always been destined for this great honor."

"How can you be sure?" Chihiro finally asked. Her face was that of one that was faltering on resolve.

Naoyuki bowed his head slightly and shifted his hold on his cane. "My powers are weakening, child. Faster than I care to admit now that I have reached my end." He sighed. "As I grow weaker, my successor grows stronger. I feel that of young Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi."
A sudden thought seemed to cross Chihiro's mind. "You have control of the gates to and from the Spirit World, correct?"

Naoyuki tilted his head and replied, "The one of this region, yes."

"Do you have any control of the gates now?"

He nodded. "I do, but my control is weak and easily swayed by the new Seiryu, whether he is conscious of it or not."

"I see…"

"I will say this." He started. "As much as I believe it, I honestly do not know if Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi is the next Seiryu or not. But I am confident that you play a part in making the right decision when the next Seiryu does ascend." He smiled.

"Then why-"

"Instinct." Naoyuki interrupted. "And experience. But most importantly, I know Ryujin-San, and he does not invest in things he does not see potential or greatness in."

"But Ryujin-San cares for Haku." Chihiro protested, her brows knit together. "Like father or a brother."

"Yes, but where did that care stem from?" He mused. "Certainly Ryujin-San did not take interest in him because of a possible familial bond. No Ryujin-San only takes interest in those that will benefit him in the long term."

"But Ryujin-San isn't like that? Or at least hasn't made it known…" Chihiro picked at her nails.

"Like he'd show us his true colors like that." Rumi said, blatantly.

"Your friend it right." Naoyuki agreed. "Ryujin-San is a god from the beginning, if you are a woman of history - as I have been told - you should know tales of Ryujin-San. He is not a tame dragon and certainly not one that seeks out familial ties."

To that, Rumi had to disagree, especially since this whole Haku and Chihiro matchmaking game started. He'd been nothing but compliant and encouraging of Haku. If anything he was a complete softy at heart. Obviously the dragon before them only read the legends and never got to know Ryujin on a personal level. Weren't they in a similar age range or something?

"Well, with all due respect, sir, I don't wish to hear anymore about the prophecy or the slander you have toward our friend's name." Chihiro affirmed raising from her chair. Rumi gawked at her imprudence.

Naoyuki observed her and nodded. "You are right. I overstepped, my apologies." He rose with effort and bowed with even greater effort. "I will not bother you with the matter again. But do pass on my message and I will take me leave. Thank you for meeting with me." He rose and from his bow and started toward the exit where Chihiro guided him out of the foyer.

Rumi stayed behind and prepared a stronger substitute for the tea. Who were these guys thinking fate ruled the world or something? Her life was a complete denial of fate after she was saved by Yuuka as a child

Chihiro rejoined her in the room in silence and took the cup of warm sake offered to her as she sat.
She swirled it for a moment the tipped it back. Rumi clinked her cup with an invisible cup in the air and tipped hers back too. Sake didn't have the same taste since the last time she got drunk and ran away. She figure it would take some time after that episode, but she'd learned her lesson the hard way.

"You good friend?" She asked Chihiro.

Chihiro grumbled incoherently. "Wonderful…"

Rumi shook her head with a slight chuckled. "It'll get better, Chi-Chan."

"I hope so." She offer her cup for more sake. "I just hope that really was the last time we hear from them."

"Hopefully." Rumi replied, filling her cup. "But only time will tell."

"Hah hah." Chihiro mocked, properly clinking her cup to Rumi's this time. "To defying fate."

"To defying fate."

They tipped back their cups and sat them down on the table, returning back to work for the rest of their shift.

Chapter End Notes

The Holy Beasts have made yet another appearance, what could this mean for our friends? This time it's Naoyuki, for the first time since the movie. Even he doesn't know who the real Seiryu will be.

The new couple's sappy love is gonna kill me. lol I keep having to tell myself "it's just a phase, it's just a phase." But then I don't want it to be cuz I always want it to be like the first time for them cuz that's what I want for my relationship whenever it comes. So yeah… love is gross. Lol

Anata is a pet name couples in Japan give their significant other. It's the equivalent of saying "you", which I don't quite understand but it's popular and cute.

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

God Bless! KawaChou
Yuuka walked around the Bathhouse as staff bustled by and steam from the baths blow all around. It was her night off but she still found herself in the center of the action. She would be returning home in the morning and wanted to take a walk through the Bathhouse a last time before leaving. She loved the Bathhouse to an extent.

Like the others, it was a second home to her. She did come here to be with her Aunt Yubaba sometimes in her younger years. She had fond memories coming to see her and Boh, Yubaba teaching her a few minor spells that didn't really stick because of her own stubbornness to not be like her father and playing with a very young Boh was always fun. They were great memories until Yubaba started becoming obsessed with the doll and the Bathhouse.

Yuuka continued to wander until she found Rumi and Chihiro on their break in the staff break room. Neither of them very happy and were conversing lowly. She observed for a moment before approaching them with caution.

"Hey, are you two alright?" She asked.

They both looked up and sighed blatantly. Rumi nodded. "Yeah, just another encounter with a Holy Beast. I'm surprised you didn't hear about."

Yuuka reeled and exasperated in a hushed whisper, "another one?!"

The two human girls nodded.  "Who was it this time?"

"The one and only." Chihiro grumbled.  "Seiryu."

"Seiryu." Rumi answered.

Yuuka stared, not sure if she was processing all this correctly. She looked at Chihiro. "You have quite the unfortunate luck."

"Tell me about it." Chihiro grunted. "If I have to hear about that prophecy one more time, I might lose it. Now I understand why Haku has been so annoyed with it."

"Do you know why he doesn't want to be Seiryu?" Yuuka asked.

Chihiro looked up thoughtfully. "Something about it not being his true calling. He's never been led to lead in such a position and that he has far better things he would rather do."

"Like?" Rumi persisted.

"Mating her." Yuuka said bluntly, earning a hit to the arm from both girls.

"Shut up!" Chihiro hushed. "I don't know. Apparently there are things he still needs to settle and things he still needs to fix with his river, especially since he was reconnected with the Human World. He doesn't have the luxury to give time to things outside his world right now."
"Except you." Yuuka mumbled, looking off into space.

Chihiro closed her eyes and breathed. "Anyway," she said ignoring her comment. "I'll stand by whatever choice he makes."

"And what if he ultimately does what they say?" Yuuka asked. "Will that change anything?"

She watched Chihiro's expression faltered slightly, as if she had never actually thought that far ahead. "... Then I will still stand by his side."

"But what does that mean?" Rumi chimed. "I know what that means for Makoto and I. I'm staying here for the rest of my life. I'm not going back to the Human World, at least not to stay. Not to be my home. What does staying by his side mean to you? Settling down? Starting a family?"

"I don't know, probably? We haven't really thought that far ahead yet." Chihiro exasperated.

"Well you should talk about it." Rumi incited. "If you plan on loving him and staying by his side, know what it means. It's a commitment."

"Do you think I don't know that, Rumi?"

Rumi raised her hands, defensively. "I know you know." She sighed. "You remember the times we'd think about our future as wives? The simple high school girl days?"

Chihiro laughed. "I wouldn't call them simple. But yeah. It's one of the things we talked about to make the list."

Rumi nodded. "You might not have been into boys at the time but you always had a dream to settle down and start a family. You always wanted the whole wedding ceremony, we both did. The white dress, the traditional kimono, the flowers. The whole nine yards."

"You wanted it all." Yuuka remembered. "You two wouldn't stop talking about it at one point." She laughed, thinking about all the magazines and talks they would have about boys and their futures. It was something she had always been a bit jealous of but something she was also okay to be without for the time being. She had other things to worry about. She was happy for her friends.

Rumi laughed. "You should have heard her snide comments in the background! It took everything sometimes not to laugh aloud over things she said in my head."

"Glad to be of you entertainment." Yuuka smirked.

"But seriously, Chihiro." Rumi smiled. "Make sure you go into this knowing what you want."

Chihiro sighed and smiled back. "Don't worry. I will. Thanks for reminding me. I'll be sure to talk with Haku at some point... about all of it."

"Good." Rumi affirmed. "Well, let's head back before Rin catches us slacking."

The girls parted ways and spent the rest of the evening doing what they needed. Yuuka found herself packing what she needed to head back to Zeniba's in the morning. She missed her aunt, Boh and Kaonashi. Zeniba has also asked her to pick things up from the Bathhouse from Kamaji since was there. She had always liked Kamaji. He was always kind to her and treated her like family. Even if he was a bit gruff on the outside.

She spent the following morning saying her goodbyes before heading out. The flight home was
always freeing. She loved it when the wind rustled her feathers and the sun beat down on her in beautiful warm rays. She didn't like her father, or the particular way she grew up, but she didn't regret it. She didn't regret who she was, she didn't regret her aunts or her chosen family. She loved her life and wouldn't regret or live in her past anymore. She had to move forward with every flap of her wings.

The train clicked down the tracks as forests crept past. Makoto was never good at small talk but Rumi seemed to appreciate the effort at they sat beside each other on the train. They were well past the sixth station that stopped in Swamp Bottom now. He had not been this far down the tracks in a long time. He would usually run to his destinations, but with Rumi, he thought it would be best to take the scenic route and just enjoy each other's company.

Their final destination was still in the eastern region of the realm, a ways down the mountain from Haku's river. Makoto himself had not visit this particular part of his past in a long time. Its former residents had probably moved on by now but the forest was still there. They would get off the train on the fourteenth station and hike the rest of the way.

Makoto knew he was not much of a romantic, but even he questioned Rumi's tastes in romantic walks through the forests. He had learned that she was not much for romantic candle light dinner and flowers, she would like them occasionally but not as often as many others would. She preferred to go out and explore, see the world outside herself. She did not always let this trait of hers off much in the Human World around her… past partners… No, this was something she saved for him. And he appreciated it.

"Makoto, where are we going exactly?" Rumi asked, watching the trees go by.

"Where I grew up." He answered, staring out the window, where another station drifted pass and into the distance.

Rumi nodded. "Okay."

He looked at her and smiled. Her posture was timid, like it always was when she wanted to ask more questions. "I will explain everything when we get there."

Rumi's eyes glistened up at him and she leaned into his side, letting him wrap his arms around her shoulders to draw her closer. For the first time in his life he felt like he knew where he belonged. This human girl changed his world and he knew he belonged by her side. She would help him and he her. It felt right.

But looking ahead, he could not help but think of what he was asking of her. What he would ask of her. Would it be too much? Would she understand? Would it scare her? Would she change her mind?

Makoto looked down at Rumi. Her eyes were watching the scenery through the window across from them, half-lidded as if falling asleep. She was beautiful in the light of the setting sun that streamed through the window she was looking through. It caused her dark hair and mahogany eyes to glow a tint of orange that complimented her tanned skin.

Was he thinking too little of her? She was a strong woman. She knew how to hold her own, even if it meant she did it all on her own. However, that was how she ended up in a forest of onibi. He shook his head lightly and thought back to just holding her in his arms for the rest of that night, comforting her and listening to her as she mentioned all the things that were racing through her head. Everything that caused her to think that a bottle of sake and running away would somehow solve her
He hugged her closer and leaned his chin against her head in a protective manner. He could trust her. He would trust her with everything. What she accepted would be up to her.

He got comfortable and watched the stations fly by as he tried to rest easy knowing that Rumi was safe in his arms.

After two and a half days on the train ride full of packed bento boxes, games - mostly evoked by Rumi - and good conversation, they reached the fourteenth station. The station stopped at the edge of a lake, with large forest trees trailing around the outside. They could hear the life of the surrounding inhabitants singing their songs. The water was still and dark in the early morning. Darker than it should be.

Rumi approached the water and looked into it to see her reflection, reaching out to touch it. Makoto caught her hand.

"No."

She looked up at him, blinking. "Why not?"

"The water is too still. It is too dark, even for this time of morning. Notice there is no life in it."

Rumi glanced at it again and studied it. Her eyes scrutinized it. "Is it… it is godless?"

Makoto sighed and nodded. "This is what happens when a god dies… or the spirit that cared for it abandons their territory without replacement. It dies and becomes poisonous. No life can thrive from it. If you touch it or drink from it, you might as well be cursed or good as dead."

"Well this is a good place to have a train drop off." She mumbled, looking at the station where the train once was.

"It was not always like this." Makoto reminenced.

"It wasn't?"

He shook his head. "It used to be a beautiful lake, life all around it. I used to drink from this lake and play in it with my pack." He picked up a stone and tossed it in the water. The stone seemed to sink into the black water like molasses, hardly disturbing the water with even a ripple. "Whenever you approach waters in the Spirit World, do not be quick to touch it. Always check if it is living or has a host."

"How?" Rumi asked, looking at the silent lake sadly.

"The water will be still, like stagnant waters. It will be dark and thick, like the consistency of honey. You will never see any creatures swimming in it, life will skirt around and avoid it."

Rumi nodded. "Is this what could have happened to Haku?"

"If he had not been reunited with his river after he met Chihiro-San again, then yes."

"Are the waters of these gods' ecosystems that fragile?"

"Some. Time varies spirit to spirit, river to river, lake to lake, land to land. Not all are as strongly bonded and in cohesion with their territory. Guardian spirits are different. They are gods of a
landmark or a piece of the earth. They are responsible for its ecosystem, for its health, for its inhabitants, everything about it. They become one with the land. They can communicate through and with their land. It really is a beautiful bond between a god and their land." He looked out at the water again. "It really is disheartening to see waters become godless."

"I see. Can it be revived?"

Makoto shook his head. "Not that I have seen or am aware of." He stretched out his hand towards her. "Come. We still have a long hike ahead of us."

Rumi took his hand and they started their hike around the lake and into the forest around it. The forest was alive with the sounds of birds and insects of all kinds. Rumi would point up at the trees now and then at things she had never seen or found worthy of awe. Makoto watched her in amazement in her element. How did he get blessed with such a beautiful creature?

As they came closer to their destination, Makoto felt his hands get clammy and he could feel his heartbeat faster. Something about being back in his old home brought back the feelings of the past and memories that he had locked away. Everything in him told him to turn back, he did not belong there anymore. He knew that his old pack no longer used this land but he remembered the trees clearly and the large rocks and caves clearly. He was back. And it terrified him.

He suddenly felt Rumi squeeze his hand. He looked down and met her earnest eyes. "It's going to be okay." She smiled reassuringly and they walked forward.

As they looked around, there was no signs of any current wolf inhabitants, but nothing else had changed, other than a few new trees and creatures that had taken residence in the area. The trees loomed over them in a beautiful canopy that streamed light down from above, accenting the ground with hues of the sun. Makoto guided Rumi to a large cave in the side of a cliff that had boulders stacked at the base.

"This." He cleared his throat. "Was where I grew up."

Rumi glanced up at him then approached the cave. "Wow." She touched the walls. "Thank you." She told the cave. "For protecting my dear Makoto in his youth. Thank you."

Makoto inhaled sharply. He almost did not have the heart to tell her. "Actually," he started. "I stayed out here."

Rumi's brows creased as she came out of the cave and looked where he was pointing. A small alcove sat between the boulders that barely protected anything from the elements, let alone a full grown wolf.

She gapped and looked up at him with a heartbroken expression. "What?" She barely squeaked.

Makoto sighed. "I was the outcast."

"Why?"

"I will explain it to you. But first, when was the last time you heard of a wolf being in Japan?"

Makoto asked her, looking at the trees around him.

Rumi blinked, then looked up thoughtfully. "Last I heard… they were practically or are extinct."

Makoto nodded. "You are not wrong. Wolves mostly live here in the Spirit World now, not really spirit or wolf anymore. I am only partially god. A quarter of me is the Shikoku dog. In our pack, I
might as well have been full dog because it was a shame upon our name. Wolves in the Human World are indeed extinct, exempt for a few in the wilder parts of Japan as well as those that bred with dogs. You will not find many full bred wolves anymore. There are a few packs still in the Spirit World, sneaking out occasionally to the Human World to hunt, to see what has changed and the like. There are even shrines that are still devout to us. We are a proud species. But you will not find many of us left."

"That explains a lot of your and Yuuka's arguments." Rumi noted.

"Right." He scoffed. "Even as a hybrid of wolf, I still have my pride. It has been ingrained in me. Mostly because of the Alpha of our pack but also heritage. We rarely ever took on any form other than our wolf form in our pack. Anything else was an insult to Moro."

"You walk around as a human and dog though?" She mused.

"Because I am practical," He huffed. "After I started following Kohaku-Sama, I started embracing my mixed blood. I will admit, even I can be proud still. I honestly prefer my wolf self over them all, but I am practical and will do what is necessary."

"You keep speaking of your mixed blood and shame, why is this such a huge factor?"

"Hybrids were always shamed upon in our pack. Many were proud because we are descendants of the great wolf goddess, Moro. To lose or dilute any of that blood would be a shame and scar upon our heritage."

"I see…"

"Our Alpha was particularly proud, taking it to new levels of shame." Makoto cringed at the memories. "If you were of mixed blood, you should have been prepared to face the brunt of the pack's brutality." He stared off. "My Oka-San was on the lower end of hierarchy and was forcefully mated by a half blood. That is how I can be. I quickly became the Omega after she died of childbirth along with my siblings. The Omega… the Omega always gets the short end of the stick… if you were Omega and of mixed blood… life was hell."

"What did they…" Rumi hesitated. "What did they do?"

Makoto grimaced and closed his eyes tight, remembering everything that had happened in his past. He took a ragged breath and turned toward her, not looking at her.

Seeing the effort, she raised her hands and waved frantically. "If it's too much, don't worry about it. I mean, we can-" she fumbled with her fingers.

"No." He breathed, finding her eyes. "I have to tell you. To show you… You will see it eventually, one way or another."

Rumi put her hands down in front of her and watched as he loosened his black yukata and shouldered the layers off to hang around his waist. Makoto heard her catch her breath at the sight of his marred and scarred skin. Her expression was pained as she gulped and slowly approached him, reaching her fingers out to touch his skin. She traced the lines of discolored skin from bite and claw marks that covered his chest and back. He could hear her heart start to beat in her chest and could smell the salt of the tears starting to form in her eyes.

"Why did they do this?" She croaked, spreading the palm of her hand across his chest.

"Because I was the outcast." He sighed. "They kept me around because I was 'family' and to be their
scapegoat. They put me at the front lines of every battle against rivaling packs, not because I was of any skill, but to see me fail. If anything were to happen to the pack or something was going wrong in the pack, they would blame me and… heh… punish me for it.” He grimaced.

"Why did you stay? Why didn't you leave?"

He shook his head. "It was not that simple, Rumi. Despite it all, they were family and we had moments where they treated me like such. But other times… not so much. There is a hierarchy in wolf packs and if you do not fall in line you are put back in line. There is also a bond. It is hard to explain, but there is a bond within the pack that holds us together, that protects us and each other. No words can explain it, it is the bond between an Alpha and his pack that keeps it whole.” Makoto struggled to explain the unexplainable. He never had to think about the bond, it just was. "So you see, leaving the pack… it just was not that simple."

Rumi looked up from her tracing. "But you did leave. When? How?"

Makoto traced his hand from her shoulder down to where her hand met his chest, holding her hand close to him. "I was not given the choice…” He squeezed her hand. "They… they left me for dead. I was put at the front lines again, like they always did, when we were met with an unbeatable rival pack and myself and a few other Beta that took front line, were practically slaughter. I was left half dead when the rest of the pack realized winning was not an option and they would have to forfeit that match and territory… I do not know if they knew I survived or not, but I was left behind to die either way."

Rumi remained silent for a moment, taking it in as tears slipped passed her eyes. "How did Haku find you?"

"The territory war was not far from Kohaku-Sama's borders and not long after he had regained his name. A few of his spirits found me and told him about me. He found me and took me in. He healed me and allowed me to stay in his territory. I have been by his side ever since."

He paused. "When Kohaku-Sama found me, I was fragile and eager to please. Eager for a pack. Kohaku-Sama revived me and he became my new pack. My new Alpha. I did everything I could to make it up to him.” He looked into Rumi's eyes. "Even if it meant going to the Human World to protect a human child in distress. Who would have thought I would save you in the process."

"What?" Rumi blinked. "You saved me? But Yuuka:-"

"Yuuka found you and took over you. I pulled you out of the car."

Rumi did not speak for a moment. "I don't know if I'm supposed to be mad or not. You knew too."

"Yes, I did. And I do not regret my decision."

She flashed her eyes at him in mild anger.

"Because I would not let the one I cared for die if I had a choice of saving them." He replied with earnest.

Rumi's eyes searched his, trying to make sense of everything. "What? What do you mean? Did you know me before:-"

"I fell in love with you the moment I laid eyes on you." He said, tucking her lose hair behind her ear. "Why would I let you die?"
"But you didn't know me. I- I-"

"Do not over complicate it." He said. "Your mind is too logical to understand."

She mocked a frown. "Is that an insult?"

"No." He smiled. "Merely a honest observation."

"Uh-huh." Rumi's became thoughtful and she truly frowned.

"If purity is a such a huge factor in being a wolf," she asked, looking away. "Why did you chose me?"

Makoto sighed and massaged her palm. "If you had told when I was still in the pack that I would chose a human for a mate, I would have gladly been thrown to the mercy of the packs' fangs." She gapped, appalled. "But after my pack abandoned me and I was found by Kohaku-Sama, something in me started to accept who I was and meet others outside the pack, I was able to begin to accept my love for you."

"So you were in denial for a bit?" Rumi raised an eyebrow.

"Of course." Makoto's laughed. "I was in denial for sometime. I may have been starting to come to terms with my blood, but twenty five years of hearing that I was supposed to be prideful of your heritage takes a toll on your mind set. But once I met you, there was no denying that you would be mine one day."

"Twenty five?" Rumi stepped back, still holding his hand. "You fell for me when you were twenty five?"

"Did I never tell you that?" He asked, his voice shaking from restrained laughter.

"Does that make you a pedophile?" She smirked. "Did you have a Lolita complex when you fell for me?"

Makoto pulled her close to his chest, leaning down to touch her forehead with his own. "I guess I did." He said with a deep husky voice. He brought his hand to her chin and lifted it, kissing her gently on the lips.

"Y'know." Rumi said breathily between kisses. "We could always elope and start our own pack."

Something in Makoto caused a growl to rumble to the back of his throat. He drew her closer. "You? An Alpha female?"

She bit his lip defiantly. "Are you saying I'm not Alpha material?"

A chuckled rumbled in the back of his throat. "We will have to see." He tilted his head. "If we mate, you will stop aging, or at least it will slow down."

"Well that sounds cool," she mumbled coyly.

He nestled her nose. "Mhmm. And you will gain some of my strength as my Alpha mate."

"Even cooler." She mused.

Makoto smiled and took the strap of the bag that Rumi was carrying and lifted it over her head, tossing it into the cave. He ran his fingers through her hair and kissed her deeply. She pressed her
hands against his chest and slid them up and around his neck. They kissed each other passionately, letting their hands study and map the other. Makoto hoisted Rumi onto his hips, where she wrapped her legs around his waist, and they headed towards the cave of his youth. His cave. Their cave.

Makoto placed her down and slung off his own bag and pulled out furs that he laid out on the cave floor. He took Rumi by the hand and pulled her toward him and kissed her once more, deepening the kiss and trailing down her jaw and neck. She leaned into him and they sunk down to the furs, moving together until there was nothing between them but the furs.

Entangled in a passionate war to show the other's love, they mapped out each other's bodies and what made the other tic. Makoto saw nothing but Rumi as her beauty and scent intoxicated his scents.

"Rumi." He breathed. "You are mine. There is no going back."

She winced and pulled him closer with her arms that were wrapped around his neck. "I... I wouldn't want it any other way."

Makoto whispered sweet nothings and trailed down to her neck where he lick the base of her neck. She tilted her head to give him access as he frantically whispered "I love you" and sunk his teeth down into her neck. She let out a scream of bliss and writhed, hugging him closer and leaving marks on his back. He released her neck, licked his mark and threw his head back in a howl.

He looked back down at Rumi, who was gasping and smiling up at him. He leaned down and licked her wound again and muttered "I love yous" to her.

"You are mine." He rasped. "And I yours. Do not ever leave me."

Rumi leaned up and kissed him. "I would never dream of it."

"You are where I belong." Makoto said as they laid in the furs holding each other.

"Welcome home, Makoto." Rumi mumbled as she cuddled into his side, falling asleep with slow, breathless murmurs of love.

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Chapter End Notes

So Rumi is partially immortal now and will forever be twenty three. Man that'd be something. Forget Forever 21, let's be Forever 23. Lol In my world, this is mostly a wolf spirit mating ritual. Mating specific spirits have different "benefits" for humans for the sake of plot. #yesjustusedtheplotcard

Okami mating facts for Written Rivers: Because Okami are pack focused, when the alpha of a pack mates, their okami mate becomes stronger. In the case of alphas mating a human, the human gains some of the alphas strength and gets an extension on their life for however long the alpha lives. However they are not invincible and can still die.
(Oh, Makoto is around thirty five years old by the way. ^^; he's a pretty young spirit)

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

God bless! KawaChou
With Haku, Rumi, Yuuka, and Makoto out, Chihiro found herself wandering around the Bathhouse more than usual after the first three days of being by herself. She did have Rin and Ame to talk to but Ame was on errands in the morning and then straight to helping around the Bathhouse and making sure everything went smoothly. Rin would hang out but it wouldn't be long before she was needed elsewhere in the Bathhouse.

After five days, she started over analyzing every task she and the other staff were doing. Mostly the ones being done wrong. She had nothing else better to do and she was getting antsy. By day seven, she was just tired. She wanted everything and everyone to be back to normal. Even some of the staff were starting to get a bit antsy without Haku's presence. She respected the reformed staff, they were holding together well without their boss's watchful and intimidating eye. It was like a different staff in comparison to when she first returned.

Chihiro went about her usual errands in a rather dull manner. She didn't have her usual enthusiasm that she normally kept while working. With that week since Haku left, she was feeling emotionally drained. She really hated the feeling and just wanted him back at the Bathhouse so she could be back to normal again.

But then again, she'd just have to get used to his being away. It would be normal for him to be away in the future.

She also didn't think Naoyuki's visit was any help. She really didn't know how she was going to tell Haku about the unexpected guest and his dear words of wisdom. She didn't want to start their relationship on lies and deceit, but she already knew he didn't want to hear anything else about the prophecy for Seiryu and certainly didn't want to hear about them bothering her. He'd be in the right mind to go up to the capital and demand they leave him and his friends, business, and river alone. Was it too much to ask for? Apparently, yes. Yes it was.

Chihiro placed a bucket down next to an empty bath she was to clean. What would happen when she was gone? She thought, thinking back about her future with Haku.

She wasn't immortal like him, she would be gone in less that a century. If their relationship continued and they mated, what would happen to Haku when she died. What would he have to hold on to? Her memory? She suddenly blushed. Their children? She hadn't thought of that yet.

Chihiro pulled a brush out of the bucket, her face still red from the idea of ever having children with the dragon god. She hauled herself into the bath to assess the damage. But if she did, it would definitely leave something behind. She vaguely remembered the small notebook Rumi had given her. She didn't have it on her but she remembered the goal lists she'd written.

"1. Graduate University

2. Get job as a journalist or mythologist

3. Write a book

4. Serve the environment in three big ways
5. Start a family

6. Leave your mark

She'd graduated university and gotten a job as a historian. Though she was proud of her accomplishment and did love her job, it didn't quite compare to her feelings for it now. It provided for herself and parents if they ever needed it one day but it didn't satisfy any personal feelings for her own desires of her future. She had written her book, so that could be checked off and count as a technical way of helping the environment in some big way. Technically… Was that a way of leaving her mark too?

She thought of goal five hard. "Start a family." Did she deserve one?

She immediately shut that question out of her head, knowing the cold, dark rabbit trail it usually sent her down. She wouldn't think of such questions lest she have some sort of anxiety attack. She had no intentions of relapsing after having no attacks for at least a week… that didn't feel long enough… Maybe she could let the last one slide because Haku's life had been in danger. Could she give herself free passes on attacks? She chuckled lightly at herself. Of course not… but if she did, it would have been at least almost two months since her last attack and dare she say that was an accomplishment by itself.

She pulled the tab for herbal water to pour into the tub. What had she been thinking about? Oh, right, her goal of a family. Why couldn't her mind stay focused for once?

Maybe that was her mark… a family. Her children. If they were his children they would most certainly leave a mark on the world. She would one day die but her children would live on with him and carry on her legacy. That would work.

Then the logical side of her brain started to work as she scrubbed at the side of the walls, her legs calf deep in murky herbal water. Could she have a child with a spirit? Sure she had read the books and myths, but what if they really were just that: myths? But there were so many stories and great heroes that were half spirit, there was a chance. In fact, according to legend, Ryujin had a few half mortal children of his own. Wasn't the first emperor of Japan claimed to be his grandchild? And to her understanding he was now an immortal human here in the Spirit World, governing over the Spirit World?

Ugh. Chihiro's head was starting to hurt. She was thinking too much about things that were yet to even be possible. She looked at her hands that were pruning and red from scrubbing the walls so hard. She looked around her and found the tub almost completely clean.

"Chihiro!"

Chihiro peeked her head over the lip of the tub to see Rin looking around. "Yes?" She called out.

Rin looked over and placed her hands on her hips in disbelief as she jutted a thumb behind her pointedly. "You have a regular here that's arrived. I'll let one of the other yuna finish up in here for you. Go clean up."

Chihiro hauled herself back out of the tub and grabbed a towel. "Thanks, Rin. I'll get over there now."

Rin nodded and told the yuna that had followed her over what needed to be done and went off to tend to other matters in the Bathhouse.

Chihiro left to clean up a little before going to assist the guest. All the workers had a few regulars that
liked their services and would ask for them specifically. Chihiro had a few, apparently she was charismatic enough to earn the favor of a few of the wealthier patrons and was often given gifts as tips for her services despite her being human. Her services were never anything big, she was a fairly good attendant and was very good at making sure her guests needs were met, providing food, drink, massages, and simple conversation when needed. She almost felt like a therapist sometimes as she listened to some of the complaints of the spirits.

Things never escalated past that. Other yuna… well they tended to take it further. She hated the idea of them selling themselves off like that. She almost felt sorry. She believed that they were worth more than that. And the fact that it was allowed in the Bathhouse in the first place was another thing that she hated. She'd tried to bring it up a few times and was often brushed off or the subject was changed. It was an unspoken rule that it wasn't to be talked about.

Chihiro made it down into the foyer and welcomed her guest. The spirit before her looked to be in his early thirties in appearance, with white hair that pulled into a ponytail and sharp blue eyes. It was Kuraokami, dragon of snow and rain, one of the early gods after the founding of Japan.

The Bathhouse never ceased to amaze Chihiro with its ability to attract such famous gods and spirits. Kuraokami seemed to take interest in her not long after she started to work officially after their permanent stay. He enjoyed talking with her about his travels and long tales of the past, sparing no details. It was never a dull moment with him.

"Ah. It's good to see you again, Kuraokami-Sama." Chihiro bowed upon approach.

"Ah. The fact that you always remember my name makes me feel all the more welcome here." He replied with a smile. "But remember, call me Okami."

"Of course, Okami-Sama." She bowed again. "It would be a dishonor if I were to neglect knowing the name of someone as esteemed as yourself."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Chihiro-Chan." His icy blue eyes gleamed.

Chihiro nodded. "Right this way then." She gestured to the hall. "The usual?"

"Yes, much appreciated."

Chihiro smiled her charismatic poker face and guided the spirit up to one of the higher rooms, where the honored guests stayed and were attended to. She hated coming up here but sometimes she had no choice. She didn't mind the gifts she got at the end, they were often special herbs or gold. She had no use for the gold though, so she always ended up handing a portion of it off to someone else and saving the rest for safe keep. But, she felt even more uncomfortable on the upper levels than usual without Haku in the building, at least she could trust nothing would happen if he were there.

She slid the door open for Kuraokami and prepared the room as needed, getting sake and the small bath ready for his leisure. After he'd been in the water a for a bit she began massaging his tense muscles and listened to him talk about his recent ventures to the north.

If she did enjoy one thing about these private sessions is that she got to hear about things outside the Bathhouse. It was always fascinating to hear what the rest of the Spirit World was like.

"I would love to see what's out there sometime." She caught herself saying aloud. "I- I mean. Don't mind my complaining. Allow me to rub oils into your muscles, you haven't returned in a long while." She blushed and went to retrieve some oils from a small cabinet.

A large hand caught her wrist as she went. She stopped and looked at him with wide eyes and a red
face. His eyes stared into hers with a horrible hunger. "Then why don't you come with me. It's been some time since I had a human companion on my ventures, it wouldn't be a disservice to show you the sights and wonders of this world." He pulled at her arm so she was close to the edge of the bath. "It's a shame that they have you locked up here in this Bathhouse."

Chihiro tried to politely pull her hand free without wrenching it away in disgust like she wanted to, but his grip tightened. "As much as I appreciate the offer, I must politely decline." She made another attempt at her hand without success. She had always feared this day would come.

"Oh, my little bird, don't be shy." He rose slightly and pulled her closer. She leaned away as much as his grip allowed without appearing rude. "I know you have some attraction to me."

"Excuse my frankness, but I believe you're mistaken. Please let go." She felt her body begin to shake. What did she do? No one would help her on this floor and Haku wasn't back. This spirit could do whatever he wanted with her and she'd get no help in time. She was helpless.

"Are you trying to tell me that I have been misled or are you trying to play a game? If it is the latter, I do love games." He leaned towards her and she promptly leaned away until she fell over onto her back. Water dripped off him and onto her, his heat from the bath steaming off him, she could smell the pheromones coming off him. If she knew anything from her experience with dragons, it was near mating season for his kind and she was his target.

"Please, don't misinterpret." She gasped, pressing her free hand against his chest in an effort to push him away. "I already have a mate!" She pleaded with a half truth.

"Well he certainly hasn't claimed you yet." He said, leaning down to place his mouth by her neck, "I should maybe do him a favor and do it for him."

She felt his breath on her neck as his teeth grazed the jugular of her neck. She felt her whole body tense and her throat and mind burned of one thing. "Kohaku!" She screamed at the top of her lungs.

The spirit paused and leaned away slightly. "That's your mate?" Kuraokami asked, more amused that she would claim Haku her mate than confused or shocked.

Without a moment's pass, a swift windless breeze flew through the private room and Chihiro found herself in a strong set of arms and Kuraokami pinned to seat of the bath with an invisible force, his expression confused and a bit angry. Chihiro looked up and found Haku staring down at the spirit and giving him a hospitable yet hostile smile that only he could master.

"I do believe she has declined your offer."

"Who are you to deny my right to the services I paid for regarding the staff here?" He struggled slightly against whatever held him in the bath.

Haku continued his smile, she could feel the muscles in his arms tense as he restrained himself. "I am Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi, the owner of this establishment and I have the right to deny you your services as I see fit, especially if it has to do with the mistreatment of my staff and mate."

Kuraokami gaped then frowned furiously. "You have no claim on her, she bares no signs of mateship! I demand you leave and show the due respect for a honorary and regular guest at your establishment! If I have paid for such services, I will have my way."

He tightened his grip around her. "Then take your money elsewhere. I will provide a full refund if you so desire but if you wished for such services, you should have chosen a different yuna. Every spirit who is serviced by Chihiro-San knows she never takes on such roles. Now leave. I do not want
to see your face in my Bathhouse ever again."

Kuraokami's face was red with anger. "Without question." He growled and vanished into thin air.

They stood there, letting the air settle. Chihiro could feel Haku shaking with anger. There was so much shaking that she slowly realized that she was shaking just as much or worse. As if she were his anchor, Haku brought her closer into his arms. He quietly hushed her, whispering to her calming and comforting words until she was no longer shaking.

"I told you I would always come." He murmured.

She nodded her head into his chest, trying to steady her breath. Despite the temperature in the room, she felt deathly cold and the only thing making her feel remotely warm were his arms.

He lifted her chin and looked her in the eyes. "Are you alright?"

Chihiro knew what he meant and was somewhat relieved at his concern but for whatever reason, anger was what bubbled up inside of her. "Alright? I'm almost raped and you ask if I'm alright?"

Her voice trembled, but she couldn't tell if it were from the fear or anger.

Haku raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"I've had enough of this servicing." She pulled away from his arms, almost immediately regretting the absence of warmth but she was too angry to let it cloud her judgement. "I don't even know why you allow such services in the first place!"

"It has been in the tradition of this Bathhouse for decades. And it is the way of many spirits. Who am I to stop them?" Haku asked.

"In my world, that's called prostitution and sex trafficking. It's not exactly tolerated." She glowered.

"I do not like it anymore than you do, that is just the way it has always been here-"

"And that makes it acceptable?" She countered.

"No-"

"Women and men alike are not objects that can be used for money! Just like the environment and spirits aren't to be abused and neglected in our world, spirits and all beings alike shouldn't be either!"

"Chihiro-" He tried to intercede again but she was on a roll and she wasn't going to stop.

"Just because it has been the way of you spirits this whole time, doesn't make it right." She seethed, recalling every sex slave practice of every religion and culture she ever read about in her mythology and history classes. "You get entitled beings like Kuraokami coming through and exploiting women like me who want nothing to do with it!" She could still feel herself shaking from what happened.

"Then why do you continue to provide services with the knowledge of what these beings really want? You do not have to take on this role!" Haku replied in spite. "I gave you the option when you asked to work!"

Chihiro gaped at him. "So it's my fault now? My fault that I was taken advantage of?"

Haku seemed to recount what he had said but the heat of the moment was not helping either of their better judgement. He shook his head. "No, but a woman of your knowledge should know how the world of spirits and the necessity for such services are linked."
"Does that make it right?!"

"Perspective, Chihiro, perspective. The gods have seen this as a symbol of union and sanctity for a millennia. The Japanese only started seeing this perspective of chastity after Westerners started showing up, corrupting the foundations on which this nation was built."

"And maybe they're right! Sex is good, but in what context? To please? To love? To submit? To praise? To reproduce? What context in which is it good? In which context is it wrong? Was it wrong for Kuraokami to force himself on me? Because by your logic you should have let him. He's a god, it's in his nature, he can do as he wants because I am human, I am a woman. I am less than, gods were meant to rule over humans, and therefore I am to submit."

"Now Chihiro, you know know that was not what I said-"

She put her hands up to stop him. "No, but you've said enough." She turned away. "I need air."

Before Haku could respond, she slid open the door with a slam and stalked out and off the floor of private rooms.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:
Touchy touchy subject. But I ain't afraid to go deep. (Low key why the chapter is late though OX )
So, as Miyazaki originally intended, the Bathhouse was supposed to represent the sex industry that is still going on in the bath houses (or even to "how Japanese society was becoming just like the sex industry"). Chihiro isn't a child anymore and has held her tongue on the matter long enough. Thought I'd finally address the Stink Spirit in the room. Chihiro is getting her first real dose of reality of the world she's beginning to call home.

Honestly found this chapter hard to write though because of how little dialogue there is.

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

God Bless! KawaChou
She was out of line and she knew it. Haku only meant to comfort her but the fear and pent up frustration of the whole issue made her snap. He protected her and she totally threw it in his face. She messed up bad. It wasn't Haku's fault, he was only playing with the cards he was dealt, no matter how bad they were.

But she also wasn't wrong about the whole thing… was she? Maybe her views were too modern for the life she was entering. But just because it was tradition didn't mean it was right… Was she in the wrong? Maybe it was her fault. She asked for it…

It was at this point she could really use Rumi's opinion or presence in general. But she wouldn't be back for another day or two and she wanted to resolve this before then. She didn't need Rumi anyway, she had to make her own decisions. She'd spent most of her life leaning on her friend that it was time she learned to stand on her own opinion.

But she also just needed her best friend right now. She was still shaken from what happened and needed Rumi to be there. Even just in her mere presence she'd be able to find some solace.

In her fit of rage, she had found herself in the boiler room, where Kamaji was slaving away at his post. When he glanced up at the intrusion, his deep frown disappeared and his expression brightened.

"Aw! Sen! What brings you down here?" The old spider spirit gruffed.

Chihiro blinked, her mind in a haze of fear and confusion. "I think I just messed up…"

Kamaji raised a brow. "Hm? How so?"

"Well I-"

"I heard what happened!" Rin exclaimed busting into the boiler room. She rushed over to Chihiro and took her face into her hands and examined her every this way and that. "Are you okay? He didn't do anything to hurt you right, Sen? Who did it? Who do I have to hurt?"

Chihiro gently pushed Rin's hands away, trying not to alert Rin to fact that her sudden barrage of questions and touching did in fact startle her beyond belief. "I'm fine now, Rin, thanks."

"What exactly happened?" Kamaji asked, one of his grey bushy eyebrows raising suspiciously.

Chihiro heaved another sigh and proceeded to tell of the events that happened prior to her descent to the boiler room. She cringed and touched at her neck as she recounted what happened in the private room, her palms becoming clammy and shaky. She went on to explain how she completely blew up in Haku's face even though he'd just saved her from an unsightly act. When she was done, Rin's face was red with anger, while an old sadness filled Kamaji's eyes.

"I'm sorry that happened to you Sen." Kamaji started.

"I'm gonna kill that bastard!" Rin exclaimed, punching the palm of her hand.

"No, Rin." Chihiro shook her head.
"And why not?" Rin bit.

"Because she knows, to a degree, that she's in the wrong." Kamaji answered.

Chihiro glanced up to retort but bit back her tongue and nodded. He was right to that degree and it made her feel sick in her stomach.

Rin assessed the both of them and sighed. "He's got a point. Haku that is."

"I know. But does it make it right? Do I have too modern of thought? Have I been westernized in thought especially to such things?" Why was Rin agreeing? Was Rin supposed to be for or against this? Kamaji too? Were they ashamed of her?

"No… but you did take on a position that is predominated by those looking for a regular fling." Rin said. Stop agreeing!

"But…" Chihiro was going to retort once again but had to face some sort of truth that she did ask for it… it was her fault…

"As much as that is true," Kamaji said as he came down from his post to Chihiro's level, taking her away from her thoughts. "You also laid down your boundaries early, your regulars all know this, even Kuraokami-Sama. You are not at fault for what happened to you." He caressed her cheek affectionately as a grandparent would. "I'm just glad you're safe. Don't let this hold you back."

Chihiro took a shaky breath and nodded. Unease seemed to fade under his touch and she fell into his embrace. "Thank you." She mumbled, holding back tears.

He softly patted her back, all six of his lengthy arms making a safe cocoon around her. The familiar smell of soot and herbs were comforting and she felt safe again.

The sound of Rin clearing her throat brought the embrace to an end. Chihiro emerged from the hug and turned to Rin.

"I'm glad you're safe. And you aren't at fault. You were clear and I wouldn't have wished what happened upon any of the yuna, let alone you." She said encouragingly. "Now… about Haku…"

Chihiro felt her cheeks heat up. But not out of a state of romantic feels but of embarrassment and guilt. "I can't exactly agree with all the ways he's chosen to run the Bathhouse… but I also said I'd support him…" The feeling of confliction heightened her sense of embarrassment.

"Sen, there's something you need to realize with Haku." Rin started. "He does his best with what he's got. I don't compliment the dragon often but he plays a good game with the cards he's been given, no matter how crappy they are."

"Haku…" Kamaji gruffed. "Haku isn't like most spirits his age. He's developed a more modern view of the world over the last century. He's had quite a lot to think about. Especially since you entered his life."

"Don't give me credit for that."

"But it's true." Kamaji said. "I've known him for some time and he has changed. He was once so indifferent. So apathetic to everything that didn't affect him and his way of life."

"You saw the knucklehead when you first came here." Rin scoffed. "He was such a tyrant and demanding. It was like he was a mini Yubaba sometimes."
"But he was under her curse. Those darn slugs she used to control some of the staff." Kamaji frowned sadly. "Even little Ame at one point."

"Ame? Why him?" Chihiro asked.

Rin shrugged. "No one knows what's so special about Ame for her to have had him under control. I mean, he's a pretty good kid and he has the potential to be pretty powerful but no one knows why or how he ended up in the care of the Bathhouse."

"It doesn't help that his name is still hidden too." The old spider spirit added.

"Which leads us back to Haku and the Bathhouse. He's turned it around for the better. He's given spirits their identities back. He's given them the choice they didn't have before." Rin paused. "Sen… he's made the Bathhouse… better. For lack of a better term that is. He's given everyone their names back, he's actually given those who chose to stay a wage! That's well above what we got before. He's earned the respect of the whole staff, not just out of fear but actual respect that he earned." She explained. "The Bathhouse is still a brothel but at least the yuna are treated well and protected here. We all know that Haku hates it, but it's been the expectation of Yubaba's infamous Bathhouse and there are far worse places many of our yuna could be working at. There is a limit and they are protected."

Chihiro grimaced. "But does that make it right?"

"No one said it was right. No one said it was fair." Kamaji said. "But I'd rather be here to work than anywhere else if it meant supporting Haku and the yuna of this place."

"But can't we find a way to rid of the services that allow sexual relationships?"

Rin shook her head. "Many of the yuna would do it anyway, especially if it meant an extra tip." She rolled her eyes. "They're all greedy that way. At least if it's allowed, Haku can regulate it and protect them if he needs to."

Chihiro looked down with an exasperated frown. Maybe they were right… She didn't like it but Haku was only playing his best game with the cards he got. She thought about all the times she said she would support him and his decisions. This was one of them.

She heaved a sigh and nodded. "There's no other choice really is there?"

"Not really." Rin shrugged. "Unless you decided to leave."

"Hah." Chihiro replied dryly, settling into her choice. "I'll go talk to him then."

"You'll be fine." The old spider gruffest with a smile. "Just communicate. That's how this all works."

She nodded and gave him her best smile in reply, given the situation. "Thank you."

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Despite his age, Haku had a relatively modern view of the world, especially in the area that their whole argument was based on. He was finding it rather hard not to agree with her. But in the heat of the moment, old habits jumped up and he spat rather harsh words. He regretted his choices and knew that Chihiro needed her space at the moment. But at the same time, he felt he was supposed to be comforting her, especially after what happened to her.

He was so angry. Infuriated, even, that another dragon would dare to come in on his territory and have the audacity to try to claim what was his. It made him sick, he was so angry…
"His… She was not his yet."

"I already have a mate!"

"That is your mate?"

Chihiro had claimed him her mate. Whether they were official or not. This made a smile play at his lips. Maybe it was time he took this another step further.

"You have no claim on her!"

Haku bit his lip, pacing his office space. The poor excuse for a dragon was right. He had not placed a claim on her yet. The most that marked Chihiro as remotely close to a mate was his scent, which was not enough to ward off other dragons. If he really wanted her safe, he would have to let the world know one way or another that Chihiro was not to be bothered.

The sound of familiar footsteps stopped his train of thought. The scent of a calming bouquet of floral lingered in the air as the steps drew closer. It was Chihiro. Her floral scent was something he had come to long for over the last few weeks.

He straightened himself out and brushed out his kimono. They would talk this out. He would show her that he was not truly angry. He would show her that he loved her no matter what.

He heard her stop in front of the door and then silence. She seemed to be mumbling to herself as she always did when contemplating something or nervous. He then heard her heave a deep breath and knock on the door.

Haku made his way to door and tried not to open it too hastily, trying not to make it look like he had been sitting around just waiting for her to come to the door.

When he opened it, he found Chihiro, who looked meeker than he had ever seen her. She looked vulnerable and nervous. It was almost out of character. He promised himself he never wanted to see her like this again. It broke him to see her like this.

"Haku, I…" She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry… I shouldn't have yelled at you like that… I was scared and frustrated and… and I took it out on you… I'm sorry…"

Haku slowly approached her as she talked.

"I need to work on that but my anger isn't an excuse. I shouldn't be yelling at you whenever I'm, I'm frustrated or or-"

Haku wrapped his arms around her, silencing her stammering. "Shhh. It will be okay. I am just glad you are safe." He hugged her tighter. "I am sorry too. I also spoke out of turn at the time too… We have a lot to talk about. But I am just glad you are safe. That is what is most important here."

Chihiro nodded into his kimono and gripped the folds in her fingers. The tension in her seemed to subside the longer he held her. He never wanted her to feel this way ever again. He would do more. He would be stronger so she would never experience anything of the nature ever again.

"You know you are not at fault, right?" He asked.

Chihiro's grip on his kimono tightened as she hesitated to answer before she nodded again.

"You know I will never let you get hurt or go through this again."
She nodded again.

"You know that I love you, right? And that nothing could change to make me love you less."

Chihiro leaned away and he brushed away the tear that was rolling down her cheek. "Really?"

He shook his head and smiled. "Nothing at all."

She gave a half smile and she wiped her tears with the back of her hand. "I love you too. No matter what."

"Hm." Haku brought her closer and kissed her forehead. "Can I be honest with you, Chihiro?"

"I would not expect anything less." She replied.

He suppressed a smirk at her reflected reply. "I have no honest intentions of allowing this habit of the yuna or guests to go on forever." He backed out of the hug, holding her hands as he closed the door with his foot behind her. "But as long as I am in charge and in ownership of this Bathhouse, I will protect every employee here. I will remove the services with time, especially since I do not know when Yubaba will attempt to return. But until then, I will do everything in my power to start putting these services into perspective and out of the Bathhouse."

Chihiro nodded, seemingly satisfied with the answer. "I understand…" She reaffirmed herself with another nod. "I support your decision."

He smiled earnestly and cupped her cheek. "What did I do to have the gods and fate gift me with such a flower?"

Her cheeks turned beet red and she played with the hem of her shirt. "You are the gift here…" she mumbled lowly.

Haku smirked, leaning in. "What did you say? I do not think I heard you."

Knowing full well of the capacity of his hearing, she pouted her lip in a huff. "Don't even bother with that, Kohaku Nushi!"

He chuckled and touched his forehead to hers. He could feel her calm and lean into him. He felt the urge to pull her close and show her just how much she ran his world. Mating season was coming and he fought every urge his instincts told him to do to the human girl before him. But he had far more respect and control than that.

Chihiro slipped her arms around his neck and breathed shakily. He could taste her sweet breath just inches from his lips. He slowly leaned in and their lips touched. Her lips tasted of fresh mint and something sweet.

He brought his free arm down to wrap around her waist and pulled her closer. The kiss deepened and his instincts started to pulsate through his mind. How could such a simple touch bring him to his knees like this?

Before he could bring himself to stop, Chihiro broke away, heaving for a breath.

"No…" She gasped, leaning her head against his chest. "Don't… Nothing more…"

Haku blinked as he took the moment to catch his own breath. "Nothing more?" Was it too soon after what happened? Was it too much for her?
She shook her head. "Nothing more than this… Not for now." She looked up at him, her eyes glistening with passion and determination. "I don't want our relationship to be founded on physical needs. If we truly love each other, we can hold off until we are official."

"Official you say?" Haku pegged, quirking a brow.

"Y'know… like later when we wed or mate and all that…" She buried her face back into his kimono.

"I understand."

She blinked and looked him in the eye once more. "I love you."

Haku grinned and nuzzled her nose. "And I love you." He kissed her nose and pulled her into a hug. It was all coming together. Their first fight as a real couple ended with grace.

"Would you go to my river with me? I think it is time you met the rest of me."

Chihiro grinned, squeezing him tighter. "I thought you'd never ask."

They stayed in that moment for a while, just letting everything settle. It felt right just loving being loved.

Chihiro sighed and squirmed a little.

"Hm?" Haku hummed, chuckling.

"Now may be good and bad time to tell you about our visitor this week."

He paused and let out a sigh of his own, releasing her and regretting the end of such a perfect moment. He knew this would come up sooner or later, he knew there was a powerful being that came to the Bathhouse when he felt a spike in power through the spell that he had on the building. He just did not know who it was, he did have his suspicions.

"Who?"

She looked down distastefully and mumbled, "Naoyuki-Sama…"

Haku's suspicions were not without merit. He turned and ran his hand through his hair, contemplating. "What did he have to say?"

"He just wanted to send a personal reminder that you are the next Seiryu." She explained, annoyance very apparent in her tone. "Not that he knew either. He even admitted to it…"

"Hn." He was tired of this. He did not need these constant reminders of the many prophecies that he was or was not involved in.

"But he mentioned Ryujin-San…" She said.

"What about him?" He turned back to her to find her vexed expression.

"He said that Ryujin-San was one of the reasons he thought you'd be Seiryu… that Ryujin-San only took interest in those that benefit him in the long run… Is that true?" She asked, sinking into the couch that sat next to his desk.

Haku paused and nodded. "Yes. And I knew that when he took me under his wing. Ryujin is one of
the most renowned dragons next to the creation gods here, one of the oldest. There are many dragons, many of great power, but he is in a league few are able to achieve. If he took a dragon of little caliber under his wing it was never out of mere fondness or curiosity. He somehow sees the potential of any dragon he meets and decides if they are worthy of his apprenticeship…” He sighed. "He also knows the birth prophecies in most cases. That also changes his opinion, like they will be destined for greatness."

"Birth prophecies?"

"Yes… every dragon is born with a prophecy over their life and destiny. Every spirit related to the Holy Beasts get a prophecy. The Phoenix, the dragon, the tiger. They all get one."

"You all need to ease back on your prophecy run lives thing out here.” Chihiro crossed her arms. "If humans followed prophecies this religiously we'd never get anything done."

Haku deadpanned her. "You do. Yours are just called fortune telling every time you go to a shrine or festival. It is no different."

"Oh, right." She blushed and the tension in him faded a bit. What an interesting human.

"So were you given a prophecy too?"

Haku stared for moment. He clenched his fist, a deep dark fear that he had not confronted in a long time started to bubble up. "I am not ready to confront that yet."

Chihiro stared at him for a moment then touched his arm. "It's okay. One step at a time. Is it why you deny the Seiryu prophecy so much? Does your prophecy say something about it?"

He shook his head, taking her hand, suppressing any of those dark thoughts down. "Not directly, but it has potential depending on interpretation."

She nodded. "It's okay. We'll make it through this. Together."

He smiled, kneeling by her side and touched her cheek, which she did not shy away from. She felt safe again. "Yes, Together." He leaned in and nuzzled her nose and tilted her head to kiss her. "I love you.” He murmured against her lips.

"And I you, Anata…"

To say the least, Rumi missed out on a lot of the going ons of the Bathhouse. Apparently she leaves for a week and her best friend becomes a dictator to the staff, is almost taken advantage of, gets in a fight with Haku, makes up with Haku, and gets invited to the river…

What.

Her week was amazing until all that info was thrown at her. She got to have a wonderful and enlightening week with her mate as they explored Makoto's old home. It was the honeymoon she never knew she wanted. It wasn't what she dreamed about as a child but it was definitely more than she ever would have thought up.

Rumi sighed as she towel dried her hair and walked out of the bathroom into the main living space of her and Chihiro's apartment. It had been two days since they got back and technically four since the two other lover birds made up. It seemed like everything was starting to come around for everyone. Hopefully it wasn't short lived. She and Chihiro had seen enough and were at this point rather
Chihiro sat at the table drinking late morning tea. She had promptly took out any alcohol that was in their apartment after Rumi's episode until further notice. She appreciated the sentiment, she didn't know if she could drink casually after what happened for a while.

She watched her friend for moment. Chihiro seemed happier. She seemed lighter as she let go of all her worries, despite recent events. She was almost free. Maybe they both were.

Chihiro glanced up to her from the table and smiled. "What are you staring at? C'mon, your tea is gonna get cold."

Rumi laughed and sat with her friend. "Thanks." She accepted the cup offered to her and sipped at it gingerly. "So what are the plans today? Are you going to work tonight?"

Chihiro stiffened slightly but kept drinking her tea. "I won't be going back for another day or so…"

She nodded. "I understand."

"What about you?" Chihiro asked, setting down her cup.

"Hm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, I work tonight so I thought I'd hang out with my two favorite people today." Rumi smirked.

Chihiro's smile beamed. "Why thank you."

"Who said I was talking about you?"

Chihiro faltered and her mouth gaped like a fish. "Wait, um, wha-"

"I'm kidding, Chi-Chan." Rumi covered Chihiro's hand with her own.

The brown haired girl mocked a frown. "Whatever." Then her face twisted in an attempt to keep from laughing.

Rumi jabbed her gently in the side and Chihiro keeled over laughing. "I missed you, you dork."

Chihiro glared at her through her laughter. "You're awful."

"So when do you go to the river?"

"Next week." She answered. "Haku said he needed to make preparations first before we went. Y'know, with the staff and all, he was just gone for a week and didn't want to leave too soon after returning."

"Makes sense, he wants to hold up his reputation with the staff."

Chihiro nodded. "Mhm."

"How are you doing?"

Chihiro stopped and looked at her, then down at her cup. "If I stop for too long and actually think about what happened, I can still feel his breath on my neck." She covered the right side of her neck,
unconsciously. "But then I remember Haku's overwhelmingly loving touch that overpowers those memories." She smiled.

Rumi nodded. "I understand."

Chihiro gave her a side glance. "What about you? You're little honeymoon?" She asked coyly.

She laughed with a blush. "It was wonderful, just as I said before. I can't wait till you experience it for yourself."

Her friend smiled. "It may be sooner than we think."

They sat and giggled together over tea, talking about everything and nothing in particular. They snacked on a simple breakfast that they order from downstairs. Something about it didn't sit right with her so she stuck with the simpler parts of the meal and her tea. It felt good just relaxing with Chihiro, it felt like old times. Except for the sick feeling in her stomach, which wasn't reminiscent at all.

"Are you okay, Rumi-Chan?" Chihiro asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine, thanks. Just not that hungry and the food just seems a bit strong right now." She smiled and sipped at her tea again to soothe her upsetting stomach.

Chihiro looked at her suspiciously and then her own plate. "Okay."

They finished their breakfast and continued their morning as usual, just enjoying the company and returning to any usual Bathhouse chores they had to take care of before opening later that night.

Later that afternoon, Makoto found her and they spent their time to getting lost in the garden maze. Makoto seemed to be on edge about something but it didn't seem out of character for the wolf, he was always a little overprotective. After wandering for a bit he stopped and she looked at him curiously.

"Is there something wrong?" She asked tilting her head.

"You smell different?" He started, his nose scrunching slightly.

Rumi laughed hesitantly, resisting the urge to smell herself. "Is that a bad thing?"

Makoto shook his head in confusion. "No… not in a bad way…" He studied her. "Are you… are you with child?"

She stared at him, her mind completely blank. Pregnant? Her? Was that possib- yeah it was definitely possible.

"Rumi?"

"Me?" She finally squeaked.

Makoto's eyes began to twinkle with a childlike wonder. He squeezed her hand.

"How can you tell?"

"Something about you just seems different. Something I was familiar with seeing in my old pack."

"But…" Rumi couldn't think. Was she excited? Was she scared? Was she ready? She touched her
still very flat stomach and tears pricked at her eyes. "Makoto… I… I…" She knelt into a squat, trying to form a coherent thought.

Makoto knelt next to her, holding her hands tight. "Are you alright?"

"Hm?" She replied dazed. "Um, yes. Just not sure how I feel."

"I understand…" He nodded. "Let's walk through it one step at a time then. Ready?"

She nodded, taking a deep breath.

"How do you feel at the idea?"

"…Happy? Excited? Scared? Unworthy?"

"And that is okay." He said. "I feel the same."

She finally looked him in the eye. "Really?"

Makoto reached up and brushed away a tear that had slipped down her cheek. "Of course. This is my first time too. I have my doubts and insecurities too. But…" He cupped his hand over the one on her stomach. "It does not take away from my love and excitement for you and what our bond has produced."

"But what if it's too soon? What if I mess up? What if something happens and I can't be there for them when they need it most?"

"Shhh… nothing will happen. And if something does, we will handle it, together. We will love them and care for them to the best of our abilities. We know what we like done to us and what we do not. We will use that to help us learn to care for them properly." He cupped her face with both his hands. "I love you and want nothing more than to start my pack with you."

Tears slipped down her cheeks in streams. Rumi closed her eyes and nodded. "Okay… Yes, I will. I love you Makoto. I love you, I love you, I love you." She placed her hands affectionately on his arms.

He smirked and brought her close. "I love you too. More than you can possibly know." He kissed her softly. "I love you." He kissed her again. "I love you." Kiss. "I love you."

Chapter End Notes

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Sorry y'all, full time school, full time work, and poor health all kicked me in the butt at the same time. Last time I'm ever living this full time everything life again. I don't recommend it.

So. First fight. Well. Real fight as a couple. And as Haku said, it ended with grace. They're learning to communicate (especially Chihiro).

So I personally have a very Western and Christian perspective when it comes to things about sex, so I did have to study up on what is actually going on in Japan and how the Shinto morals actually correlate with modern Japanese belief on the subject. Can't say it was fun but it was informative.
Oh hey look, Rumi and Makoto… whaaaaa?

Thanks for reading and don't forget to review! And for those that do review, I thank you a bunches!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!