Temptation's Flower (Book One)

by MyWorldHeartBeating

Summary

Shortly after graduating high school, Kagome is immediately confronted by a shift in her surroundings, and by some unknown power, she is pulled through time, into a world filled with demons. An unknown evil soon arises, and with it, the object of its desire manifests within her, a pretty gem sought after by a mischievous thief.

Book Two is now Posted! Expect Youko to make his full appearance! Let the romance and adventure truly begin!

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The Goshinboku Tree

Year 1990

June 1st

A chorus of applause echoed within the Omori Senior High School gymnasium as proud parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings all stood before the stage watching the students step up to receive their diplomas one by one. The students were dressed in their required uniforms; the girls in their navy-blue blazers and plaid blue skirts while the young boys were dressed in the usual black blazers and black pants.

Higurashi was called next followed after by her three friends, Eri, Yuka and Ayumi. Once receiving their diplomas, a hardback small book containing their achievements, the four gathered together with their families, snapping pictures and selfies with one another.

Many parents and grandparents were dressed in the traditional Kimonos of various colors and lengths. Among them were Kagome’s mother and grandfather who wore their own traditional garb. Grandfather was wearing his normal priest clothes while her mother was donned in a stunning black Kimono with beautiful pink and white cherry blossoms stitched into the fabric while her hair was curled to frame her face.

Souta, who was also standing beside his mother and grandfather, smiled at his sister happily. Although he wasn’t dressed similarly as his family, he was instead dressed in a simple button down white shirt with his sleeves folded up at his wrists with black dress pants; over three years, he had grown much taller and was now in his first year of Middle School, fairly popular among his classmates and had even made captain of the soccer team.

“Congratulations Sis!” Souta loudly exclaimed alongside his mother and grandfather.

Kagome smiled warmly in return, slightly blushing from embarrassment. Both her arms were entwined by her friends and Yuka continuously took many pictures, laughing here and there at their celebratory gestures towards the camera.

After all the students received their diplomas, everyone was dismissed but those who remained resigned themselves to enjoying a feast within the school’s cafeteria. The Higurashi family however stepped outside the school with Kagome and her three friends following behind, each conversed in light conversation concerning their future careers.

At the entrance of Omori High School, they were greeted by the various decorations surrounding the site where they were all saying their goodbyes to each other. Some people had remained, and as Kagome and her friends looked on, they noticed a good portion of the boys ripping their buttons off their blazers and giving them to the girls, some who were flattered to receive.

Eri and Yuka slyly smirked at Kagome who looked at them in obvious confusion. While Kagome had never gotten a button, she thought the act was rather precious. From what she had seen in middle school, the second golden button closest to the guy’s heart was torn from the uniform and given to their significant other. When she thought about it, Kagome couldn’t help but smile.

When Mrs. Higurashi and grandpa separated to converse with some of the other parents nearby, the
girls caught sight of a familiar brunette surrounded by a crowd of blushing and smiling girls.

“It’s Hojo,” Kagome suddenly exclaimed, and at this, her friends’ laughed at the boy’s awkward attempt to flee the crowd. “It seems everyone is after his button.”

Yuka laughed. “Well from the looks of it, it seems he’s saving it.”

Eri exchanged a knowing look with Ayumi and Yuka. “Bet you anything he’s saving it for someone special.”

“Oh, it’s so romantic!” Ayumi gushed.

It was at this point that Kagome looked over at Souta, curious about his graduation from grade school. “That’s right. Pretty soon you’ll have girls asking for your button, Souta,” Kagome teased.

Souta blushed at her reply. “Well mine is reserved for someone else.”

The girls smiled at his remark, and Souta couldn’t help but blush. From what they remembered a while back, Souta had confessed to Hitomi back in grade school, and although he’d been too shy and shot down by the girl, with the help of his sister, he managed to express his fondness for her. It was surprisingly the two were still together, often going out for small dates together and the two were lucky to be in the same class again.

“Aww, look he’s blushing!” Eri teased. “Now that you are captain of the soccer team, what about your girlfriend?”

Still blushing from their teasing’s, Souta awkwardly rubbed his neck. “Well she joined the gardening club and she’s also started cheerleading.” Among all the girls at his school, Hitomi was the smartest and beautiful girl with large blue eyes, somewhat similar to his sister’s, and she had a gentle side when it came to animals.

Although Kagome’s friends were both single, not interested in the boys at their school, they were however given a button from a few boys that day, however it was simply returned as mutual friendship.

As Hojo struggled to escape the girls surrounding him, he managed to find a small gap just wide enough for him to squeeze through. As soon as he was out, he noticed Kagome and her friends a short distance away. “Kagome!”

Turning away from Souta, Kagome caught sight of Hojo running up to her waving. It seemed he had finally escaped from his fan girls. “Hello Hojo. Congratulations on graduating.”

“Thanks. You too Kagome,” He replied with his everyday enthusiasm. “I was afraid I would miss you after the ceremony.”

Kagome’s friends looked on pulling Souta away quietly as they waited for the moment Hojo would give his second button to their friend. They were all smiles, except Souta who looked on in confusion.

“So, I heard you were going to college to become a doctor?” Kagome asked.

He nodded. “Yes. I’ve been studying hard over summer vacation. I only need to pass the college entrance exams soon.”

“Well I wish you the best of luck, Hojo. I know you will get into a good college!”
Hojo blushed. “Thank you, Kagome.”

For a moment, the two fell into a short conversation discussing their plans for the future. Kagome had explained she didn’t plan to go to college simply because she wasn’t sure what to major in. Instead, she planned to help out around the shrine grounds until she figured out what she really wanted. Hojo accepted this, also explaining that whatever Kagome wished to do in the future, career wise, she would do great in.

“I have to get going soon,” He explained before hesitantly looking at Kagome. “My family and I are having dinner, so I can’t stay too much longer.”

Understanding this, Kagome offered a low bow to her classmate. “No worries.”

“But before that…” As his face reddened somewhat, and Yuka, Eri and Ayumi held their breaths excitedly, Hojo finally tore off his second button and held it out to Kagome sheepishly. “I wanted to give this to you. I hope you will accept it.”

Surprised he was giving her his button, Kagome blushed. To be honest, she didn’t hold the same feelings for Hojo as he did for her, but she took it anyways. The understanding that nothing more than just friendship would blossom between them was obviously noted, and although her friends had hoped for more, they silently accepted their decision.

As soon as Hojo ran off to rejoin his family, Kagome and her friends eventually said their goodbyes before separating. As Souta and Kagome followed behind their mother and grandfather, Souta couldn’t help but ask Kagome about her relationship with Hojo.

“Huh?” Kagome couldn’t help but blink at her brother.

“Well he gave you his button, but I thought maybe you would both start going out. Do you not feel the same way about him?” He asked.

Kagome shook her head. “It’s not that I don’t like him. I know he held feelings for me for a long time, but I only saw him as a friend. Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever gone out with anyone in school.”

At this Souta laughed. Although his sister was beautiful, as weird as it was for him to admit, he was surprised she still remained single. He was sure some guys had asked her out over the years. Even his own friends had gossiped about how good looking his sister was.

“Why are you so interested in who I date anyway?” Kagome teased.

At this, he couldn’t help but smugly put his arms behind head. “Well if you keep turning down every guy you’re eventually going to become a lonely old grandma.”

She narrowed her eyes at her brother, and her mother only laughed ahead of them. Looking back at the siblings, she offered Kagome a knowing smile. “It’s because Kagome is waiting for the right man to come along.”

“Mom!” Kagome blushed.

Souta only shook his head. “I guess, but sis you need to stop being so picky,” He joked, watching in amusement as his sister glared at him.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She huffed, her hands on either side of her waist.”
Laughing at her reaction, he ducked away from her when she raised her hand to smack him, causing his sister to chase after him until they finally arrived at the staircase to the shrine house. Since Omori High School wasn’t but a few blocks away from their house, it wasn’t surprising they were already at the long stairs.

“I’ll race you!” Souta loudly exclaimed before sticking his tongue out at his sister. After which, he started up the stairs sprinting.

Somewhat annoyed, Kagome chased after. “Stop acting like a child! Get back here!”

Once at the top, Kagome easily caught her younger brother and before he could get away, she quickly wrapped her arms around his shoulders and ruffled up his hair, much to his disdain.

“Hey stop that!” When Kagome refused to stop, he finally gave in and apologized.

Letting go, Kagome triumphantly smiled. That was more like it. As she looked around the yard, Kagome couldn’t help but breathe in the fresh air. Finally, she had graduated and that meant no more studying, at least for a while.

Yet as she stood there, something seemed awfully different in her surroundings. Looking around the yard, Kagome couldn’t quite her finger on what it was. Buyou was lazing around the yard as always, and nothing seemed out of place.

“Since today is a special day, I’ve decided to make soba noodles and steak. How does that sound?” Mrs. Higurashi asked as she stepped onto the porch, looking out at her children in the yard.

At the mentioning of food, Kagome and Souta immediately turned around and smiled. “Sounds great!” They replied in unison.

As she and grandpa disappeared into the house, Kagome’s gaze shifted around the yard again. Why did it feel different? Maybe it was because she graduated?

The sound of a ball bouncing near her shifted her attention towards Souta. He was tapping the ball on the ground before kicking it up in front of him with his knee.

“Hey Kagome. Can you help me practice?”

“But you’re already captain of the team,” She replied.

That was true, but that didn’t mean he had to stop practicing. The more practice he got the better he would do in upcoming events. “Well I was supposed to practice with the guys today but they changed their plans. Coach said I needed to brush up a little when it comes to making goals.”

If that was the case, Kagome guessed it wouldn’t hurt to help him out. The problem was they didn’t exactly have any nets which he could shoot the soccer ball into. As she looked around the yard, she decided to place herself just right of the Goshinboku tree, with a short distance between them.

“Okay Souta. Just visualize this point here as the net,” Kagome explained, spreading her feet apart and awaiting the ball’s move.

Nodding, Souta kicked the ball up in front of him a few times, watching his sister before focusing on the goal itself. He knew it wouldn’t be as easy kicking the ball out of her reach, given that Kagome was fairly good at sports. During Kagome’s time in Middle School and High School, she had taken up Volley Ball and Tennis with her friends and that alone would serve as good
As soon as he was backed a great distance away from the goal, Souta sprinted forward towards the ball and focusing all his strength into his kick, he hit the ball with the side of his foot and it flew straight towards the goal. Souta almost shouted in victory until he saw Kagome move. To Souta’s absolute disdain, his sister had jumped and grabbed the ball before it could fly past her before smirking at him.

“That was a good kick. But you’re going to have to try a little better,” Kagome replied teasingly.

Disappointed by this, Souta didn’t give up. For a while, the two practiced, and little by little, the Souta began to improve. Although his sister wasn’t into soccer, she gave Souta a few pointers here and there, since she had gone to quite a few games to see him perform.

Since it was almost dinner time and Souta could practically smell the soba noodles cooking on the stove, Souta gave one final kick. The ball flew through the air, spinning as it shot towards the big tree in the yard. Although it had missed the goal by a fraction, Kagome leapt towards the tree, placing herself between it and the ball with her arms outstretched.

Effortlessly, she caught it, but the momentum behind the kick had propelled her backwards against the tree. The bark rubbed somewhat achingly against her back, but it wasn’t enough to deter her. “I think that’s enough practice for today.”

Her brother nodded, wiping the sweat from his face. “Yeah. Thanks Kagome.”

Grinning at her brother, she placed the ball onto the ground near her, but before she could walk towards her brother, she heard a whisper. “Huh?” Turning around, she was met with the familiar bark of the Goshinboku Tree. It had sounded like someone was talking into her ear.

Not noticing Kagome’s distraction, Souta began walking towards the house, the smell of mom’s cooking much stronger from the porch. His stomach practically growled at the thought of food. Before entering into the house, he realized his sister wasn’t behind him, but was instead looking around the yard. “Sis what are you doing?”

Maybe she was only imagining things. Looking back at her brother, Kagome merely shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

“The time has come…”

Kagome froze at the voice. No, she wasn’t imagining things. Something was whispering to her, but as she turned once more, nothing was there except for the tree. The time has come? What did that even mean?

“Sis? Are you okay?” Souta asked from the porch, eyeing his sister peculiarly. Why was she acting so strange all of a sudden?

“Return to us Priestess … Save us…”

Placing her hand against the bark of the tree, Kagome wondered if it really wasn’t her mind playing tricks on her. The bark felt as rough as usual, though she thought she felt something off about it. There was a slight pulsing feeling against her fingertips, and she had the urge to place her ear up against it.
“Sis?” As he stepped off the porch towards his sister, his ears were suddenly flooded by her startling cry. Of course, her cry could have been from a number of things such as a small bug or cut, but her scream was different this time; there was fear in that scream, and in an instant, he sprinted towards her. As he neared, he saw an unbelievable sight. Her arm was caught inside the bark of the tree.

She couldn’t move her arm. Somehow, the tree had sucked it in, and she miserably attempted to pull her arm out, but it was futile. She was stuck. “Souta get mom and grandpa!”

Despite her calls, he stood before her, looking at the sight in obvious confusion. How in the world did this happen? “How is this possible? Kagome what did you do?”

“Nothing. I was just touching the bark and something pulled my arm in!” She exclaimed frightfully. “I can’t move. Hurry get mom and grandpa!”

When she said this, Souta was about to turn towards the house, but he was caught off guard when he saw the bark of the Goshinboku become slightly distorted around her arm. Within a second of this happening, Kagome was pulled deeper into the bark, crying out frightfully as her entire shoulder was pulled through including her leg.

“What’s going on?!” He cried, immediately grabbing onto his sister to pull her away from the tree. His attempts proved useless. He couldn’t do anything, and he doubted he would have enough time to get his mom and grandpa. This wasn’t really happening, was it? “Don’t worry Kagome. I’ll get you out!”

“Thus, is your fate…”

As her vision began darkening, Kagome watched helplessly as the rest of her body was pulled away from her brother. The last thing she heard was Souta’s cries and the next, absolute silence.
Captured

Chapter Summary

Kagome awakens to find herself in a forest, her house gone and her family nowhere in the vicinity. Where was she? Taken hostage by strange men, she finds herself held hostage in a village seemingly set in the feudal times. Was this a dream? What would become of her?

Musashi Province (Feudal Japan)

The Musashi Province, which was ruled by the Kai Clan in the early 14th century, was the largest territory of the Kanto Region. It was also home to one of the most provincial Villages of the world, Edo and Takeda Castle, ruled by the reigning Daimyo Takeda Nobutsuna.

Current Shogun: Ashikaga Yoshitane of Kyoto.

Ψ

A gentle wind and soft blades of grass brushed against the young girl as she slept on the forest ground. Kagome was unaware her surroundings had changed drastically as she laid there, her expression somewhat serene. Yet as the hot sun shined down upon her, her long lashes fluttered against her cheeks, it wasn’t long before she awoke with a start, her crystalline blue eyes shifting around her as she sat up surveying her whereabouts.

Where in the world was she?

The last thing she remembered was some unknown force dragging her into the tree in her yard, but now she was somewhere else. Her house was nowhere in the vicinity and there were no signs of Souta either.

“Where … am I?”

As she regained her standing, the young girl turned to look behind her, but when she did, she was surprised to see the Goshinboku tree standing tall before her. How was it possible the tree was here and yet her house wasn’t? Looking around, she realized there were more trees than usual, and for a moment, she pondered if this was just a dream.

It didn’t make sense. What on earth happened? Where was her brother? Where was the house? Where was Buyou?

Realizing her questions wouldn’t get answered just standing there, Kagome began walking in the direction she hoped to find her house, but no matter which turn she took, ducking beneath low branches, she found herself delving deeper within the forest.

This wasn’t right at all.

“Maybe I’m still dreaming,” She muttered on her trek before bringing her hand to rest on her wrist. With her fingers, she gave her skin a firm squeeze, and she yelped slightly in slight pain. “Or maybe I’m not…”
Either way, she wouldn’t give up that easily. There had to be at least a road nearby or better yet, some people who could help her. If only she had her cellphone with her; with that, she was sure she’d reach her mother faster. Continuing further, her path becoming narrower by the second as the trees became more immense in the area. It was clear to her she was probably going the wrong way, and thus, she turned around, deciding to go a different direction.

“Someone has to be around here…”

Eventually she came across something strange on her walk, and stepping closer, she came to an open area where the trees were less dense. Across from her, Kagome saw two distinct graves, both covered with small flowers. The gravestones were clearly made from wood, its exterior somewhat rough and sharp with mold on the sides slightly visible.

Kagome wondered whose graves these were and why they were the only ones settled so deep within the forest. Perhaps there was a special reason why. Before turning to leave, Kagome clasped her hands in front of her and offered a small prayer to the deceased.

As she stood there, her eyes closed, hoping the deceased had found solace in the next world, the sound of twigs snapping behind her surprised Kagome. With a start, she turned and was greeted by five men, dressed in clothing similar to old times. These top knotted men wore old kimono tops and trousers, some varying in colors of blues, grays or browns with straw sandals upon their cut up and calloused feet. In each hand, they wielded old fashioned shovels and hoes, and a couple were carrying large assortments of freshly picked flowers, their small wooden cart behind them.

“What are you doing there?!”

“Demon!”

Ψ

If anything, Kagome was highly irritated. These strange men had chased her through the woods, shouting unintelligible and belligerent names at her, going so far as to accuse her of being some demon. After cutting off her escape route, they had even threatened to kill her, but for some reason had tied her down roughly and threw her onto a cart and brought her to some small village.

For an awkward and frightening time, she sat there on the ground, her arms and legs entwined with rope, watching these strange people dressed in olden kimonos whisper and converse about her as if she were some odd thing that had showed up. If anything, she was a normal, confused and frightened graduate who wanted to return home.

“You didn’t have to tie me up you know!”

All that surrounded Kagome was old village huts, rice paddies and farmland. There were no vehicles or towers nearby that she could make out, and for some reason, Kagome felt she wouldn’t get out of this situation so easily. If they thought she had done something wrong, it was clearly a misunderstanding, though they didn’t seem to think so. These people were suspicious and fearful of her, that much she noted in their expressions.

“Do you suppose she’s a Kitsune in disguise?” An older lady with long raven hair questioned, her two children behind her, staring in curiosity.

“No, those shape-shifting foxes are a lot trickier than that!” An older man retorted back.

“You reckon this is war?” An old man asked, balancing himself with his small cane, to which a young man presumably in his early thirties grunted.
“Of course, it is, and right in the middle of rice planting season!”

As they continued conversing, eying her up as if she were some sort of oddity, going so far as to question if she were some spy from another village, Kagome felt a slight headache form. It seemed trying to convince them otherwise was out of the question; they thought she was some kind of threat, but how was she a threat if she was already tied up?

‘Top knot, top knot, top knot, top knot. What is this, Japan Medieval Times?’ It certainly seemed like it, though she wondered briefly if this was some sort of prank that was usually advertised on TV. No, it seemed a little too real to be a prank.

“Make way for High Priestess Kaede!”

There was a sudden movement in the crowd which didn’t go unnoticed to the young girl or anyone else for that matter. Without having to push through the throng of people, an elderly woman, dressed in what seemed like priestess clothes, sauntered into the area. In her hand, she held a large bow and with it, she kept her balance, moving it upon the ground with each step. Her long and graying hair was pulled behind her and a large black eyepatch rested over her right eye; she looked upon Kagome suspiciously.

For a moment, the two shared a long look, and Kagome wondered if she noticed Kagome’s innocence and nonthreatening appearance. Unfortunately, Kagome was immediately rewarded with a strange and dusty substance thrown in her face by the old woman.

“Hey! Hey! Stop that! I’m not a demon, okay?!” Kagome’s eyes were closed as she attempted to shake her head of the substance littered upon her. To her reprieve, the priestess known as Kaede stopped.

“Are ye not? Then why were ye found in the Forest of Inuyasha?” She questioned.

Forest of Inuyasha? What a strange name. What was the big deal? Surely those woods weren’t prohibited by others passing by, right? This had to be some kind of joke.

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” She replied, struggling to break free from her ropes. “I was only passing through. I don’t know what the big deal is anyway.”

Stepping closer to the aged priestess, a young man dressed in a gray Kimono top, and blue trousers, whispered into her ear, though it was loud enough for Kagome to hear. “She could be a spy from another village.”

Kaede’s glare narrowed, not once leaving Kagome’s form on the ground before her. “In that case, she would be a fool! Who would dare invade a poor village as ours?”

Kagome almost sighed. Couldn’t they see she wasn’t a threat? “I’m telling you I’m not a threat. Look I’ll tell you everything if you want.”

At her response, the other villagers seemed somewhat hesitant to listen, believing her words would seem false in their ears, yet some of the village men demanded her explanation immediately, to which Kaede nodded.

From the corner of her eye, Kagome noticed that some of the children and older men had gathered up a small collection of rocks, some larger than others with sharp and jagged edges. If her story wasn’t deemed believable, she guessed she would meet a cruel fate.

“Well, ye best start talking child.”
Gulping, Kagome took a deep breath and exhaled. “Well I was with my younger brother and somehow I got lost in these woods. I didn’t recognize my surroundings and I thought if I kept walking, I might find my house. That’s when I stumbled upon a couple graves nearby and then I was attacked by your men.” That was simple enough to seem believable, right? It wasn’t like she was lying.

A chorus of whispers sounded around her once more, and Kagome felt a strange uncertainty in the air. Did they not believe her? Before she could say anything, a few stones were chucked at her, narrowly missing her skull. A few sharp stones hit her in the sides and back of the neck, scraping her flesh, and she cried out in pain.

“That is enough!” Kaede called out.

From the tone in her voice the villagers ceased their attempt to stone the girl to death and curiously looked to their elder. Handing her bow to one of the village men beside her, Kaede stepped towards Kagome before bending down to inspect her closely.

‘Now what?’

Forcibly, Kaede grasped her chin, turning her head from side to side. While she did, Kagome had the sudden urge to bite the old woman, but from the cautious stares of the villagers, she knew it wouldn’t be wise. This lady was scrutinizing her, judging her reaction to discern whether she was good or held ill intentions.

“Be clever girl, or be ye a halfwit?” Kaede questioned. For a moment, she didn’t see anything sinister about the girl, yet Kaede couldn’t be certain whether her story added up. It was obvious in the way she explained her arrival in the Forest of Inuyasha as somewhat farfetched. She wasn’t entirely truthful, and because of that Kaede couldn’t bring herself to trust her.

“Kaede what should we do with her?” A younger man questioned, sauntering over towards the pair, his eyes glowering at Kagome, who returned the glare full on. He held Kaede’s bow out for her to take, much to her appreciation.

“Ye have a peculiar color to ye eyes, child. If I wasn’t mistaken, I’d think ye were indeed a demon,” She explained, looking into her eyes deeply. Kaede noted the bright and vivid color as bright as the sky overhead, her irises a darker shade near the exterior and surrounding her pupil. Never before had she laid eyes on such a color, and as she searched her gaze closely, the old lady couldn’t help but feel something emanating from deep within the girl. What was it? The feeling was too subtle to understand.

After much scrutiny, Kaede pulled away from Kagome and regained her standing, retrieving her bow from the young man. “Seeing as how the powder held no effect on her, she is not a demon. Ye may lower your weapons.”

At this, the villagers shared baffled glances.

Aggravated, the young man quickly bent down and grasped Kagome by the collar of her navy-blue blazer roughly pulling her to her feet, earning a startled yelp from the girl. “Don’t tell me you believe her story, Priestess Kaede? Just look at her!” His dark eyes took in her entire form disgustedly. “Look at how she is dressed!”

The others seemed to agree, nodding their heads vigorously. Kaede however said nothing as she watched the scene play out before her. His words did speak truth. The girl was quite an oddity and they’d never seen a Kimono quite like hers before nor as short.
As he leaned in closer, he inhaled the strange perfumed scent emanating from her. It was a sweet fragrance, a scent fit for someone of higher standing than this woman in his grasp. Reaching down, he grasped her plaid blue skirt, tugging at it roughly as he looked back at the villagers, much to Kagome’s dismay and embarrassment. “If you ask me, she seems to enjoy parading herself around in these whorish clothes!”

A twitch under Kagome’s eye formed, and if she wasn’t tied up, she’d smack this guy for insulting her. She was far from a whore! “Excuse me?! What did you say??”

He chuckled darkly at her before placing his knee in between her legs, rubbing the area between her thighs with his knee in a motion that made Kagome sick to her stomach. “I’m right, aren’t I?” He asked loudly, urging stern glares from the villagers. “Listen here, we don’t take too kindly to women selling themselves from village to village.” Yet there was something strangely attractive about this woman that seemed to spark his interest.

When Kagome recognized the lust and ill intentions in his gaze, a certain fear welled up inside her, and she couldn’t hold back any longer. As she collected the spit within her mouth, she pursed her lips and spat at him, coating his face with her saliva. “I’m the farthest thing from a whore you jerk! How dare you! Get your hands off me!”

Although she should have realized her mistake, in an instant, a resounding smack across her face forced her to the ground at his feet, and Kagome cried out painfully. Why were they treating her like this?

“You bitch!”

Fed up with the young man’s insulting actions, Kaede stepped forward. “That is enough. I do not condone such behavior in this village, Satouru.”

Surprised by her interference, Satouru apologized and stepped away from the strange looking girl who had the audacity to spit at him. It wasn’t his fault she displayed herself as a whore; the girl was practically asking for attention.

“What do you plan to do with her, Priestess Kaede?” An older woman asked, eyeing the girl distrustfully though she showed signs of pitying the child.

After careful consideration, Kaede decided for the time being to keep this strange woman within the village. If she was indeed a spy then they would keep a close watch over her, watching her actions and behavior for signs of suspicion. “She does not leave here. Until we are certain of her intentions, she will work for us. Do ye understand?”

As she turned her eyes to the villagers, they erupted once more in a chorus of conversation. Many refused to allow the strange woman to linger in their homes, believing her appearance would bring bad luck, while others mockingly laughed.

“If she works for us, then I see no problem!” A village man exclaimed.

Surprised by this, Kagome immediately sat up, her eyes glaring directly at the old Priestess. “You can’t keep me here! That’s kidnapping! I have the right to go where I want!”

“Silence girl! You don’t make the rules around here!” Another man shouted angrily, waving his hand at the girl, who refused to listen.

Her head whipped back in his direction defiantly. “I refuse to be kept here against my will! Let me go!”
While her efforts were in vain, Kaede simply shook her head. “As ye appearance poses great confusion, for now ye will stay until we know for certain ye do not threaten us. Ye will do best to adhere to our ways, child or ye be a fool to think otherwise.”

“Shouldn’t we first put her in her place, Priestess Kaede?” The same villager asked, the men beside him nodding in agreement. It seemed the girl held a difficult feistiness about her and breaking her would prove difficult.

But to Kagome’s surprise, the old lady merely shook her head. “There will be no need of that. As ye can see, she will soon learn her place. Ye will be sure to properly do so without the need of violence. If I hear tell of any misconduct, be ye warned I shall intervene, do ye understand me?”

They nodded, lowering their heads respectively to her.

With that said, the old lady walked off to resume her duties back at her old and small hut, leaving Kagome struggling to regain her modesty. The humiliation she felt at that moment, as the villagers looked down at her, kicking the dirt up at her and stalking off was enough to well her eyes up in tears but she refused to cry in front of them.

The only person who was left before her was an older lady, and as Kagome looked up questionably, noticing the dark circles under her eyes and the pale red kimono tattered with rips in places, she didn’t seem as menacing as the others. In fact, she bent down behind Kagome and untied the ropes at her feet and her arms, allowing Kagome her freedom to move finally.

“Thank you…”

“Come. You’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Although she wasn’t planning on staying here, she noticed that her escape from this small village was not possible considering the watchful eyes of the village men. As much as she hated to admit it, she realized she was stuck here, but it wouldn’t be for long. Somehow, she would find a way to escape and return back home to her family who were no doubt worried.

Kagome was led through the village by the woman, whom from her understanding, seemed in her early thirties. Just like all the other girls, her long black hair was tied back in a loose ponytail with a few strands framing her round face. Their feet were either adorned in straw sandals or they walked around barefoot, their heads lowered respectively to the village men. The woman never gave her name or asked for Kagome’s, but she supposed for someone as suspicious as her, there was no importance in exchanging such information.

Eventually, after passing multiple rice paddies, and fields where the men laboriously harvested their crops, plowing through the ground with the few oxen they had, Kagome arrived at a small hut. It was like all the rest, wooden with a straw flap which served as their doors, and barely any windows to offer any light.

“Go in.”

Abiding, Kagome stepped inside, pushing back the straw flap as she entered the small room. The entire floor was made from the same wood as the hut’s exterior, and it seemed straw also served the purpose for their mats as well. There was barely anything within the hut, save for a small fire pit sitting in the very center of the room, a few baskets in the far corner containing a small selection of turnips and mushrooms, a chest, and a small futon. There were a few wooden buckets outside the hut as well but other than that, there wasn’t much else.
How awful it had to be to live in these circumstances. The more she dwelled within this village, the more surreal it seemed. Perhaps she had traveled back in time, as strange as that idea sounded.

The woman was sorting through a small chest across the room and after regaining her standing, she turned and threw a small bundle to Kagome, who caught it unexpectedly. “Change out of your clothes and put those on. Once you are finished come outside. Do not take too long. My husband doesn’t take too kindly to strangers.”

As soon as the lady had stepped out of the hut to allow Kagome her privacy, Kagome looked at the bundle of cloth in her arms. As she unfolded it, she realized it was an old Kimono, a pale blue in color and made from what seemed to be cotton while the obi was a darker shade.

After removing her uniform, Kagome wondered if her clothing would be thrown away. She hoped not; it was the only thing she had left to remind her of her home and family. Deciding against removing her panties and bra, Kagome donned the Kimono and tied the obi as best as she could manage around her waist. After which, she folded her uniform and placed it into the small chest, hoping the older lady wouldn’t mind.

Once dressed, she stepped out of the hut and was immediately confronted by another villager, this one a tall and robust man with a large scar across his cheek. From his appearance, he was at least the same age as the other woman who had taken her in.

As he looked at her, Kagome felt her heart pound fast, and she wondered if he was going to hit her. Judging by his attitude, he wasn’t pleased about her intrusion in the house which told Kagome he was possibly the husband.

“Where are your manners? Lower your head girl!” He yelled, causing the other villagers in the vicinity to turn their heads in question.

Fearful he would strike her like Satouru, Kagome flinched when he raised his fist and quickly lowered her head in a respective bow. Unfortunately for Kagome, this was not the proper way to greet just anyone, at least to his standards.

“Such insolence!”

His tone of voice frightened her and before she could look up in question, the man had grabbed Kagome by the back of her collar and forced her onto her hands and knees, pushing her head into the soil at his feet.

“This is the proper way to greet someone!” He hollered before standing up. For a moment, he watched her under his gaze, not once moving yet he noticed her legs tremble slightly. “As long as you live in my hut, you will respect me in this manner! Make the same mistake again and you won’t be able to walk for three days!”

After which, he went into the hut, leaving Kagome in the same spot. This time, she couldn’t help but fight back the tears which threatened to fall. Why was this happening to her?

“Get up.

Although she would rather not, Kagome didn’t have a choice in the matter, and did as she was told. Once doing so, the woman threw a pair of straw sandals to Kagome who quickly reached out to catch them. After putting them on, she followed her towards the fields where dozens of other village women busily harvested the crops.

“It’s that girl…”
“Don’t look at her. She might bring us bad luck!”

“Even in a Kimono she doesn’t fit in.”

As she worked alongside the woman who had taken her in, whose name Kagome learned was Mayoko and her husband Daisuke, Kagome had been ordered to pluck all the weeds from the soil. It was an arduous job, especially since there was so much soil to cover within such a small village. Kagome wasn’t the only woman plucking weeds; there were at least two other girls around her own age, though they seemed keen on keeping their distance.

As the hours slowly drifted by and the sun began its slow descent, Kagome trudged through the fields, a basket in hand filled with a small selection of mushrooms she’d found nearby. Since morning she’d been working, breaking her back to pull the weeds which were almost never-ending; it hadn’t helped much when the two girls had disappeared on her, leaving her to finish what they ignored.

Wiping the sweat from her brow, Kagome finally arrived at the small hut. The boisterous laughter of Daisuke from inside warned her not to go in, and so she knelt at the door, the basket forgotten at her side. From head to foot she was covered in sweat and dirt, and she wanted more than anything to bathe.

From across the dirt path, she heard the village dogs barking and the chickens clucking as they scampered about the village. What a horrible place. Since there was no absolute reason for her to walk inside and make herself comfortable, Kagome resigned herself to a small bundle of hay lying outside the hut. Somehow, she would use it as a makeshift bed, and ignoring the fact that bugs had probably crawled or lived within the straw, Kagome nestled her head down, and covered the straw over her legs and chest.

From there, she closed her eyes, but sleep did not come. Her thoughts carried worry and anxiety of what would come tomorrow and the next day. How long could she continue this torment from strangers? The villagers hadn’t been fazed one bit by the thought of keeping her hostage, and that alone frightened Kagome.
With no choice but to reside in the village, still treated as a threat, Kagome spends her days working in the fields and tending to the chores. She meets two people who show kindness to her, and one willing to reveal the mystery behind the two graves in the forest she awoke.

Throughout the night, Kagome found it difficult to fall into slumber, often tossing and turning in the pile of hay on the side of the house. It was frightening, not knowing who was out prowling the night, and she found herself always searching through the darkness of the village. While she laid there, no harm befell her, but she wondered how long that would last without the protection of a wall.

The sound of footsteps walking past woke her, and somewhat confused, Kagome sat up and squinted her eyes at the villagers who were going off to work in the fields. From what she saw, the sun was slowly ascending into the still darkened sky, and Kagome tiredly fell back into the heap of hay hoping to fall back to sleep.

It wasn’t a dream. She really had been taken hostage by these people.

As she snuggled back into the warmth of her makeshift bed, she felt something roughly jab her side. Opening her eyes, Kagome saw that it was Daisuke, grouchily standing above her with a hoe over his shoulder held firmly by his masculine hand. The mere sight of his intimidating form caused her to sit up immediately.

“Get up. There’s work to be done, girl.”

And that was all he said before walking off to join the others. From there, Kagome shifted in her bedding, ready to crawl out, but she paused when she noticed something covering her. It was a brown blanket, and while it was poor in quality, it had kept her warm through the night.

“How’d you put it on me? Did Mayoko do this? Even if she was a little strict, maybe she wasn’t all bad. It certainly wasn’t Daisuke, that was for sure; as far as she knew, he didn’t like her.

Although it was still dawn, Kagome quickly stood up and folded the blanket. Since she was stuck wearing the same kimono, she had a feeling she would be wearing these clothes for weeks at a time, as disgusting as that sounded.

‘I must be in the Warring States Era, but it doesn’t make sense how I ended up here. I just need to get through this right now before making my escape.’

“Are you up yet?” Mayoko’s voice asked from the other side of the hut.

Hearing her, Kagome stood up and lowered her head to the woman as she rounded the corner, looking at her up and down pitifully. “Good morning…” Once raising her head, Kagome offered the small blanket to Mayoko. “Thank you for the blanket.”

Mayoko’s arms were folded and her eyes narrowed. From her expression, Kagome thought she
seemed rather bitter, and she wondered if it was because of her presence. “Child, I didn’t give you this blanket.” She replied, confusing Kagome greatly. “I suppose someone else has taken pity on you. Just put it under your bed.”

Doing as told, Kagome bent down near the hay and pushed the folded blanket inside. After which, Mayoko disappeared inside the hut and returned not long after with a small wooden bowl in hand before setting it on the ground before Kagome.

As she looked into the bowl, Kagome noticed the contents inside was filled with some sort of porridge mainly consisting of rice. Believing this was her breakfast, Kagome took the bowl and looked up at Mayoko silently staring at her.

“Once you are finished eating, set the bowl in front of the flap. After which, you’ll follow me to the fields where you will continue where u left off.”

As she watched her disappear back into the hut, Kagome’s shoulders slumped. Not again. How much more weeding could she take? Yet as she sat there watching the village men push the oxen to till the soils while the women planted the seeds, Kagome began somewhat awkwardly eating her porridge. There were no chopsticks or any kind of utensil to use to make eating easier, and Kagome was forced to sip the contents, chewing and swallowing hungrily.

Even after eating and setting the bowl at the door, she was still hungry, her stomach growling consistently. More than anything she wished for her mother’s homecooked meals. Looking back at the haystack where her gifted blanket lay, Kagome couldn’t help but smile to herself. Someone was surely looking after her.

After a few minutes of quietly waiting for Mayoko to finish up, the older lady finally stepped out of the hut, a fairly decent size bag of seeds in hand. With a wave of her hand, she started away from the hut and Kagome followed.

Kagome was thankful for the straw sandals as there were sharp rocks here and there. Though they weren’t as comfortable as the cloth or rubber kind from her own time, it was something at least. Although the trip up the small incline was silent, Kagome couldn’t help the wave of nervousness that flooded her when she saw the faces of the village women ahead turn towards her disgustedly. Mayoko didn’t pay their stares any mind and led Kagome to her placement near the center of the field where they were all gathered.

“Good morning Mayoko,” A younger woman replied, smiling warmly, wiping her dirty hands upon the front of her kimono.

“Good morning yourself,” Mayoko grumbled.

As Kagome knelt down to begin her chore, she couldn’t help but shift her gaze to the women near her whom Mayoko quietly conversed with.

One woman in particular caught Kagome’s stare, and with a repulsed frown, she leaned into another, her voice above that of a whisper. “I feel bad for Mayoko. That girl probably stinks up the place I bet.”

“No kidding. I noticed she sleeps outside.”

“Well the hut is surely not big enough for three people. Other than that, it wouldn’t be right. After all, Mayoko is a married woman.”

Kagome’s eye twitched. It was difficult to ignore the old women gossiping about her. Did they all
act this way when new people arrived or what? What had Kagome done to deserve this kind of treatment?

Kneeling beside the young girl, the woman whom Kagome lived under merely shook her head before calmly pulling the weeds nearby. “Pay them no listen. With time their words will diminish and if you live according to our rules, you may very well gain better respect.”

Kagome nodded, but she wouldn’t stay in this village, not after the way they treated her. But her words somewhat comforted her, and just like Mayoko, Kagome began pulling at the weeds.

“By this afternoon, another girl will come to take your shift. When that happens, you will come back to the hut to help me. You do remember the way?”

Kagome nodded. “Yes…”

Pleased with her answer, Mayoko handed Kagome the bag of seeds and stood up before departing from her and the other women to attend her own duties back home. Kagome was a little displeased to see her leave so suddenly, but decided to do her best until noon.

As she continued pulling the weeds, planting the seeds directly after, Kagome noticed the same three girls from yesterday not far from her. As she continued watching them, they eventually noticed her staring. Maybe if she talked to them, they would open up to her. “Hello.”

It wasn’t surprising when they huffed irritably, turning their noses into the air, this time entirely ignoring her presence. This caused Kagome to sweat drop. So much for that idea.

‘Everyone here must have a problem making friends with strangers.’ Then again, it was definitely clear she was in a different time period. From what she remembered yesterday, they didn’t trust outsiders, and Kagome wondered briefly if every village was like this.

As the hours went by, Kagome couldn’t help but noticed how far away the other women had distanced themselves. For a moment, she thought it really was because of her, but looking closely, she saw that the women were quite nimble with their hands, plucking the weeds at a faster rate than herself.

The young girls who had been nearby helping her on the same row disappeared a couple hours earlier just like yesterday, and Kagome found herself plucking all by herself.

Wiping the sweat from her brow and face, Kagome stood up for a moment to rest her legs. Kneeling in that same position was taking its toll on her, and she wasn’t sure how the others possibly did it. After a moment standing there looking out across the village, Kagome couldn’t help but stretch her arms above her head.

After feeling her back crack, Kagome once again knelt down in the soil to continue her repetitive chore, but before she could begin, she noticed someone’s bare feet walk up beside her before stopping completely.

Confused, she looked up, noticing a young girl with long brown hair behind her. She looked about Kagome’s age, perhaps a little older. Her face was round, graced with a few freckles upon her cheeks and small nose. Her large brown eyes looked upon Kagome somewhat impatiently though she was a little hesitant to say anything.

“Yes?”

“I’m … here to take your place,” She replied, shifting on her feet.
Delighted to hear this, Kagome stood up and wiped her hands upon her Kimono before smiling at the girl. “Oh, thank you so much!”

Her unexpected reply threw the girl off for a moment and she wasn’t expecting her to bow her head respectfully towards her either.

Judging by her confused reaction and less intimidating stare, Kagome wondered if this girl was more welcoming than all the other villagers. “My name is Kagome. What’s yours?”

Although hesitant to answer, she opened her mouth but before any words trailed out, the shout of an older man quieted her and she and Kagome turned in the direction of a few men a short distance away in the rice fields.

“Naomi! What are you doing over there talking to her?”

Kagome couldn’t help but frown at the man. What was the big deal?

Turning away from Kagome, Naomi stepped forward a few steps before giving her explanation. When she told him it was by Mayoko’s orders, the man in question glared at them.

“She hasn’t finished her row! So, give us a hand over here!” He barked.

Naomi was hesitant to walk away and turned to Kagome apologetically. With a bow similar to Kagome’s greeting, she turned and ran off in the opposite direction, leaving Kagome completely dumbfounded.

“This isn’t fair…” She muttered to herself before looking back at the man who was motioning for her to get back to work. “That’s not fair! I did my part!” It wasn’t her fault those other girls had ditched her just like yesterday.

“No excuses! If this continues, I’ll tell Lady Kaede to punish you!” He retorted arrogantly.

The woods were close by, and as much as she wanted to run away, Kagome knew she wouldn’t get far. Just like yesterday, the men had outrun and caught her fairly easily. As athletic as she was in sports, Kagome wasn’t too keen on men twice her size, chasing her with sharp weapons. Most likely, she would suffer a worse outcome if she were caught. Right now, the villagers were too wary of her suspicious appearance, and as much as she hated to admit it, she knew she would need to gain their favor first before escaping.

With a disgruntled huff, Kagome turned around and knelt back in the soil, continuing her chore, more roughly than before.

Ψ

When two hours dragged by, Kagome could no longer continue plucking weeds and planting seeds, and instead, stood up and looked around the fields. No one was watching her, and the old women who had been near before were gone. Looking back at the rice fields where Naomi fled to earlier, she noticed the men were not looking in her direction.

Thankful for this, Kagome stretched her tired muscles. Although she would have run, she knew running would draw too much attention to herself. Instead, she walked through the fields towards the huts until she was touching the soft blades of grass at her feet. It felt good walking after so many hours kneeling.

Mayoko was no doubt impatiently waiting back at the hut, and quickening her footsteps, Kagome
stepped around the frolicking chickens and past the children playing near the huts. For a moment, Kagome stopped and found herself watching them play, smiling softly as they laughed and chased each other. They were playing some sort of game involving sticks and rocks.

The sight of the children enjoying themselves briefly reminded her of Souta back home. When she was pulled through the tree, he had tried to free her, but now she was here of all places. Was Souta alright? What about her mother and grandfather? Would they believe that a tree literally pulled her into some other world?

“Girl. What are ye doing?”

She was unexpectedly brought away from silent musings and turned her head in question. *Girl.* They hadn’t even bothered to ask her name or use it for that matter. While she would have loved to ignore the elderly priestess standing a short distance away, Kagome wasn’t disrespectful.

Almost sighing tiredly, Kagome turned fully to the elderly woman with the eye patch and one arm behind her back before offering a slight nod of the head. What did she want? Surely, she didn’t plan to throw things in her face again, right?

“I see ye are finished in the fields, am I right?”

Kagome nodded. “Yes. I was on my way back to Mayo—“

“That can wait,” Kaede interrupted with a shake of her head. “Come this way. I have something for ye to do before that.”

Noticing her uncomfortable posture and untrusting stare, Kaede beckoned the girl over to her, and she complied hesitantly. “Come with me.”

Unsure of what she wanted, Kagome felt she had no other choice in the matter; after all, Kaede was in charge of this village. As she followed after the graying woman, Kagome wondered how it was she acquired the injury to her eye; perhaps she had gotten into an accident or it could be she was born that way.

After arriving before her hut, Kaede pointed to the three wooden buckets situated in front of her doorstep. As Kagome stepped over to them, looking down into them, she noticed they were each empty. “Since ye have finished working in the fields, ye can assist me by fetching me water from the well.”

Kagome’s shoulders slumped at this. Couldn’t she just sit down and rest before doing anything else? And where exactly was this well located anyways? Hopefully it wasn’t too far away.

“In my old age, it is difficult to get around and my strength is not as it used to be,” She explained before pointing up the long staircase behind her hut. “Ye will find our well up by our shrine.”

Looking up in the direction the old lady was staring, Kagome couldn’t help but inwardly sigh. Well doing this was better than anything else she’d done while staying here.

“Well?”

The tone in her voice urged Kagome to quickly gather up the buckets, stacking them atop the other before making her way towards the Torii gate beside Kaede’s hut. As she briefly regarded the familiar red, wooden gate, she hurriedly climbed the long staircase towards the shrine upon the hill. Although she didn’t care too well to do this, she knew Kaede was old and it was probably difficult to go up and down these steps from time to time.
As she climbed the stairs, Kagome couldn’t help but feel a strange familiarity in the air around her. These stairs were just as long as the ones back home, not to mention the tree she’d woken up under in the forest resembled much of the Goshinboku. Could it be possible?

Her steps quickened suddenly, her eyes widening as she reached the final step towards the shrine grounds before her, and once there, she fell to her knees, the buckets slipping from her arms and onto the ground.

“How can this be?” There was no doubt about it. This was the Higurashi Shrine, however, what stood on this sacred ground was just a small shrine compared to that in her own time period. Back home, the shrine grounds had been remodeled with added buildings onto the property, but even so, this was the closest thing to home.

The small shrine building ahead of her was a building often served as a place where sacred objects were kept. Back home, there had been a shed added onto the building housing many old artifacts as well as ancient swords and tools, not to mention scrolls from the era. Perhaps inside, those documents and objects were housed as well.

“Mom … Souta … Grandpa …” Were they doing alright? Was there a way to return home? There had to be, right? How was it possible she ended up so far into the past? The Sacred Tree had literally engulfed her—

Kagome’s eyes widened. Wait a minute. The Sacred Tree! Looking around the area, she realized there was no sign of the tree anywhere. That wasn’t right. After a moment of careful pondering, she realized the tree was back in the forest on the outskirts of the village. But that didn’t make sense. Why was the tree in her yard in her own time period but here…

“I don’t understand…” Yet even as this baffled her, Kagome wondered if the Sacred Tree was the answer to returning her back home. If it brought her here, surely it could take her back. ‘I’ll have to be careful arousing further suspicion. The sooner I can gain some trust, the sooner I can sneak out and return home!’

With that thought weighing heavily on her mind, Kagome picked up the fallen buckets and regained her standing. As she approached the Shrine House ahead, she saw a familiar and old well beside it. Once in front of it, she peered down into its depths before lowering each bucket into the well until each was filled close to the brim with water.

Once that was taken care of, Kagome realized she couldn’t possible carry two at a time considering how much heavier the bucket had become. She found she was only able to carry one with two hands, struggling as she ambled to the steps leading into the village below. With each step, the water swished and swirled, and she found herself wavering from side to side trying to balance herself with each step. It was obvious she would have to make three trips for Kaede.

For what seemed like forever, Kagome finally sat the last bucket down in front of Kaede’s hut before placing both her hands on her knees. If her legs and arms didn’t hurt before, they sure did now.

The flap to the hut was pushed aside just then and Lady Kaede peered out before nodding in satisfaction. “Ye did well, child.”

“Lady Kaede!” A masculine voice called out suddenly, causing the two to turn their heads in question.

A young man with tanned skin, wearing a blue Kimono top and brown trousers with his hair up in
a high topknot, ran towards them despairingly.

“Kosuke, what seems to be the problem?” Lady Kaede asked, noting his troubled expression.

He lowered his head apologetically. “I regret to tell you that my wagon which was carrying the wood for you has lost its wheel and fell over near the outskirts of the village.”

Kaede nodded at this, understanding completely. “These things happen from time to time. There is no need to trouble ye-self, Kosuke. Should ye need assistance, I can offer ye the help to repair ye cart.”

At her words, Kosuke beamed, nodding vigorously to the old priestess. He’d been so worried he’d upset her for the lateness of his arrival, but she was understanding of the situation. “Thank you, Lady Kaede. I’ll only need help holding up the cart while I reset the wheel in place.”

Kaede’s gaze shifted to the girl before her, and although she seemed exhausted from fetching water, she figured the girl would be enough help. “Very well. Child, ye shall assist him with his cart and be kind enough to unload the wood near my hut.”

Kagome blinked at this. The old lady was trusting her to walk outside the village to help someone out? Could this be her chance at escaping? No, that would seem too easy, wouldn’t it?

“Of course, ye will not be foolish as to run away, now would ye? Am I able to trust ye in this situation?” Kaede asked, and Kagome was quick to nod.

“I … promise not to run … Lady Kaede.”

Kaede looked at the child for a moment, while Kosuke looked between the two in confusion, not quite understanding the situation. The child was indeed very different from other villagers, and she found herself very confused by what dwelled deep within her. It was something familiar and yet unfamiliar to her. Kaede couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was, but from the look in the girl’s eyes, she felt she could trust her not run away.

“Lady Kaede?” Kosuke called, scratching his cheek confusedly. “You wish for this woman to accompany me?”

Kaede nodded, shifting her attention back to the young man. “She may not look it, but she is a diligent worker,” She explained, surprising Kagome suddenly.

‘For someone who is keeping me hostage, she sure speaks kindly about me to others…” Maybe she was just saying stuff. It was obvious from this man’s stare that he wasn’t present during yesterday’s situation when the villagers had called her out on being suspicious. Perhaps Kaede didn’t want to arouse further suspicion.

“Be sure she does not stray from ye side, Kosuke.”

Kosuke nodded, before shifting his stare to Kagome beside the old priestess. “Well, shall we go?” He asked, smiling softly at her, much to Kagome’s surprise and slight elation.

He was being polite to her that much she was certain. As the two fell into a comfortable silence, each walking beside the other, Kagome couldn’t help but glance back wondering why Kaede trusted her to leave the village. It was surely a test.

“I’m sorry I completely forgot to introduce myself back there. My name is Kosuke.” He greeted, smiling at her with a certain flush to his cheeks.
From his greeting, Kagome’s cheeks brightened and her lips curled into a bashful smile. Finally, someone was being nice to her. “Nice to meet you Kosuke. My name is Kagome.”

“Kagome. That’s a pretty name. It suits you well,” He complimented, causing the young girl to blush. “I’m afraid this is the first I’ve seen you before. Did you recently settle into our village?”

How would she answer that? ‘More like captured and held hostage.’ “Something like that. I’m … still adjusting myself here though.”

He nodded at this. “It’s a quaint village but the people can take some time to get used to. I’ve had my share of good and bad times living here, but Lady Kaede keeps everyone in order. I haven’t always lived here, however.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Yes. I live a few houses down from Lady Kaede. I normally don’t stay too long in the village. Often, I’m out running errands for Lady Kaede, when she needs my help, that is. Recently I’ve been visiting other villages, mainly sight-seeing.”

“You enjoy traveling, I take it?” Kagome smiled.

“Very much so. In fact, I’m hoping to settle elsewhere, but that won’t be for a while. There’s much I wish to do to help Lady Kaede. In all honesty, she’s like a grandmother to me. She’s looked after me for years.”

“Really?” She asked, and as she watched Kosuke from the corner of her eye, she saw him rub the back of his neck awkwardly as his face flushed. He wasn’t like all the other men in the village. He was a lot kinder and talkative towards her. From her scrutiny, he was probably a couple years older than Kagome.

From her small smile, he couldn’t help but return it. This was the first time he’d openly conversed with a female, especially for so long. Kagome seemed rather curious about him, and he felt a little excited over that.

Unexpectedly a rough hand grabbed hold of Kagome’s arm, pulling her away from Kosuke’s side, much to his and Kagome’s surprise. The large and calloused hand belonged to one of the village men, and he held a firm hold on Kagome’s wrist, possibly bruising it in the process.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going wench?! Trying to run away?!”

Kagome desperately tried to free herself from his hold, but he was unmoving, glowering at her. “Let me go! Stop that hurts!”

Surprised by the actions this man had made towards her, Kosuke pushed himself in-between the two, grasping the man’s wrist with just as much strength. “What is the meaning of this? Unhand her!”

The man in question shifted his gaze to Kosuke before pulling Kagome towards him roughly. “This woman has no reason to be exiting the village, Kosuke.”

“And why is that?” Kosuke questioned, glaring at the farmer. “Surely you are jesting! How can you be so ignorant to treat a woman like this? Unhand her!”

“This wench is being held here by Lady Kaede for suspicion. This girl was caught in the Forest of Inuyasha yesterday and because of such, she cannot be trusted. You know what kind of time we
live in Kosuke. We can’t be sure she isn’t some spy from another village.”

Hearing this, Kosuke briefly looked at Kagome who was pitifully trying to escape the other man’s grasp, held firmly to his chest inappropriately to Kosuke’s liking. “That is enough.”

Although anyone would have turned and left after such, Kosuke instead reached out for Kagome before elbowing the man under his chin. Once she was released, he stood in front of her, shielding her from harm. “I have permission from Kaede herself. She is to help me with my cart on the outskirts of the village. You have my word I will return her.”

“Liar! Why should I believe you? You’re probably in cahoots with the little wench! Why would Lady Kaede allow that?”

Kagome’s heart pounded wildly in her chest. She was worried. What would happen? Surely, he wouldn’t let this situation drop. Yet Kosuke was defending her, protecting her from this man’s abusive behavior, and that much she was thankful for.

It was at this point that a young woman stepped in, as if having overheard the conversation not far off. The young girl had large soft brown eyes and long brown hair held back by a plain hair tie. Her straight bangs covered her forehead and she was dressed in blue kimono, holding a large basket in her grip with many plants and turnips inside.

“It’s quite true. I overheard Lady Kaede say so not long ago.”

He couldn’t believe this. “Are you certain Aiko?”

She nodded. “You know you can trust me,” She smiled dismissingly. “Lady Kaede even told him to bring her straight back to the village, no question about that. It seems she is putting some trust into her.”

Unconvinced by this, he wasn’t about to let the matter drop, but he was suddenly pulled away by Aiko. “What are you doing? If you hold them up any longer they won’t be able to fix the cart for Lady Kaede!” She lightly scolded, tugging on his arm as she led him away.

“But Aiko…”

Aiko sent a little wave to Kosuke and Kagome before disappearing back into the village with the other man. Whoever she was, Kagome was thankful to her as well. Maybe not everyone in the village was as bad as she first thought. This whole suspicion however was too much.

Releasing a breath, Kosuke turned toward Kagome who’d been hugging his back uncertainly since. As he took her wrists into his hands carefully, he rolled up her sleeves and noticed a bright redness upon her fair skin. “Are you okay? I’m sorry that happened.”

Kagome shook her head. “I’m okay. Thank you for helping me.”

Once again, the two continued on their trek, this time in silence. After putting some distance between them and the village, Kagome couldn’t help but release a long breath. Finally, she could breathe.

Kosuke noticed this. “I’m sorry about what has happened to you, Kagome. I can only imagine what must have happened during your stay in the village…”

She was happy to hear him say this. “I can understand the situation, but only slightly. I know they
are suspicious of me, but to hold me hostage … it just seems strange to me.”

Hearing her say the word hostage urged a frown on his face. They were obviously treating her terribly. When he examined her wrists earlier, he noticed recent bruises blemishing her arms.

“These times are quite troubling, Kagome. I shouldn’t have been so quick to assume you’d recently settled into the village peacefully. Normally we do not allow outsiders in so easily. Forgive me for that.”

“Huh?”

Kosuke sighed, musing back to recent memories. “We’ve had our share of spies in our village, we’ve had many thefts not long ago, we’ve even had some nobles walk into our village and destroy our crops and abuse our loved ones,” He explained. “Forgive them for not welcoming outsiders. They are worried that something ill-fated many come to pass again.”

“I see. I didn’t take that into consideration…”

As they continued down the path through the woods, Kagome realized they were walking further and further from the village. His cart must have broken down quite a bit aways. “Kosuke. Why is it called The Forest of Inuyasha?”

Surprised by this, Kosuke couldn’t help but smile, his brown eyes looking upon the tall and lush trees around them. “Well it’s a tragic tale that has left its name in these woods, Kagome. You see, fifty years ago, our village was under the care of a young priestess by the name of Kikyou. She was a powerful and caring woman who aided the injured, no matter if they were friend or enemy. Her abilities far surpassed her teachers, and she was gifted with knowledge of all sorts of remedies for sicknesses and wounds.”

As she listened, deeply interested in the tale, Kagome noticed they had finally neared the collapsed cart. The cart itself was large, tied at the front of it was a large ox, lazily chewing the grass before it, barely passing them any interest as they approached.

While Kosuke set to work, pulling out his tools from pockets and retrieving the wheel, with Kagome doing her best to hold up the cart despite its heavy weight, he continued his story.

“One day she was met by a demon which had saved her life. It was that very meeting that began the tragic tale.”

“Tragic? What happened? Was this demon Inuyasha?”

Kosuke nodded. “From what I recall from the story, Kikyou was very distrusting towards demons, often killing them in order to protect the village. Yet after this encounter with Inuyasha, she showed him mercy. You see Inuyasha wasn’t a full-fledged demon, in fact he was a half demon.”

“Half demon?”

“Yes. After many moons had passed, the two became friends and a promising romance soon blossomed after. Together they became strong and protected the village, yet before their marriage, tragedy befell them.”

As Kosuke finally set the wheel into place, he stood up and wiped the sweat from his brow before frowning at the young girl beside him. “A demon by the name Onigumo had attacked the village, injuring our dear priestess terribly. He wished to consume the powers she held to increase that of his own. Unlike other demons, this one was quite different and Kikyou could not find the strength to defeat him. Inuyasha gave his life to protect her, and in the end … with the last of her strength,
Kikyou used her powers to curse the demon.”

Kagome gasped. So they died right before marriage? How awful! “So how did she curse this demon?”

“With her spiritual powers, it was said she forever placed an incantation onto the demon, sending him far away and never to return or bring harm to anyone ever again. Killing the demon was an impossible feat, but this was all she could do to protect her people. Kikyou died soon after with Inuyasha, and it was within these woods that it all took place. That is why it is called the Forest of Inuyasha.”

“How terrible. They loved each other and swore to marry but in the end…”

Kosuke smiled at her deflated expression before kneeling down to retrieve the fallen wood beside his cart. “It truly is sad. Their graves are not far from here. We often bring flowers when we can.”

Hearing this Kagome suddenly gasped. “The two graves!”

He blinked at her, noticing her sudden revelation. “Yes. You have seen the graves, by chance I take it?”

She nodded. “It happened before I was forcibly taken to the village…”

“They were probably worried you might desecrate the graves, not to mention this territory belongs to Lady Kaede now since her sister’s passing.”

Sister? “So, she and Kikyou were sisters…”

After finally picking up the last pieces of wood, Kosuke helped Kagome into the front of the cart but since there was only room for one person to sit, he remained standing, leading the ox back towards the village.

“Kosuke … I’m not dangerous. I honestly wouldn’t hurt a fly. I don’t want you to think otherwise…” Kagome couldn’t help but frown, hoping he wouldn’t be fooled into thinking otherwise.

At this, he looked back at her, noticing her fallen expression. In all honesty, she didn’t seem dangerous at all, in fact, she seemed rather innocent and confused. “You don’t need to worry about that. You arrived here yesterday, correct?” At her nod, he continued. “From what I can see, you are doing well here. Lady Kaede has trusted you to leave the village, despite the circumstances of your arrival. Also, there are some people in this village who show you empathy and kindness.”

Kagome blinked at this. “Oh?”

At her expression, he couldn’t help but chuckle. “Well for one there is me. I find you rather charming, Kagome, even though we have just met. You seem like a nice girl who has gotten mixed up in quite the usual misunderstanding. There is also Aiko, a friend of mine who was willing to help you outside the village.”

His words relieved her of her worries. Kosuke wasn’t wrong; very few villagers had showed her pity, and the fact that Lady Kaede had allowed her to step out of the village was surprising. Maybe she was doing well here, even if it was her second day.

“If you don’t mind me asking, where are you staying? Since you only arrived yesterday, I assume you must be staying with one of the villagers?” He asked, hoping they hadn’t locked her up in the
chicken pen.

“I’m staying with Mayoko and her husband,” She replied, tucking a strand of hair behind her ears. As Kosuke guided the oxen back to the village, Kagome couldn’t help but notice just how dirty she was; she was sure her face wasn’t so pretty either. Kosuke hadn’t said anything about her untidiness and had been polite nonetheless, but still, Kagome felt somewhat embarrased by her uncleanliness. The sooner she could bathe, the better.

After a short while, they finally returned to the village, earning peculiar stares from the villagers passing through, their eyes mainly focused on Kagome in the driver’s seat. Kosuke on the other hand merely smiled and continued on, ignoring the stares.

Walking over to the side of the cart, he assisted Kagome down and together, the two unloaded the wood, stacking it neatly at the side of Kaede’s hut. There was a decent amount there already, and Kosuke explained he would be fetching more tomorrow morning.

It took the two a good ten minutes to finally unload the last pieces of lumber before Kaede stepped out to greet them, acknowledging their hard work.

“Ye have done well.”

Kosuke lowered his head respectfully to the High Priestess, and Kagome did the same. “Think nothing of it, Lady Kaede. I’ll be sure to bring you more first thing at dawn.”

Kaede nodded at this before directing her old eyes to the woman beside him. “Ye have done well, child.”

Kagome merely lowered her head, wondering what she would be sent to do next. Yet for the longest time, she felt the old woman’s stare on her linger much longer than was necessary, and Kosuke seemed to have noticed as well but said nothing of it.

As if coming to terms with her thoughts, Kaede closed her eye before turning to walk back into her small hut. Before stepping inside, she glanced at the girl over her shoulder. “Ye may return to Mayoko’s, child. Ye have done enough for the day.”

At this, Kagome raised her head, blinking as the elderly woman disappeared back inside her home. Looking up into the sky, Kagome guessed it was nearing five in the afternoon and there was still plenty of daylight left. Somehow, Kagome knew Mayoko had more work in store for her back at the hut.

“I must be going now,” Kosuke suddenly voiced, shifting Kagome’s attention onto him as he grasped the reigns to the oxen near him. “Thank you for your help today, Kagome. I greatly appreciated it.”

“Oh, it was nothing really. I’m glad I could help. It was nice getting away for a while,” She explained with a small smile.

He nodded. “On most days, I’m here helping around the village, so if you should ever need my help or simply wish to talk, I’ll be here.” After that, he led his oxen and cart down the path through the village, and Kagome smiled at the thought of making a new friend.

“Mayoko’s is probably wondering where I’ve disappeared to. I shouldn’t keep her waiting.”

With that thought, Kagome quickly walked towards her destination and once there, she was surprised to find Mayoko standing in front of the door flap of the hut, frowning at her.
“Where have you been? You should have returned by noon! Did that girl not show up?”

Gulping, Kagome quickly lowered herself onto her knees with her head bent respectfully to the older woman. It wasn’t that Naomi didn’t show up, but she was practically berated to go elsewhere. “She did but the village men refused to let me leave … and Lady Kaede called for my assistance shortly after.”

Hearing her response, Mayoko’s irritation slightly faded and her scowl was replaced with a tired sigh. “I see. Well since you are here I’m sure you are famished. I’ll bring you a bowl of porridge before we get started.”

Started on what? Kagome didn’t get a chance to ask before Mayoko disappeared back into her hut, leaving Kagome to sit on her hands and knees. For now, Kagome guessed she could simply allow herself a small while to rest before getting back up again. The soreness in her legs and back were slight, and as she examined her fingers, Kagome noticed a few blisters here and there. Thankfully she managed not to get any splinters and without tweezers, she knew such an ordeal would prove terribly painful and annoying.

Before Kagome could find some way to tend to her blisters, Mayoko returned and in her hand, was the familiar wooden bowl ladled with the same porridge as breakfast. After receiving the food, Kagome quickly ate her fill before following Mayoko inside the hut.

Since her husband, Daisuke, was away working, Mayoko saw no reason to not allow Kagome inside. From there, Kagome assisted the woman in sewing some blankets together with the furs of recently caught animals. Mayoko said these blankets would serve as comfort to aid them in the troubling season of Winter.

As the hours flew by, night quickly approached, and Mayoko sent Kagome back outside for the rest of the night. Soon after, Daisuke returned from the fields, his clothes dirtied and he was drenched in sweat. Only sparing her the briefest of looks, he stepped into the house, and it was at this moment Kagome closed her eyes, hoping sleep would consume her. To her despair, it did not, and Kagome found herself tossing and turning in the haystack.

Everyone had turned in for the night, except for the night watchman prowling around the village, keeping a watch for anything suspicious. Besides their shuffling feet from each section of the small village, everything was quiet. Even the dogs and chicken were quiet, and yet Kagome found herself strangely restless. She was sure after so many hours of working, sleep would consume her, but it didn’t.

As she attempted to relax her thoughts and ease her mind of worries, Kagome suddenly heard shuffling from inside the hut, and as she listened, her head rested against the straw, she heard the distinct sounds of heavy breathing and soft groans. Instantly Kagome’s face reddened and before long, the sounds of flesh slapping upon flesh accompanied by Daisuke’s grunts and his wife’s moans completely mortified the young girl outside. It was enough to embarrass Kagome; she wasn’t naïve; she knew exactly what was happening, and she was thankful she was sleeping outside.

After what seemed like minutes after long relentless minutes, the moaning and grunts finally stopped. Confident that was the end of it, Kagome tried to fall into slumber, but to her dismay, the sounds started up again, this time Daisuke’s grunts became more animalistic and his wife’s moans much louder than before. Kagome couldn’t help but bury her face into the straw, and sometime during the night, slumber finally consumed her.
Kaede's Decision

Chapter Summary

When a man arrives from Edo Village to inspect the crops of Kaede's Village, it's clear something is not right, an unable to pay their taxes, the village must give up some of their women and children. A young village girl, who has been keeping an eye on Kagome quickly guides Kagome to safety before they are spotted, and soon, a budding friendship begins.

June 9th

Nine days had passed since her unexpected arrival into the village, and Kagome found herself slightly easing her way into her chores more easily than before. Although she was still seen as a captive, there were few signs of acceptance among some of the people who had come to pity her rather than detest Kagome, but not everyone was as accepting.

Escaping from this village was still an impossibility. The village men were always watching, some watching a little too closely for her liking, and since the day Kaede had allowed her to leave the village to help Kosuke with his cart, she hadn’t been allowed to step foot back out. Kagome wasn’t sure what had gotten into Lady Kaede that day, but ever since, the old woman had called upon Kagome to assist her every so often, whether that be to fetch her water, or some other form of chore that resulted in lifting heavy objects.

Three days ago, Kagome had woken up to find a small pouch underneath her makeshift bed beside Mayoko and Daisuke’s hut. The pouch contained two rice balls, and every time she returned from her work in the fields at late evenings, she found more food under the bedding. Sometimes it was rice balls and sometimes it was a grilled fish with hot mushrooms inside. Kagome never found out who it was that was leaving her food, but she was very grateful for their generosity.

On one such day, Kagome was knelt in the fields, sowing the seeds into the silty soil as the day was reaching mid-afternoon. Her forehead was accumulated with sweat and her face smudged with dirt, but her messiness was more easily tolerated as the days progressed.

Lifting herself up, Kagome gathered what was left of the bag of seeds before beginning her trek back to Mayoko’s hut. Like always, very few spared her a glance and Kagome wasn’t oblivious to the whispers from the old women of the village, nor the glances from the village men. It was routine after routine every day, and as tiring as it was, Kagome knew it would soon be over.

‘Keep it together Kagome. It’s only been a week, but as soon as their guard drops, I’m out of here.’ Kagome mentally told herself to be patient and when the time was right, she would escape. Right now, it was still too soon to do anything, and besides making friends with Kosuke, who’d been absent for days now, Kagome was still on her own.

When Mayoko’s form appeared leaving the hut, Kagome’s steps quickened. Once before her, Kagome lowered her head and handed over the seeds to the woman who took them with an approved nod.

“I’m surprised by how diligent you have been, Kagome. I expected you back much later,” Mayoko
replied with her usual frown. “There’s not much to do around the hut. Lady Kaede stopped by earlier while you were working in the fields. It seems she needs your assistance.”

Although she wanted nothing more than to rest for a bit, she nodded to the older woman, turning to make her way in the direction of Kaede’s hut. However, Mayoko stopped her with a raised hand, shaking her head disapprovingly.

“Before you head over there, I think it would be best if you bathed first.”

Her eyes widened and she almost couldn’t believe her ears. A bath. Her ears didn’t deceive her; Mayoko was actually going to allow her to finally bathe and clean herself of all the sweat and dirt she had accumulated during her week’s stay in this small village.

“Really?”

At her ecstatic smile, Mayoko only shook her head. Turning around, she stepped inside her hut, and after a few minutes of searching, she returned with a red kimono in hand, gesturing for Kagome to follow her away from the hut. “This way.”

The two traveled a short while, leaving the entrance of the village and following the river’s stream downhill. Along the way, many young girls were sauntering by, their hair wet and their skin much cleaner than before.

Noticing Kagome’s staring at the passers, Mayoko briefed her in on the explanation. “Once every week, all the women and men gather for a thorough cleansing by the river. Men take theirs at the earliest of the day and the women take theirs turn by afternoon.”

Kagome nodded. But only once a week? She supposed it was better than taking a bath once a month. Eventually the two arrived upon a large lake situated just below a huge collection of trees, concealing the village just above the hill. A small group of women were already submerged into the cold water, rubbing their hands over their arms and legs.

Near the edge of the lake, Mayoko placed the clean Kimono down upon the grass. As she did, she caught sight of a smile gracing the young girl’s dirtied complexion, and she couldn’t help but chuckle. Since she arrived a short time ago to their village, she’d been nothing but downtrodden, but it was to be expected of course.

The young girl removed her straw sandals, dipping her feet into the cold sparkling water. If only it was a nice hot bath with soap bubbled above the surface. Kagome imagined soaking herself in her tub back at home, her head reclined against the tub, her hair shining from her shampoo.

“Remove your kimono,” Mayoko replied, moving to stand beside Kagome. “Hurry, child.”

Although a little hesitant, Kagome obliged, removing her clothes before handing them to Mayoko’s outstretched hand. Once doing so, Kagome covered her breasts and stepped into the water until she was waist deep in. For a moment, she shivered, but eventually she became used to the cold, and from there, she rubbed vigorously at her arms and neck, wishing deeply for a bar of soap.

Every once in a while, Kagome turned her head to look back at Mayoko, who was knelt at the edge of the lake washing the kimono she had taken off. She was rubbing the fabric against a rock in a repetitive fashion before soaking it into the water.

Eventually, after washing the kimono, along with her own, Mayoko joined Kagome, moving to stand beside her. From there, she began cleansing herself, eventually cleansing Kagome’s tangled tresses, much to Kagome’s content.
“Thank you…” As she relaxed into Mayoko’s tender touch, closing her eyes at the feeling of someone rubbing her scalp, Kagome couldn’t help but ask her something. “Why did you take me in?”

“Would you rather have been on your own, shunned by everyone around you without a place to sleep?” She asked.

“No…”

“Regarding the situation, I believe some people took it a little too far. As you said before, you were lost and you just so happened to stumble too close to our humble village. It was a little too close to everyone’s liking.”

Kagome nodded. “Kosuke told me your village had problems with thefts and outsiders.”

Mayoko fell silent, her hands pausing in her ministrations to Kagome’s hair. “And he is correct. I’m not sure who you are, Kagome, but it seems you are not accustomed to our ways.”

Hearing this, Kagome also fell silent. So, she noticed?

“If I had to guess, I would assume you come from a different class of people. However, your clothing bemuses me deeply. Beautifully intricated cloth but not suited for a woman of any standing. I would like to ask where you came from and from what family, but I have no right to ask that of you, not after what has happened.”

Kagome was thankful for this. If she revealed herself, it would undoubtedly make the situation worse, she was sure of it. Mayoko was understanding her little by little as the days went on, and Kagome had a feeling they could finally get along.

But, Kagome wasn’t here to make friends. She was here because she was still a captive, living as one of them. That wouldn’t last. Kagome couldn’t stay. Even if there were some nice people here, showing her pity and friendship, Kagome had to escape, before she was pulled deeper into this lie.

Sure, she was thankful to those who showed her kindness, but Kagome couldn’t do anything else but play the part until the time came to leave. The time was drawing nearer. Within the next day or two, she would find an escape and leave this terrible village behind and find a way back home. Back to her mom, grandpa and Souta.

“Kagome?”

Realizing the older lady had been calling out to her, Kagome cleared her thoughts, and flashed a forced smile at her. It seemed she was finished washing her hair, and was gesturing for them to step out of the lake.

Following after, Kagome stepped out, grasping the folded up red kimono on the ground before dressing herself. After which, Mayoko led her back to the hut. From there, Mayoko gestured for Kagome to hurry along to Kaede’s hut.

With one last respectful bow, Kagome turned and made her way up the path. The relationship between Kagome and Mayoko had become more tolerable than before, and because Kagome was quick to learn things around the village, the more accepting of Kagome she became.

As she continued, Kagome heard the distinct sounds of crying nearby, and curious, Kagome found herself searching around the huts. The sound was obviously that of a child’s, that much she was certain. Eventually she came across the said child, sitting upon the ground with his hands covering
his eyes, and as she stepped closer, Kagome noticed many bruises upon the child’s arms and legs, as well as his cheeks.

“Are you alright?” She asked, bending down to inspect his injuries. It was clear to her that someone had beat the child, and she felt the sudden urge to hug him, but she kept minimal distance between them.

The villagers who walked by paid little to no attention to the sobbing child, though after taking quick glances at Kagome, they slowed their steps for a moment before pressing on to their chores. How terrible. No one was going to comfort him? This village was becoming even more terrible by the minute. If Kosuke were here, she was sure he would have done something, right?

“Are you alright? What’s wrong?” She asked, hoping the little boy would talk to her.

Removing his hands from his face, the child who was seemingly around seven or eight years old, with black hair pulled back into a high-top knot, with freckles adorning his cheeks and nose, he gave Kagome a questionable stare. “Go away…”

Well that certainly hurt. Kagome understood she wasn’t wanted by many here, but to hear that from a child no less, well it stung. Still, she wasn’t going to give up consoling him. “I’ll go away as soon as you tell me what happened? Where did you get these bruises?”

He merely wiped at his tears, looking at the young girl for a moment longer before looking elsewhere. It was clear to Kagome he didn’t plan to open up to her and wanted left alone.

“Please? I’m not as bad as many make me out to be,” She tried to persuade him.

“It’s … it’s none of your business!” He cried before standing up and running off.

As she knelt there, completely stupefied by his reaction towards her, Kagome couldn’t help but lower her head dismally. Even the children detested her. With a deep sigh, Kagome stood up and brushed the dirt from her red kimono before continuing on her path to the head priestess’s hut.

Finally nearing the old priestess’s hut, Kagome called out to the elderly woman before stepping into the hut. To her surprise, Kaede was not inside, and baffled, Kagome looked around the small living area. Just like Mayoko’s, it was small, yet more items were nestled within, accumulated with a few more chests, pots and bedding. There were even small shelves hooked upon the interior, holding various jars, and on one side of the room, many plants were hung up to dry on the ceiling.

Not knowing where she had disappeared to, Kagome stepped outside, searching her surroundings for the elderly woman, but there was no sign of her within the vicinity.

How strange.

Given her situation, Kagome was tempted to return to Mayoko’s, but for some reason, she found herself facing a large set of stairs behind the hut. Perhaps Lady Kaede was at the shrine grounds? If she wasn’t there, perhaps she was visiting some of the neighbors. It was worth a shot, Kagome thought.

Making her way up the flight of stone steps, Kagome heard the distinct sounds of water being thrown just ahead. It wasn’t long before she was at the top when she saw Kaede bent over near the well, depositing a large bucket to gather the water within.

Noticing she wasn’t alone; the old woman straightened her back and acknowledged the young girl’s presence. “I see ye have finally arrived.”
Stepping over to her, Kagome offered a polite bow, before curiously staring at the bucket near her feet, filled to the rim with water. “You needed my assistance?”

She nodded, looking down at the bucket and back at her. “It’s been some time since I’ve had the chance to properly clean the shrine. In my old age, it hadn’t been easy. Will ye take of this?”

Kagome’s eyes shifted from the bucket to the building a short distance away. “Y-yes…” Saying no wasn’t an option. She either accepted or … Well Kagome didn’t want to think of the consequences.

Pleased with her answer, Kaede handed her a rag. “Once ye have finished cleaning, there is something I wish to talk to ye about later tonight.”

Kagome blinked at this, baffled by her words. There was something she wanted to discuss? By the tone of her voice, it didn’t sound bad or good, and Kagome could only wonder silently to herself. “What about?”

“Lady Kaede!”

At the sound of a masculine voice calling out, Kagome and Kaede stepped away from the well and sauntered over towards the stairs leading down into the village. From the bottom of the steps, a young village man waved at them with a panicked expression marred on his face.

“Something must be wrong…” Kaede voiced aloud. Looking back at the girl beside her, Kaede ushered her to begin the chore before discussing further on tonight at her hut. After which, Kaede began her trek down the incline to speak with the young man.

With a sigh, Kagome turned and walked back to the well before gathering the bucket in her hands. As she steadied it in both her arms, careful of spilling its contents, Kagome slowly eased her way over to the small shrine house ahead.

Ψ

As Kaede made her way down the stairs, her old eyes caught sight of a familiar face standing just outside her hut. The mere sight of his face was enough to cause her scowl. So, this was the reason she was summoned.

After descending the staircase, Kaede stepped past the panicked villager, ignoring the other villagers who had stopped to look fearfully in the man’s direction.

His name was Takeo, a young man who served under the Daimyo of Musashi and Kai Province, originally from a provincial village in Edo which was located a few miles North, away from their poor village. Takeo regularly visited each year during Summer and Fall to inspect the rice harvest and the quality of their wares which were sold elsewhere for little compensation.

All eight were dressed in higher quality garments than themselves. They were dressed in well-fitted blue Kimono’s with black Hakama’s tied neatly in the front. Over their Kimonos were white Buke’s which were large, broad-sleeved coats similar to Haori’s. It was the standard clothing for those of the middle class.

“Priestess Kaede, I assume your harvest has been more fruitful than last year’s?” He inquired to which Kaede remained silent.

As the older woman surveyed the rest of the men who had traveled with him, she was surprised there were eight. How strange a village inspector would require so many men to protect him on such a short outing. “Ye arrived earlier than expected, milord.”
He nodded at this. “Yes, well the Daimyo is a very impatient person, of course. Before inspecting the fields, I must inform you of the increased tax on the rice this year.”

Increased? “Why has it increased? How much?”

Without having to look into his small tome held at his side, he smiled cockily at the older woman. “Well the tax on rice has increased considerably, I’m afraid. Let’s see, currently, since your village has been lacking the following years, we’ve decreased your tax by ten mon leaving you at seventy mon yearly. Unfortunately, in order to meet the demands of our Daimyo, we can no longer keep this up. Other villages are providing adequate harvests and have been paying their taxes quite meticulously and without problem…”

Kaede nodded. Somehow, she didn’t like where this was headed. If there was a sudden increase in their taxes, then it didn’t bode well for the village. It was bad enough they had to pay twice a year, in Summer and Fall, to meet the demands of their Daimyo. “How much has it increased?”

Takeo opened his tome, his eyes skimming over the fine writing carefully. “It’s increased ten mon more. Since we’ve decreased your tax over the years, that will leave your village at eighty mon per year,” He explained, immediately surprising Kaede and the other villagers. “I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do to decrease it this time around. We haven’t seen an increase like this for five years, but it was bound to happen. You understand, I’m sure.”

The villagers, who had long since gathered the moment they noticed the harvest inspector, Takeo and his men, stared in disbelief, their eyes shifting from their Head Priestess and back. Increased ten more mon? How was that possible? How in the world would they pay such an amount?

“I didn’t think he would arrive so early this year!”

“We hardly have enough food for ourselves!”

“What does he mean the tax has increased? How are we going to pay that much?”

Ignoring the people, Takeo continued on. “Now I would like to have a look at how much you have stored away of wheat, rice, and barley.” He explained, and at Kaede’s nod, he and his men were led down the path to their storage hut. It didn’t take long to arrive upon it before she opened the flap and allowed them entrance inside.

Before following them inside, Kaede acknowledged the fear in her people’s faces, but there wasn’t much she could do, knowing the possible outcome of their poor harvest. Once inside, the old lady watched as the inspector went from one bundle of wheat to the other. There were three stacks of wheat, four barley and a large crate filled with the rice they had managed for the year so far. Just with one glance, Kaede knew it wasn’t enough to meet the quota of last years.

Takeo swept his hands into the crate of rice and gathered a small portion into his palm before smelling the small grains. With a frown, he dropped it back into the crate and made note in his small book with his ink brush. As he moved onto the wheat and barley, he was again not impressed by the smell or texture and scribbled away.

After much time inspecting the harvest, he finally turned to Kaede with a disgruntled scowl. “Is this the best you could manage? The quality of the rice has become poor, even worse than last year’s.”

Kaede offered a small bow of apology. “Our harvest has suffered this year from the intolerable heat, I’m afraid.”
“Not just the rice, but the wheat and barley are lacking in nutrients, and the color isn’t quite right at all,” He continued with a shake of his head. “I wish to inspect the fields and your soil.”

Nodding, Kaede exited the hut, following behind the inspector and his group of men as they made their way through the crowd of villagers towards the fields on the hill above their village. The people were looking at Kaede as if she had answers as to what was happening, but Kaede said nothing, ignoring the stares as she and everyone else followed.

Once arriving upon the grounds, Takeo went through each field, frowning and recording his findings with each scribble of his ink brush. From his understanding, the fields were either too moist or too dry, and the crops were of poor quality.

The village men who’d been working previously, had stopped on account of the inspector’s arrival. For some time, they watched him, knowing full well they would receive hell for the poor harvest. Many clutched their tools angrily, wanting desperately to knock the fool out, but doing so would result in immediate death.

Eventually he stood before the rice fields, his eyes surveying the crops intently. They were still green in color, not quite ready to turn yellow quite yet to harvest, and he started along the narrow patches of grass.

Bending down, Takeo swept his hands into the water, his fingers gliding upon the short stalks before frowning in disappointment. Immediately withdrawing his hand, he turned his attention to the rest of the rice paddies near, and just like before, he examined them very carefully, touching the stalks and smelling them to judge their worth. As before, he pulled away unsatisfied.

Takeo shook his head at the High Priestess before recording the information into his small booklet. Dabbing his paint brush into the small jar of ink around his neck, he continued away. “The Daimyo will be very displeased with these findings. We haven’t even inspected your wares and already this visit is doing so poorly.”

At his tone, and the sight of Lady Kaede on her knees bowing, the villagers quickly dropped to their knees as well, begging for forgiveness, but Takeo only shook his head. Even the village men, who were reluctant to bow down before him did so anyways with their weapons held close beside them.

“Forgive us!”

“With the increased prices on seeds this year, we haven’t been able to grow as much,” One admitted somewhat feebly.

“Because of the sweltering weather this Summer, we haven’t been able to increase our yields!”

Takeo’s frown worsened. “Your stalks are sterile and the color is poor! You expect me to believe the price for seeds is to blame for your inability in the fields?!”

“Forgive us!”

In a manner of rage, Takeo’s men pushed some of the village men clean into the dirt, smearing their faces into the wet soil roughly. In a matter of seconds, they pushed and kicked the farmers around, and the other villagers could do nothing but watch fearfully.

“Forget of this detriment, the Daimyo will be informed,” Takeo explained with a shake of his head. “Regardless of your troubles, there’s nothing I can do. I’m under orders to visit each and every village within Musashi Province, and your village is no different. You either pay the tax or
you will no longer be under the protection of our Lord.”

“We can’t possibly pay that amount!” A woman suddenly cried out, followed after by another.

“Our village is poor enough as it is! How do you expect us to survive if you continue raising the taxes?!”

“Silence! How dare you raise your voices at our Lord!”

A chorus of disagreements became louder, many speaking out against Takeo and his men, though they were silenced suddenly when Kaede raised her hand. While her face hardened at the inevitable, she otherwise gave in and offered an apologetic bow of her head to Takeo. “Forgive them. We will pay the amount…”

Satisfied with the older woman’s response, Takeo opened his tome once more. “Since we are in the midst of Summer you will pay half the amount until our next visit in Fall of September,” He explained before closing his tome. “But before that, I will be inspecting your wares, surely they are of better quality than the harvest.”

Ψ

While half an hour passed by, Kagome did her best to clean up the shrine. With the single rag given to her by Kaede, Kagome very easily cleaned up the wooden floors and walls of the small building. There had been cobwebs everywhere on the inside and fortunately Kagome only had to kill a couple small spiders with her straw sandals.

Inside, there were numerous shelves along the walls, each with some pottery placed upon it or antique swords and what not. She cleaned those as well, and even the few chests along the walls that were filled with many rolled up scrolls and books which were too difficult to decipher. As strenuous as this would be for Lady Kaede, Kagome found it pretty easy to clean up. Back at home, cleaning was her specialty, so this was no problem. After exiting the building, Kagome had even set about cleaning the outside walls, however she found it difficult to clean anywhere higher up near the roof.

“I guess that’s as good as it’s going to get…” If that was all Kaede wanted her to do, why call upon her when she could have called upon someone else?

With a sigh, Kagome sat down on the small steps of the building and placed her hands upon either side of her face. Her thoughts were centered on her family and her friends back home. Why couldn’t all of this be a dream? At least then she could wake up from it and move on with her supposed ordinary life, but that wasn’t the case.

‘I have to get home. I don’t know how much longer I can stay here. Mom. Souta … Grandpa…’

Shaking her head, Kagome stood up and reached for the broom leaning against the building. As she swept the leaves and dirt away, she couldn’t help but wonder what the ruckus was near Kaede’s hut earlier. Someone had arrived in the village, and Kagome couldn’t help but grow curious.

‘I’ve already finished cleaning. I’m sure Lady Kaede wouldn’t mind if I walk around the village for a while, right?’

With that thought, Kagome dropped the broom upon the sidewalk and ran towards the steps before quickly descending them. As she did, she couldn’t help but notice just how empty the village seemed. After reaching the last step, Kagome walked along the path, looking around the huts for everyone. To her surprise, they were all up at the fields, following a group of men around.
“Huh? What’s going on? Who are they?”

“That’s the village inspector, Lord Takeo,” A feminine voice suddenly explained.

Surprised, Kagome jumped and turned towards the girl behind her, who was smiling from the reaction. A familiar face with soft brown eyes, straight bangs with her hair tied back, greeted her. It took her a moment to recognize the girl. “Oh, you’re … Aiko? Aiko, right?”

If she remembered correct, Aiko was the girl who helped her leave the village nine days ago, with Kosuke. It had been a while since she last her in the village.

She nodded. “Yes. Sorry I scared you. It wasn’t my intention.”

“Oh no, it’s okay,” Kagome laughed softly before turning back towards the direction she’d previously been staring. “Inspector?”

Aiko nodded, moving to stand beside Kagome, her eyes staring up at the fields ahead. “Every year he shows up, and from the sounds of things, it doesn’t look good…”

Kagome blinked at this, wondering why that was. “Why? Is the village in trouble?”

“It would seem so. Our harvest has been poor, and we’ve been struggling to pull together our finances to pay for seeds, food for our oxen and for ourselves,” She explained solemnly. “And I heard earlier there has been an increase in our taxes.”

How terrible. “I’m sorry. It probably doesn’t help that I’m here…”

Surprised by this, Aiko quickly shook her head. “Oh no, that’s not what I meant. It’s great having more help, but it’s not your fault. You see it hasn’t been just this year, but its every year. Before Winter we’re doing what we can to produce a good harvest. Sometimes we have a decent number of leftovers and other times we have nothing.”

Kagome nodded at this. It seemed this village was truly struggling to survive. “Besides inspecting, what else does he do?”

“Well, if the harvest has been good, he and his men normally take 2/3rds of what we have, leaving us with the rest.”

Kagome gasped at this information. “But that’s not nearly enough to sustain yourselves!”

Aiko nodded. “That’s just how poor villages such as ours are. The rest goes to our Daimyo in Edo. If only we had a blacksmith or some other means of making money here. All we have are our fields and a few craftsmen in our village.”

“I’m sorry. I wish things were easier for all of you…” Kagome replied solemnly, which caused Aiko to softly smile. “You said he’s from Edo?”

“Yes. It takes a number of days to reach, but I haven’t been there personally. I’ve heard from many that it’s the biggest village around. There are many festivals and the women there are very beautiful. There’s even a few Inns there as well.”

“Really? Has no one from this village been to Edo?” Kagome asked.

“Yes, but not everyone is capable of making the journey that far. Some of the women who used to live here have gone to work there to help pay off their family’s debts, but that was some years
Kagome found herself imagining such a huge village. In her mind, it sounded rather nice than this one. “I wonder just how many people live there. Our Daimyo lives there as well?”

Aiko nodded. “Yes, that’s right. I hear he is a very prude person, but so far he hasn’t wiped out our village.” She faked a laugh, which caused Kagome to sweat drop. “Over a thousand people live there and a lot of them are from the middle class and up. I hear that even peasants like ourselves find it much easier to live there than in poor villages like ours.”

“Why not simply move there, since it’s a much easier lifestyle?”

Aiko frowned at this. “If only it were that easy. Money is the problem. In order to establish a place of our own there, we must have some form of currency. If you’re a pretty girl, you’ll find it easier to find a place to stay, but … it’s not exactly the ideal place I would want…”

“What do you mean?”

But before Kagome could ask, Aiko suddenly grabbed the young girl’s hand and pulled her quickly behind one of the huts. Kagome was about to ask what had come over her, but was silently asked not to say a word as Aiko worryingly glanced around the hut. Taking note of her change in behavior, Kagome did the same.

As Takeo sauntered about the village, one of the village men led him to his hut before quickly running inside to bring out his wares to the inspector. A grand total of twenty-three things were lain about before his hut, and he nervously rubbed his palms together, watching as Takeo bent down to examine the products.

Many of the items lain strewn before him were hand crafted bird cages made from poor quality wood, the edges cut far too narrow and thin. There was a selection of well-crafted pots, plates and utensils with unique and decorative designs which he noted within his book. Unfortunately, the rest of his wares did not suit him well, and Takeo closed his book with a disapproving nod.

“I’m afraid your village has not passed this inspection very well, High Priestess,” He replied, shaking his head all the while. Placing his book into his Kimono, his dark eyes searched the village for anything of value, but he found nothing. “Is this all you have to show me?”

Kaede nodded, her eyes stern and her hands somewhat trembling. “I’m afraid we haven’t much to offer in the middle of the year.”

“What a shame,” He replied, knowing full well that by the end of Fall it would be just the same. “The Daimyo will not be pleased. We cannot guarantee the safety of your village if this remains.”

The villagers fell to their knees, pleading to spare them and help them in their time of need. The small children who were around, hid behind their mothers, their expressions confused as the adults begged.

Taking pity on the people, Takeo scratched his neck before clearing his throat. “Aside from this, there are ways to help benefit your village, despite the poor harvest,” He explained.

Hope suddenly instilled itself into their widened stares, and the people lowered their heads once more to the inspector.

“Although the increased tax will burden you for some years, I believe I have an answer which will solve your problems. If you shall agree upon it however, we will not force it upon you,” Takeo
explained. “But if you shall refuse, I cannot guarantee your safety.”

“What should we do?” Someone cried out.

“Please help us!”

Without even batting an eye, he pulled out a different book from his Kimono. When he found what he was looking for, he paused for a moment before looking at the villagers. “A simple solution would be to offer up your youngest sons and daughters,” He replied, urging sudden silence within the village.

From behind the hut, Kagome couldn’t help but cover her mouth as she and Aiko listened. The inspector was right next to the hut, turned at an angle facing the others and Kaede, and it seemed he had not noticed them hiding. From Kagome’s understanding, the worst would befall the children if they were taken.

Kagome had read about such in her history books in school. Many children, boys and girls were sent away to become slaves and servants; they were almost always beaten and raped. The girls were mainly sent to brothels where they would live out their lives serving lustful men where there was a limited chance of escaping unless bought by a higher ranking noble to become a personal possession and or wife. One thing was certain, Kagome knew they would never see their families again.

Takeo continued. “Although young, their hard work will help ensure the prosperity of your village. We haven’t had to do something like this in nearly ten years, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Our children?!” A woman cried, holding her five-year-old son close to her bosom fearfully.

“Not our daughters! You’ve already taken our sons!” An older man cried out, grasping his hoe tightly in his hands.

Disappointed in their reactions, Takeo stepped closer to Kaede, his hands behind his back. “Lady Kaede, I’m sure you know what is best for your people.”

“Must ye really come to this?”

He nodded. “I’ll gather you’ll rake in a decent amount of money if you sacrifice a few of your people. At least this way you’ll all make it through the Winter or lose everything. You should know our Daimyo has been very lenient to your small village, but if this keeps up, we will have no choice but to abandon you entirely, and in these times, you will need all the protection you can get.”

“Like you’ve ever protected us!” A village man suddenly shouted.

“Not once has any soldier come into our village to protect us! You people are just talk and no action!”

Takeo glared at this. “How dare you act this way. Hold your tongue!”

Before he could take one step towards the inspector, Kaede held up a hand to stop him. “That is enough. Apologize.”

“But … Lady Kaede…”

She turned and narrowed her old eyes at the young man, and swallowing nervously, he got on his
knees and apologized to Takeo.

“F-forgive me … I was out of line…”

Takeo waved it off. “Your answer?”

With a deep sigh, Kaede did what she had to do to help her people thrive. “Very well. Ye may take whomever you wish, but no younger than nine.”

Pleased with her answer, he looked into his small book before arriving at a blank page. “I want all women and children between the ages of 9-18 to form a line in front of me.”

As Kagome and Aiko looked on, Kagome watched nervously as the young girls and children were pulled from the embrace of their families by the men to forcibly stand before their high priestess. Mothers and fathers pleaded with Takeo, but he ignored them.

“We need to hide…” Aiko whispered, and Kagome felt a sudden shiver creep down her spine. “If we are caught, it will be all over…”

At the look in her eyes, Kagome realized she was right. There was no reason to stay any longer. She and Aiko were just as much at risk as everyone else if they were caught. There was no denying would might happen if they were caught.

Before the two could sneak away, Kagome heard a loud feminine shriek fill the air, and surprised, Kagome peeked behind the hut, only to look on horrifyingly at the sight.

Takeo was standing in front of a young girl, probably fifteen years old, with her kimono top completely open, her small breasts exposed to the public eye. She was crying, trying to cover herself, but her arms were held down by one of his men.

“Remain still while I examine. If there should be so much as an imperfection then it’s best to know now,” He explained. “Family name?” He inquired to Kaede, and one by one, each girl and child was examined just the same.

It was terrible and mortifying, and Kaede was simply allowing it, though given the situation, in times like these, what could they do? As Kagome allowed Aiko to pull her away, she couldn’t help but glance back one last time.

Although it was the perfect moment to escape the village, Kagome couldn’t quite find the heart to leave, not when this was happening. Instead, the two fled to the top of the stairs leading to the shrine behind Kaede’s hut, and it was there the two hid. With the door closed behind them, the two silently held their breaths, hoping no one had seen them.

Eventually an hour drifted by, and two hours and then three hours, and there was no sign of anyone searching for them. All that surrounded the two girls was silence, sitting together against the farthest wall hidden behind a large clay pot in the corner.

Had the inspector left the village? Was it all over now? Were they searching for them? They didn’t know.

“I’ll check to see if anyone is out there,” Aiko whispered from beside her, and with a nervous nod, she crawled towards the door, listening closely at first for any signs of movement or noise before slowly sliding open the door. Eventually Aiko crept outside, and Kagome was left hidden, wondering if it were truly safe to come out. Surely by now they had left; the village wasn’t so large and if they were searching for them, Kagome was sure they’d check the shrine, right?
A minute or two passed and Aiko hadn’t returned. Kagome wanted so desperately to step out, but she was scared to move. The worse possible scenario played out in her head; what if someone had grabbed her just as she got outside? No, think positive.

While she sat there, her head nestled upon her knees clutched to her chest, Kagome heard the faintest sound of footsteps shuffling just outside. Her breath caught in her throat the moment the door slid open, and to her relief, it was Aiko, smiling back at her.

“We’re safe now,” She reassured, stepping inside to sit beside the young girl. “It seems the inspector and his men left. I heard from Kaede that only a few girls and two boys were taken…”

“It’s terrible…” Kagome muttered, fisting her hands tightly.

Aiko agreed with her. “Lady Kaede sent me to fetch you. Come on.”

When Aiko stood up, offering her hand to Kagome, she couldn’t help but wonder why it was this girl was treating her so nicely, even going so far as to protect her. “Why?”

“Huh?” Aiko seemed puzzled by her reply, and she canted her head to the side.

“Why … are you treating me so kindly? Aren’t you even a little bit suspicious about who I am and where I came from?” Kagome asked. It seemed everyone in the village felt the same.

From her reply, Aiko only smiled, taking Kagome’s wrist before helping her to her feet. As she led Kagome outside, she released her hand as the two sauntered towards the steps. “Well I am curious about you, but you don’t seem like a bad person, Kagome. Honestly, it’s really none of my business why it is you are here and where you came from.”

Hearing this, Kagome felt a small smile tug at her lips. This girl didn’t seem so bad at all. “Oh, you seem to already know my name…”

“Oh, Kosuke told me,” She replied. From Kagome’s understanding expression, Aiko went on. “Listen Kagome. I understand you must feel … uncomfortable here, and given the circumstances, I don’t blame you. I’m sure you must have family waiting on you, right?”

Kagome nodded. “Yes, but what can I do? I’m stuck here until they are able to trust me. It’s already been over a week now since I arrived.”

It seemed there was something on Aiko’s mind, but she didn’t say anything more on the subject. The last of the steps greeted the two, and as soon as they were standing beside the hut, the smell of food emanated from within, and Kagome couldn’t help but hold her stomach hungrily.

“Well, you should go on inside,” She replied before standing just outside Kaede’s hut.

“Thank you, Aiko.”

There was something about Kagome that left Aiko almost speechless. It wasn’t just the color of her eyes, but her smile. Aiko couldn’t help but return it. “Tomorrow, let’s work together, yeah?”

“Yes, let’s.”

Delighted by her answer, Aiko ushered her inside while she waited outside the hut. Kagome figured she had to talk with Kaede as well, but was allowing her to go in first. Somewhat nervous, Kagome stepped inside, pushing back the flap before staring at Kaede’s back.
The head priestess was bent over in front of a pot, stirring a healthy broth of mushrooms, beans and vegetables, her ladle held lightly in her hand. Without even looking at the girl standing awkwardly in front of the door, she pointed to a spot on the floor in front of the fire.

“Ye may take a seat.”

Doing as she was told, Kagome stepped across the small room and situated herself onto the floor, her knees bent under her. While she sat there, Kaede poured out a small bowl and handed it to her, and Kagome took it respectively.

As if on cue, her stomach growled, and she tried to ignore the redness on her cheeks. It smelled wonderful, but she wasn’t sure if she was allowed to take a sip of it. Then again, she worked hard each day she was here, and she was sure she was entitled to eat. Despite the older lady not touching her own bowl, Kagome took a risk, tipping the contents so they poured into her mouth hungrily. It had been hours since she last ate anything, and even that had been a less than enough to fill her belly.

Kaede wasn’t bothered by the girl’s ill manners, and seated herself across the floor from her, watching her before taking a sip of her own. When she noticed Kagome’s bowl empty seconds later, she allowed her a second, much to Kagome’s excitement and disbelief.

“Ye have worked hard, child. More than I expected.”

Accepting the bowl, Kagome scarfed it down as well, trying to retain some modesty but failing as the broth dripped from her mouth. She was hungrier than she first thought, and her stomach only growled further.

After a few moments, she finally swallowed the last of the soup, before lowering her bowl. To be honest, Kagome still didn’t feel comfortable around the old woman, especially with all that’s happened and what she had witnessed earlier. But Kagome wasn’t about to call her out on that; she knew that if she did, she’d most likely suffer some sort of punishment.

“So … when can I leave?”

The old priestess’s eyes squinted, noticing the blisters and scratches on the young girl’s hands and feet. Contemplating, she reached over and grasped a small jar filled with crushed leaves. Ushering the child closer, she tended to the small injuries, placing the wet leaves upon her hands before wrapping them in a thin cloth.

“I mean … I really haven’t done anything wrong. I’ve been held here for days now, and I’ve done my part to help you and everyone else,” Kagome explained.

“So…”

Finished tying up the cloth on her hands and feet, Kaede pushed the medicine jar to the side and her gaze softened at the child seated before her. “Where are ye planning on going?”

Home. That was her plan. However, Kagome wasn’t sure how to return. Her only clue was the Goshinboku Tree back in the forest; it brought her into this mess in the first place, and Kagome was sure it would take her back.

“If I remember ye story, ye said you were separated from ye brother after becoming lost in the Forest of Inuyasha, correct?”
Kagome nodded. “That’s why I need to go. My family is waiting for me…”

“Those woods are dangerous and as I recall, there are no other villages around for miles. For someone as young as ye are, I am surprised ye have not been attacked. How is it ye became lost and so far from home?” Kaede asked.

This was the moment Kagome dreaded. Should she tell her the truth? Right now, it seemed the old priestess was contemplating her release from the village, but if she told her, her chance at freedom would disappear.

Noticing her troubled expression, Kaede gave the child a moment to gather her thoughts. It was obvious in her eyes that she was very far from any village, but how was the question. No woman in her right mind would travel so far on her own, not with the dangers lurking in this world.

“Child, do ye know how far ye village is?” Did she even know her way back? Judging by her troubled expression, it didn’t seem likely.

Far. Her home was very far from her. Her family was far from her reach. “My home … is very far from me. I’m not sure how to return, exactly, but I need to go back. I know they are waiting for me.”

“Far, is it? I see…” It was obvious the child was nowhere near her home, and judging by her expression, her family was far away from her. Could it be her family was already dead? The child said she was separated from her brother in the Forest of Inuyasha, but was that truly the case? The day she was brought to the village, there had been no sightings of anyone else within the forest, and she made sure her men scouted the area after. Had the child suffered a tragedy recently and she still couldn’t cope with the grief? There was much Kaede wanted answered, but she didn’t want to press the child any further.

Kagome sighed and dropped her gaze to the wooden floor beneath her. “I have to go back.”

The old priestess nodded. “I understand, but I think it’s best ye stay here for now. Ye say ye have no recollection of how far home is, so for now, ye shall stay here—”

“I can’t!” Her head shot up suddenly and she fisted her hands. There was no way she could stay here any longer. “I can’t do that. I haven’t done anything to deserve this. My family is out there worried about me. I can’t just stay here and do nothing.”

Kaede held up a hand, surprised by her sudden outburst, but instead of reprimanding her, she instead shook her head. “I understand fully, Kagome. Understand that I will not keep ye here as a prisoner, but as one of us.”

“Huh?” She was confused. So, she wasn’t a prisoner anymore? Yet she planned to keep her here despite releasing her? That didn’t make sense. Either way, she was still keeping her here against her will.

“However, I cannot simply allow ye to leave, especially when ye have no memory of how it is ye came here,” Kaede replied. “Ye will not be treated ill by anyone.”

“I can’t stay. I don’t belong here.”

For a short moment, the two stared at each other silently. They were completely opposite in their thinking. Kaede understood she wanted to leave, but she didn’t believe it was the time. Allowing her to wander the land on her own was suicidal, but Kaede wondered how it was possible she came this far without any trouble.
Her hands trembled slightly and she had a nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach. This was wrong. “Let me leave. Turn a blind eye towards me.”
Sake For Your Troubles

Chapter Summary

As the days pass, things are starting to look up for Kagome. When a dreadful event injures Daisuke, Kagome quickly rushes in to help him, despite the whispers behind her back. Using her knowledge in medicine, she surprises both Kaede and Daisuke when she reveals she uses Western Medicine, a practice strictly prohibited in Japan. Kaede immediately becomes suspicious.

June 10th

The rays of the morning sun drifted into the small open window of a small hut, shining its light upon a restless ebony haired girl. As Kagome rested, nestled beneath a warm and thick blanket, she couldn’t stop her thoughts from trailing to last night’s conversation…

Flash Back

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Her hands trembled slightly and she had a nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach. This was wrong. “Let me leave. Turn a blind eye towards me.”

The child was acting difficult. As she glanced out her window, she realized it was getting rather late. “I see. Let us continue our conversation tomorrow, Kagome,” She explained, watching the
girl’s shoulders drop suddenly. “By then, I hope ye will tell me everything without any secrets, alright?”

Kagome’s frown deepened. There was no getting through to her, but she noticed she wasn’t being entirely truthful in her explanation. Should she tell Kaede everything? Should she run away as soon as everyone went to sleep? Could she even make it through tomorrow without breaking?

There was a small knock outside the hut, and it shifted the two’s attention towards the door flap. “Excuse me, Lady Kaede. May I come in?”

The voice belonged to Aiko, and as Kaede allowed her entrance, the young girl stepped in, looking between the two somewhat hesitant. In a matter of seconds, she dropped to her knees and lowered her head to the floor before the high priestess. “Please excuse my interruption. If it’s alright with you, can Kagome stay with me?”

Hearing this, Kagome blinked in surprise. Stay with her?

“I see no reason why not,” The old priestess replied, turning to look back at Kagome, who’s attention was focused bemusedly on Aiko. “After all, I have released ye from captivity. For the time being, ye can stay with Aiko. Tomorrow, we shall continue our discussion.”

End Flash Back

The soft pitter patter of feet crept from one area of the hut to the next, and with a sigh, Kagome pulled herself up into a seated position, her crystalline blue eyes settled on the young girl sorting through her belongings in a chest across the hut.

Last night, Aiko had overheard the conversation between her and Kaede, and Kagome supposed she felt inclined to take her in. Although it gave Mayoko and Daisuke their needed space, Kagome didn’t feel too well about the entire situation.

She couldn’t stay here.

“Oh, you’re awake,” Aiko exclaimed before approaching the girl with a bundle of clothes in her arms. “I wasn’t sure if I should wake you or not.”

A forced smile fell from her lips. “Thank you for letting me stay with you, Aiko.”

Kneeling beside her, Aiko only shook her head, her smile widening, despite Kagome’s frown. “Think nothing of it. Here,” She offered Kagome a clean kimono, but as she held it out to her, Aiko saw how her countenance seemed entirely dejected. Well, who wouldn’t feel upset after all she’s been put through? If only there was something she could do to lift her spirits. “While you were sleeping, I went over to Daisuke’s hut and gathered your belongings for you.”

She looked up at this.

Aiko grinned and pointed to a small chest in the corner of the room. “I’ve placed your clothing in there. I thought you would like them back before something should happen to them.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s no problem.” Standing up, she dusted her pale red kimono off and looked around the hut briefly before her stare rested back on Kagome, who was still sitting inside her futon. “When you’re ready, we’ll head out.”
“To the fields?” Kagome asked, hoping that wasn’t the case, but Aiko only shook her head.

“Not yet. Priestess Kaede wishes to speak with everyone in the village soon. I’ll give you privacy while I go out and finish cooking up breakfast, okay?” She asked, starting towards the door before glancing back.

Kagome nodded. As soon as Aiko left the hut, she pulled herself out of the warm blankets, but she couldn’t find the energy to remove her kimono. After a few minutes of simply standing there, staring at the dull wood of the floor, Kagome eventually changed her clothing, wearing a knee length brown kimono. At least the length was a lot easier to move around in, as well as a lot looser.

After tying the obi around her waist, she stepped over to the door flap before putting on her straw sandals. After which, she stepped out, shielding her eyes from the intense sunlight blazing upon her.

Aiko was bent over a medium sized cooking pot, stirring constantly at what appeared to be simmering rice porridge. It was always the same food day in and day out, and last night Kagome was lucky to have something different to satisfy her hunger. But Kagome didn’t say anything to Aiko, and she accepted her large bowl of breakfast, which Aiko had tended to all morning while she slept.

“After the meeting, we should hurry on over to the fields to finish planting and weeding the soil, and after we should go to the rice fields for a couple hours,” Aiko explained, pushing her bowl aside to clean later. “Have you met Naomi by chance?”

Pausing from eating, Kagome took a moment to recollect her thoughts. Naomi? She was sure she met her a week ago, right? Wasn’t she the girl who was supposed to take over her shift one day but was refused by the village men? The name sounded familiar. “I think so … but only briefly.”

Hearing this, Aiko clasped her hands together. “Oh, that’s good. We’ll be helping her out. Naomi is really easy to get along with, so if you ever have questions or anything, feel free to ask away.”

Kagome nodded. There were only a few spoonful’s of porridge left, but Kagome couldn’t stand to eat another bite, but she was grateful to Aiko, nonetheless. “Thank you for the food. I’m sorry I’m not very talkative. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“No, it’s ok. It’s perfectly understandable.”

The sudden sound of a bell resonated within the village, and as if on cue, Aiko stood up, offering her hand to Kagome, who only looked on bemused. “Well, priestess Kaede is calling for us. Let’s go.”

Ψ

The two were the first to show up, followed after by the other villagers, especially the children who paused in their games to run over, latching onto their parent’s arms and kimonos curiously. Kaede was standing before a large copper bell, obviously the one who had rung it. While many of the farmers were rushing over as quickly as they could, Aiko and Kagome situated themselves beside the elderly priestess.

Among the bustling crowd, Kagome caught sight of a familiar and friendly face, staring over at her. It was Kosuke. From the looks of it, he must have finally arrived after spending some time away from the village. Although she was a little depressed with how things were going for her these days, just seeing him put a smile on her lips. Kagome didn’t know why it was she enjoyed his
company, but he seemed to have a knack at cheering her up.

After spotting her beside Kaede, he waved at Kagome, wondering if she was faring well during his absence. Although she seemed to have lost a little weight, she was still glowing, though her smile seemed more forced than before.

There was a sudden shift in everyone’s behavior, mainly those of the villagers who’d arrived. Their heated glares stared straight at Kagome, and a few choice words were uttered, which left Aiko fuming and Kagome annoyed.

“Did this bitch do something to upset you, Lady Kaede?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me! Why is she even still here? She’s stinking our village up!”

A small group of men laughed at this, eying Kagome up as if she were some sort of thing they found amusing. Even they spoke terribly about her, repeating the words bitch and whore, and it left Kagome completely stiff.

It was one thing to say it behind her back, but to continuously say it in front of her was completely out of line. She was fed up with the humiliation. She was fed up with their hash treatment and despicable behavior. She was simply Kagome. Not a bitch and not a whore!

Kagome was shaking, trying her best to contain herself. She wanted so much as to talk back and put them down just as much as they treated her, but that was beneath her character. She wasn’t the type to belittle others simply because they belittled her. Kagome was a respectful person, but it was awfully hard not to lose her temper and embarrass herself further without opening her mouth. She knew that if she did, she would make the situation a whole lot worse.

“That’s what we call submission, boys,” One man remarked, smirking at Kagome’s defeated countenance.

Another laughed. “She’s not so feisty as she was before. The little bitch has finally learned her place!”

“But there must be a reason why priestess Kaede has called for this meeting, right?”

“I bet it has to do with that girl. She must have done something to upset her.”

“Then we should put her in her place! The little conniving wench!”

Aiko wasn’t about to stand for this much longer, and immediately took a position in front of Kagome. “Hey stop that! Kagome hasn’t done anything!” She defended, much to Kagome’s appreciation, but she wished she didn’t say anything to worsen the situation. “You know just as well as I do how hard Kagome has worked to attain some respect here! You shouldn’t be so quick to judge when you know nothing!”

“What’s this? Aiko, don’t tell me you’re siding with this girl…”

Aiko’s face reddened. She was shaking just as much as Kagome; she was so frustrated and tired of the village men treating every woman like this. It wasn’t just Kagome who was suffering such torment. “Enough is enough!”

Before the group of young men could say anything further and harass Aiko as well, Kaede held up a hand, and immediately everyone silenced. “As of today, this young woman shall no longer be our captive.”
A chorus of noise sounded after these words, and many flashed Kagome disapproving glares. The group of men who heard this responded arrogantly, eying Kagome up and down before spitting at the ground.

“Quiet.” When everyone quieted down once more, she continued. “Through her hard work and ambition to assist our crops, she has not once shown us a reason not to trust her. I have also looked into her identity, and I can assure everyone she is innocent of any crime.”

Kagome looked over at the head priestess in question. Was Kaede telling only half the truth?

“Since she has no place to go, Kagome will stay with us,” She replied, watching the confusion grace her people’s faces. No one was happy about it, but they would have to get used to it. As the elderly priestess turned towards Mayoko and Daisuke within the crowd, she went on. “You do not need to worry about housing her any longer. Kagome will be staying with Aiko from this point on.”

Mayoko and Daisuke nodded, completely understanding. Although Mayoko didn’t have a problem with the girl sleeping outside their hut, she couldn’t help but become disheartened slightly. She was just beginning to like the child.

“I would like everyone to get along with her. If I should hear of any problems, then ye will be brought to me, understood?”

Though the villagers weren’t as accepting of this decision, they silently nodded before leaving to continue their daily chores once the meeting ended. As they did, Kagome approached Mayoko and her husband, offering them a respectful bow of gratitude.

“Thank you for looking after me. I’m sorry if I burdened you both,” Kagome replied. “Thank you for the meals and the bath by the lake.”

Mayoko only shook her head at this, while her husband looked away at the retreating villagers. “Well it can’t be helped,” She sighed before bringing the girl into a soft hug, much to Kagome’s surprise. “It’s not like we won’t be seeing each other, child.”

Although the hug reminded her of her mother’s, Kagome couldn’t help but nod, smiling softly. Maybe she really could get along with some of the villagers.

As soon as Mayoko and her husband departed from them to continue their chores, Kaede eventually returned to her hut, leaving Kagome and Aiko standing beside the other.

Kosuke, who hadn’t left with the others, quickly walked over to the two girls, his brown eyes smiling as they landed on Kagome. “Are you alright?” He asked. The fact that those men had said awful things to her irritated him.

“I’m alright. It’s good to see you again, Kosuke,” Kagome replied, watching a smile tug at his lips suddenly. He was dressed as if he had just come back from a long journey, and she presumed he was out visiting other villages. In truth, this was her second time seeing him.

“Kagome, would you like to have lunch this afternoon?” He asked, and at Kagome’s nod, he grinned. “I’ll tell you about the places I went to, if you like?”

She nodded, suddenly excited to spend more time with him. “Yes. Do you mind if Aiko joins us?”

Kosuke nodded. “I don’t mind. I would love to catch up on all that’s happened during my absence.” With a quick glance back in the direction of the fields, Kosuke offered the two girls a final smile before running off to help the men in the fields.
Aiko, who had been listening silently, couldn’t help but grin to herself next to Kagome. “He sure is a hard-working guy, huh Kagome?”

Although she nodded, Kagome couldn’t help but notice the sly look in the girl’s eyes, smiling at her as if she knew something she didn’t. When she understood the smile, Kagome immediately blushed. “It’s not like that, really. This is only our second time talking.”

“I’m only teasing you, Kagome,” She laughed before grasping her hand suddenly. “Come on, we’ve got some work to do.”

ψ

A few hours went by quicker than Kagome first imagined, and with Aiko’s assistance, the two managed to cover over half the fields in no time. The two worked alongside each other wonderfully, and without Aiko’s help, Kagome would have struggled on her own.

Wiping the sweat from her brow, Aiko stretched her arms above her, her back and shoulders cracking in the process; Kagome followed after. Right now, it was around ten in the morning and there was still much daylight left to spend in the fields.

As she closed up the bag of seeds while Aiko discarded the weeds off to the side of the fields, the two walked alongside each other, making their way to the rice paddies to assist the others.

On their way, they passed Kosuke, fixing up a cart on the side of the road near the huts. He was helping a few men fix a broken wheel when he noticed Kagome and Aiko walking by. Though he didn’t have much time to talk, he waved at them, and they returned it.

Aiko eyed Kagome, whose eyes were looking over towards Kosuke in the distance, and she couldn’t help but smile. It was obvious something was going on between them, but it seemed Kagome was oblivious.

There was a commotion a short distance away from them, and as the two looked off curiously towards the hills, they saw a group of older men gathered around a fallen individual. As they neared the scene, Kagome and Aiko gasped at the sight of blood, seeping from a fresh wound.

“Daisuke…” Kagome couldn’t help but run forward, with Aiko close behind. When she got there, the other men were trying to ease the man’s discomfort, sitting him down so as to inspect the wound. One fled immediately away towards Kaede’s hut to fetch the old priestess.

“Just take it easy, Daisuke. The wound looks bad,” An older man with a scruffy beard exclaimed, easing Daisuke as he squeezed his shoulders. “Damn, that’s one messed up wound!”

Daisuke who was built like an ox, only scoffed. “The wound isn’t so serious. I’m fine.” When he went to pick himself up, the men stopped him, much to his annoyance.

“What happened?” Kagome found herself asking.

For a second, the others looked at her, though it was not with looks of disapproval. Another turned to Kagome before pointing at the wound near Daisuke’s thigh. “The rope holding his scythe fell off and sliced his leg.”

Kagome winced and quickly knelt at the wounded’s side before grasping his pant leg, tearing it open, much to everyone’s surprise. When a hand reached out to stop her, she pulled away. “I need to see his wound to make sure it doesn’t get infected.”
“That’s why we had Takemaru run after the medicine from Lady Kaede. With that he will be fine. You don’t need to worry about this.”

“I’m fine, child,” Daisuke replied before pushing her hand away from his thigh. “You needn’t worry.”

Even so, Kagome couldn’t help but feel she had to help, after all, Daisuke took her in for a short time, despite their rough meeting. “Still, it’s best to check the wound first.” With that, she pulled at his pants once more until his wound was suddenly visible. Kagome didn’t dare touch the wound, not until she cleaned it. While her hand was lying on his outer thigh, away from the injury, this caused some of the men to frown; Daisuke on the other hand said nothing.

“Um … Kagome…” Aiko tried to pull her away, realizing it was causing some misunderstandings.

Kagome didn’t listen. “I need a wet cloth! Anyone?” She asked.

Everyone looked at each other before scratching their heads. To her disappointment, she only sighed before turning to Aiko. “Can you quickly get me a hot wet rag? And if possible, some needle and thread? I need you to put the needle in really hot water before I begin.”

Without even waiting a second to ask why she needed those things, Aiko quickly ran off to fetch the desired items.

Ψ

It wasn’t long before Lady Kaede arrived with her basket of medicinal herbs, a jar nestled in her basket filled with various herbs, salves and roots. As she arrived, she noticed the young girl, Kagome, kneeling beside Daisuke. She was applying pressure to his thigh in order to stop the bleeding, and seeing this, Kaede was somewhat surprised.

“Move aside girl, Lady Kaede will take care of this,” Someone in the group replied, but Kagome refused to move.

Although she took notice of Kagome’s defiance, she said nothing of it as she knelt down, careful of her back before setting her basket to the side. “Let me have a look at his leg, child.”

Nodding, Kagome let go, allowing the old priestess to look over the wound. With a shake of her head, she reached for her jar of medicine, before pulling out some moist, crushed leaves. With a large bit in the palm of her hand, she reached forward to place it onto Daisuke’s wound, but Kagome quickly stopped her.

“Wait! His wound needs cleaned first.”

Kaede nodded. “Yes child. This medicine will help cleanse his wound and rid it of infection if it should arise. There is no reason to grow wary.”

“What kind of medicine is that?” Kagome asked, eying the dark substance of finely crushed up leaves.

“These are Arikko leaves.”

Even though she was sure this woman had tended to many injuries in her life, Kagome couldn’t help but protest. Instead, she asked that Lady Kaede wait until Aiko returned with the items needed to properly take care of Daisuke’s leg. Even though she knew the thread wasn’t as thick as those used in her own time, she was sure it would do the trick.
Eventually, Aiko returned, with all three items in hand. The needle was lying in a scolding small wooden cup of water, while the hot rag and thread was in her other hand. Immediately Kagome took the hot rag from her and quickly and gently cleaned his wound, removing any dirt visible to the eye. As blood continued seeping from the wound, Kagome realized the gash was much bigger than she first thought.

As Kagome went to work, ignoring the constant stares from the village men surrounding them, Kaede poured a little water into the palm of her hand and added the crushed leaves before blending them together into a type of moist salve. “Here,” Kaede voiced, handing Kagome a small handful to place onto his injury. “It will rid him of any infection.”

Nodding, Kagome placed the herbs onto his wound while she used her rag to clean around the area of the gash. “I’ll only leave it on for a bit, but I need to suture his leg up soon. Although you say it helps to rid infection, with the gash wide open like that, infection will still spread.”

“Suture?” The old priestess’s eyes widened at the term, and in an instant, she grasped Kagome’s hand, much to Kagome’s confusion. “I believe ye should come back to my hut.”


Despite her questions, Lady Kaede ushered the group of men to help Daisuke to her hut, with Kagome and Aiko following behind curiously. When they arrived moments later, Aiko and Kagome made room in the small hut to lay Daisuke onto the wooden floor while Lady Kaede ushered the men back to the fields to work.

As soon as the men were gone, Kaede turned back to the girls kneeling beside Daisuke. Approaching them, she knelt down beside Kagome, her bowl of medicinal herbs and remedies inside various jars. “Kagome, are ye knowledgeable in western medicine?”

Hearing this, Aiko suddenly gasped.

Kagome looked between the two of them confused, but nodded anyways. “Um ... somewhat. My mother is a trained nurse, and she’s taught me the basics of how to tend to injuries, especially those as severe as these.”

Although Kaede wasn’t familiar with the term nurse, she narrowed her gaze. Telling her no would have been more sensible in their predicament, but instead of scolding her, Kaede turned to Daisuke. He was staring at Kagome long and hard, and having heard the words western medicine, his gaze narrowed. It couldn’t be possible this girl knew of such things. “So, this suture you intend to do to me involves western medicine?” He questioned.

When he asked this, Kagome nodded, taking the hot rag from Aiko before she began cleaning away the blood once more. It was a shame they wasted the herbs which they had recently put onto his wound after moving him to Kaede’s hut. “Well to be honest, suture is relatively ... something that’s been around for many years,” She suddenly explained. “Think of it as a fancy word upper class doctors have started using.”

“Upper class?” Aiko asked.

Kagome nodded. “But it’s the same. I only need to sew up your wound so infection doesn’t spread. It will take some time to heal, but in time it will be as good as new, though you might have a scar.”

“You intend to sew my leg?”
Kagome nodded again. “Are … you all against this or something? If we leave the wound open like this, the worst-case scenario will likely happen. Since it was a scythe that fell onto your thigh, you will most likely end up with gangrene … and ultimately lose your leg.”

He immediately paled hearing this. That was something he really did not want to happen. He pondered briefly on this decision, before turning his eyes to Lady Kaede.

When she saw his look, she nodded. “I will allow it. I have seen this practice many times in my life and the end result has never disappointed me. The child is right about the infection. If left untreated, ye may very well lose ye leg as well as ye way of life. It would no doubt burden ye wife, but I will leave the decision to ye.”

While Kagome looked between them confusedly, she looked back at Aiko who was staring at the needle lying within the wooden cup at her side. There was a strange expression on her face; it was as if something plagued her thoughts.

Before Kagome could ask what was wrong with suturing his leg, Daisuke suddenly lifted himself up into a seated position, his gaze locked onto Kagome’s. “Very well. I will trust you. If Lady Kaede trusts you, then I will trust you.”

“Thank you…”

With one last look at Kaede beside her, Kagome helped Daisuke onto his back. Once the blood was cleared away, as best as it could, Kagome turned to Kaede. “Do you have any alcohol?”

“No no! The alcohol isn’t for me. It’s for you,” She replied, suddenly easing his thoughts. Kagome looked back at Kaede, and to her surprise, the older woman already had a jar in her possession. “Thank you.”

Aiko looked at it questionably. “What do you intend to do with it?”

“I will pour it onto his injury,” Kagome replied. There was no doubt in her mind how much pain Daisuke would be in after this. “Lady Kaede, will you help hold him down while I do this?”

Nodding, she moved around the child, kneeling beside him before pressing her arms onto his chest and shoulders. Aiko held him down as well, watching as Kagome pulled the cork off the jar before turning the jar over slightly as the milky white contents flowed onto his open wound.

In an instant, he reacted, his body jerking at the stinging sensation. His bellowing was so loud, everyone was sure the entire village heard him, but Kagome didn’t let up. As soon as she was finished pouring the alcohol onto his gash, she immediately reached into the scolding hot wooden cup beside her and retrieved the needle.

“Thread?” Kagome asked.

Aiko was on it quickly, handing her the thick black thread. As Kagome pierced the hole of the needle, she made a knot at one end of the thread and positioned the tip of the needle near the beginning of his injury. “I’m not going to lie, but this will hurt.”

Already knowing the excrutiating pain that would no doubt follow, Daisuke sat up and reached for the jar of Sake at Kagome’s side before bringing it to his lips. He swallowed the contents greedily, and when he was sure he had enough to dull his senses, he laid back down. “I’m ready…”
Fed up with Satouru's mistreatment towards her and the village women, she confronts him head on, surprising everyone, including Satouru himself.

She was lying in the middle of the rice paddies, her entire form from the torso up, drenched by the muddy water, her hair matted against her back. Humiliation was obviously apparent on her face, and as she struggled to push herself up to her feet, Aiko was at her side in an instant.

Red in the face and doing her best not to cry out angrily, she turned her heated blue gaze towards the source of her fall. A group of three young men, the same who had shouted obscenities at her earlier that morning in front of Kaede’s hut, were standing a few feet away, their mocked expressions ever taunting as they laughed at her.

“Kagome, are you okay?” Aiko asked, her hand positioned upon Kagome’s lower back.

Before all this, Kagome had fixed up Daisuke’s leg, and while there was no more talk regarding Western Medicine, Kagome and Aiko left Lady Kaede to her quiet ponderings. The two had gone to the rice paddies to help Naomi, a quiet girl around their age, with brown hair and a collection of small freckles across her face, gather the stalks and replant the seeds. The process was fairly simple, and after two hours of working, everything suddenly went downhill.

“The new girl should watch where she’s walking!”

Maybe if she ignored them, they would grow bored of mocking her? As Kagome turned her blue eyes away from the men, she resumed her chore, gather the rice stalks into her basket; her ignorance only seemed to anger the men.

“Why don’t you guys just leave us alone?” Aiko replied, not at all hesitant.

“Just ignore them, Aiko…” Kagome muttered, her gaze directed at the stalks before her.

One of them sauntered forward, despite Aiko’s warning glare, and stood directly behind Kagome, who was knelt with her back towards him. As he crossed his arms, a sneer overtook his complexion. “Are you looking down on us, girl? If you are, then maybe we need to teach you a lesson.”

“I can’t be looking down at you if I’m looking at the rice stalks!” Kagome whipped her head over her shoulder, her fiery gaze glowering at the towering man behind her. What the heck was his problem? Why couldn’t these people get over themselves already? So, what if she was first thought to be suspicious for supposedly wandering around their neighborhood? Lady Kaede already confirmed to the entire village she was not a threat and could be trusted. What more did they want from her?

Having heard her retort, Naomi tried to fight back a laugh, but her trembling shoulders gave her away.

“What was that?” Another asked, before approaching her as well.
Aiko immediately positioned herself between Kagome and the men, not at all liking where this situation was headed. If Kagome continued to show defiance, then it would make the situation worse. Then again, Kagome wasn’t like her or Naomi; it was clear to her that Kagome was very different from them. “Leave her alone, or else I’ll tell Lady Kaede!”

The third guy sneered at her. “I don’t give a damn what Lady Kaede says!”

“What’s the old bat going to do? Hit me with her cane?” He laughed.

Aiko fumed at this. “You call yourselves men of our village, but it’s clear you aren’t! If you have no respect for our High Priestess, then leave!”

Kagome remained knelt there, her gaze widened as she looked at Aiko standing behind her, her arms held up defiantly to shield her. Unlike the other villagers, she was willing to stand up for her, and even go so far as to say such words which would put her into a bad predicament.

As Kagome turned her gaze back to the men, she suddenly found herself rising to her feet, but it was too late. A harsh slap resonated within the rice paddies, and seconds later, Aiko was lying in the water, her entire face submerged.

“Aiko!” Kagome cried out, kneeling down to assist her. When she saw the reddened mark upon her cheek and her friend close to tears, Kagome couldn’t stand it any longer. This had to stop. “How dare you…” It was one thing to hit a girl straight on, but to hit her despite being wrong themselves, it really ticked her off. Aiko had done nothing wrong. “You should apologize…”

“Eh? What was that?” The person responsible for hitting Aiko asked.

“I said you should apologize! How dare you hit a girl! What did Aiko ever do to you, you arrogant prick?!” Kagome shouted, her voice loud enough to draw attention to the scene. “Just because you act all macho, waltzing around this village like you own it, doesn’t give you the right to hit a girl just because she said something sensible! You call yourselves men? Ha! All I see are three idiots, dumb, dumber and dumbest!”

The three of them growled, their hands clenched tightly at her words. This girl was really starting to piss them off, especially since they first laid eyes on her. She was nothing like the women of their village, she had a temper and a voice that rivaled that of men.

Expecting to be slapped just as her friend, Kagome was instead, grasped by the collar of her brown kimono and pulled closer to the individual’s face. His foul breath caused her to turn her face in disgust.

“You should show a little more respect, stupid wench! There’s a difference between men and women in this world. The first difference, a woman should always shut her mouth when the man is present!”

A woman should shut her mouth and remain silent? Kagome was really beginning to be set off the edge. She wasn’t sure how long she could bite her tongue, but she was having difficulty the more these idiots pressed on. “A woman has the right to speak her mind! Just who do you think was responsible for bringing men into this world? Women! Without us, you wouldn’t even be here!”

“Bitch!” Another bellowed. “Mitsuki, she really doesn’t understand our ways!”

“I think we should teach her properly the ways of our village.”

This wasn’t good. The three men were huddled around her, glowering as they hoped to do wrong to
her, but Kagome remained standing, her gaze narrowed and her mouth pressed into a firm scowl. She wasn’t afraid.

"Feisty, isn’t she?"

A different voice called out suddenly, but the familiarity of the voice immediately brought a sickening feeling to the pit of Kagome’s stomach. She recognized that voice, and as she turned her gaze to her right, she saw the figure of a man approach them.

Dressed in a burgundy kimono top with loose fitted black pants tied at the front, this young man who was a little older than Kagome smirked at the scene. His hair was pulled back loosely in a low short ponytail, a few stray bangs fanning his forehead.

"Satouru! Just in time!” Mitsuki replied before pushing the young woman away. “Maybe you can lend a hand and teach this girl a lesson. She’s been leering at us from the start!”

He stopped a few feet away, looking Kagome up and down in a manner which left her completely uncomfortable. “Now that’s troublesome…”

Oh no. Not him again. He was the same individual who had humiliated her when she was first brought to the village tied up days ago, and from the looks of it, he wasn’t ashamed of his behavior. Just the way he looked at her sent chills up her spine and caused her legs to tremble. She didn’t like him.

As she picked herself up out of the water, Aiko grasped onto Kagome’s arm, her stare frightened as she looked upon Satouru. Her face was as pale as Kagome’s. “Kagome … let’s leave…”

Even as Aiko attempted to pull Kagome away, Kagome remained standing, her glare hardening as she met Satouru’s gaze. He stepped so close to her, he was but mere inches away, and much to Kagome’s displeasure, he placed a finger under her chin, lifting it.

“It’s been a while,” He replied, smirking at her defiant glare.

She slapped his hand away from her. “Don’t touch me.”

Although she was a difficult woman, the likes he had never before seen, there was something about her that brought a chuckle out of him. When he saw her brought into the village days ago, she had irked him with an unbelievable voice, yet the sight of her in that short kimono had warmed his loins. This woman was indeed an interesting sight. Yet here she was standing before him, glaring at him as if he had done her wrong before. Perhaps he did, but that didn’t mean this woman hadn’t enjoyed his touch, he was almost sure of it.

“Still as tempered as ever, aren’t we?” He teased, eyeing her rigid form before him. “I think we should fix that, shouldn’t we boys?”

Mitsuki snickered, grasping Aiko by her arm before pushing her away from Kagome. Immediately after, he came up behind Kagome and grasped her breasts, fondling them roughly. “If you ask me, I think she likes being touched!”

Startled by his roaming hands, Kagome squeaked in surprise, her face reddened in humiliation. As Satouru and his friends laughed at her expense, Kagome felt her anger boil over. Turning so quickly, she raised her left hand, clenching it as tightly as she could before knocking Mitsuki right in the jaw.

Mitsuki landed in the water, the stalks flattened by his landing as he laid in pain, groaning as he
rubbed his unexpected injury. Having witnessed this, Satouru and the other two guys’ eyes widened in surprise, and Aiko and Naomi covered their mouths at the sight.

“It’s not so pleasant getting smacked into the water, now is it!” Kagome shouted, revenging Aiko who had suffered a similar scenario a short while ago.

Spitting the blood from his mouth, Mitsuki tried ascertaining the extent of his injury. Fortunately, his teeth remained intact, that much he knew after feeling them with his fingers. “You will live to regret that, you bitch!” He growled.

Just before she could mutter the words ‘Just go ahead and try,’ a fistful of Kagome’s ebony locks was grabbed from behind, and she cried out in pain as she was yanked back, stumbling to pull away from the one responsible.

“I see the fire hasn’t died,” Satouru remarked, smirking as the woman trembled painfully in his grasp. “It seems field work just isn’t her strong point, boys. Perhaps we should fix that.”

“Let me go!” Kagome cried out, but Satouru only laughed. “Get your hands off me!”

Ψ

Daisuke was sitting in Kaede’s hut, drinking a small bowl of tea before the elderly priestess. After having been tended to by Kagome a couple hours ago, he remained within the hut, resting his injury. Although he wasn’t comfortable with the woman performing Western Medicine upon him, she had stitched his wound up nicely. It was less painful than he had anticipated.

“Are ye uncomfortable?” Kaede asked from across him, her legs bent under her as she sat there fixing the small fire in the center of the room.

Pulled away from his silent musings, Daisuke nodded. “I never would have guessed someone with such knowledge would appear before us; It’s almost unheard of. She is Japanese like us and yet … just knowing this and having allowed her to operate upon my leg, it leaves me unsettled.”

Kaede nodded. “So ye regret ye decision?”

Daisuke pondered again, his eyes narrowed as he tried to collect his thoughts. Unsettled was entirely the case. “I do. This western practice is forbidden in our country. If the others should find out, especially since you allowed it, our lives would be forfeit…”

“Ye are correct. That is why we must keep this a secret.”

Daisuke looked up at this, his eyes widened at her choice of words. “But Lady Kaede!”

She held up a hand to silence him. “I have had my suspicions about the child since she first arrived upon our village, Daisuke. There is something within her, something I cannot ascertain at this moment.”

“What do you mean?”

“I sensed a power within the child, but I cannot gather whether or not it is good or bad,” Lady Kaede replied, pondering as she revisited the days before. Was it possible she possessed powers similar to Kikyou? Although Lady Kaede failed to master her spiritual abilities years ago, she wondered if it was possible this child held the same potential as her deceased sister. Then again, was it possible the child possessed other worldly powers, powers of sinister origins?
“Could it be possible she is a woman born with the power?” He asked, but Kaede wasn’t certain.

“If so, then her knowledge would make better sense, but I believe there is more to this child than we know,” She replied. “Although she claims her mother taught her these foreign practices, I’m sure there is a blood line within her family that parallels that of priestesses and women of spiritual healing.”

Hearing this, Daisuke’s mouth opened in surprise. If that was the case, then it made better sense. If Lady Kaede sensed something within the girl, then it had to be true. “It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth to hide this wound from my wife…”

“As it should. Ye must not remove the bandages in front of anyone but myself, Daisuke. For now, we must watch the child.”

He nodded. “I understand.” Yet as he watched the elderly woman, he noticed how her expression had become more serious as of late. “I take it this is why you haven’t allowed her to leave the village, am I correct? You are curious of her powers.”

The old woman softly smiled at his reply. “It would seem she is not aware of it yet. Sending her out into the world to return to her family, wherever they are now, would put her life at risk,” She replied, and Daisuke finally understood the old priestess’s intentions. “As of late, the air has been strange. I have a feeling something is about to happen, something that may pose a threat to our humble village…”

His frowned deepened. “Do you suppose it could be a demon?” He asked, but the old woman simply shook her head. Another thought came to mind, and it left Daisuke somewhat uneasy as he sat there. “If it’s possible this child is indeed a priestess, do you think it might be possible we may have angered the gods for mistreating her?”

Kaede shook her head. “I am not sure. Whatever the case, we will know very soon.”

Hearing this was certainly not good news, but there was nothing he could do about it. Warning everyone would only trouble the people, and so he decided to keep this information to himself. Pushing himself up to his feet, he placed pressure onto his leg, and when he felt good enough to stand, he turned to Lady Kaede, bowing his head to her respectively. “I’m going to finish what I started in the fields before heading home for the rest of the day, Lady Kaede. I’m sorry to have troubled you with my injury.”

“Ye are fine. Do not trouble ye-self with unnecessary thoughts,” She replied, not moving from her seated position on the floor. “Be sure to visit my hut every day so I can change ye bandages.”

Understanding, Daisuke bowed once more before pushing back the flap to her hut before exiting. The hot sun blazed upon him, and as he began his trek towards the hills, he couldn’t help but think back to his and Kaede’s conversation regarding the girl. It was strange, but perhaps, if this was true, maybe this was a blessing to their village.

As he made his way up the grassy incline, passing the many wives of the village going about their normal routine chores around the huts, Daisuke suddenly noticed a commotion up ahead. As he quickened his steps, mindful of his injury, he found himself looking down over the hill where the rice paddies were. From his line of sight, he noticed a group of people down below, shouting incriminating words at one another, but the blazing sun made it difficult to look closely.

“Can you believe Satouru is causing mischief again? The guy never learns.”
“Don’t you think we ought to tell Priestess Kaede about this?”

“Yeah … but I’m curious to see what’s going to happen next…”

Overhearing a few men talking amongst themselves behind an old fence, looking down at the rice paddies, Daisuke approached them. It seemed everyone had stopped to watch the scene play out down the hill, and no one seemed determine to put an end to it. “What’s going on over there?”

As the three older men in their earlier thirties turned at this, they smiled at Daisuke. “Oh Daisuke, you’re back? I thought for sure you would go home after getting that nasty gash.”

Daisuke leaned his body against the fence, and made a face at the men. “This little thing? Don’t insult me.”

They laughed at his reply.

“Oh look! There she goes!” One of them commented, pointing towards the rice paddies down below, and at this, his friends’ heads turned quickly.

Down the hill, they saw the feisty woman throw her fist at Mitsuki, causing the young man to fall face first into the water, damaging the stalks of rice. The two girls down below had shrieked in surprise.

“Oooh!” All three of the men made a noise of amusement, their grins widening as the scene unfolded.

“Did you see the force behind that hit?” One asked.

“Wow … what a woman! If only I were younger…” Another sighed.

The other guy couldn’t help but laugh uncontrollably, slapping his buddy beside him on the back repetitively. “He was knocked on his ass by a woman! Damn that’s sexy!”

Daisuke on the other hand wasn’t amused by the scene like the other three. As he leaned forward on the bench a little more, he raised up a hand to shield his eyes. “Is that Kagome?” He asked, squinting.

Although they weren’t knowledgeable about the girl’s name, they shrugged. Unexpectedly, they witnessed Satouru down in the rice paddies grab the girl by the back of her hair, pulling her towards his chest. Although they weren’t in earshot to know what was said between the two, they heard Kagome moments later scream for him to release her.

Aggravated by the men manhandling the child, Daisuke jumped the fence, earning surprised stares from the men who had been watching. Before he continued on his way, he stopped and turned towards the three men who were doing nothing but standing there, watching it happen. “How can you stand there and watch?” He questioned.

Somewhat ashamed, they dropped their gazes, their grins replaced by frowns. Daisuke was right, what were they doing just watching? Sure, it had been entertaining up until Satouru and his friends began playing dirty, but it wasn’t a good enough excuse for them watching.

Daisuke turned to one of the guys before him. “What if that was your daughter Suki being manhandled?”

The person in question paled at the thought. Of course, he wouldn’t like any guy manhandling his
little girl, Suki. As he looked at the two guys beside him, he turned back to Daisuke and jumped over the fence, followed after by the other two. “Alright, let’s put a stop to this.”

Ψ

Satouru laughed as he held her to his chest, his warm breath fanning her neck. As his free hand held her closely to him, he couldn’t help but breathe in her scent. Her hair smelled rather nice.

“Let me go! That hurts!” Kagome cried out, but he wouldn’t let up. She cringed when he inhaled her scent, nudging his nose into her hair. Enraged he wasn’t letting go, Kagome stomped onto his foot, which in turn caused him to lessen his hold upon her, but it wasn’t enough to get completely away from him.

“Let her go!” Aiko cried, trying to push away from Mitsuki and the others holding her back. She didn’t like this at all. Kagome did nothing wrong. Why were they treating her this way?

After having stomped onto his foot, Satouru only sneered at the struggling vixen. As he clenched tighter onto the back of her hair, bringing more pain upon the girl, he forced her onto her hands and knees. “You see this, boys? This is the position she belongs in. On her knees like a good whore.”

“I’m not a whore!” Kagome retorted. “How many times do I have to repeat myself?!”

Satouru only snickered at her remark.

Mitsuki and the other two guys, who were watching the scene in amusement, suddenly paled when they saw Daisuke and three older men approach them. At the sight of their irritation, the three stepped back fearfully.

Mitsuki tapped Satouru upon the shoulder, but Satouru was too distracted by Kagome to pay his friend any attention. “It seems we have company…”

“So, what? They can join in on the fun.” He remarked, laughing as Kagome relentlessly struggled beneath him.

Before Satouru could do any more harm to the girl, a hand reached out and grasped him by the back of his head, yanking his hair back just as roughly as he had done to Kagome. In an instant, he released his hold on Kagome and was turned half way around before he was met in the face by a strong fist.

He fell into the water, his lip bleeding from the force of the punch. As he sat up, wiping the blood away, he scowled at the person responsible. “What the hell, Daisuke!”

“I should be saying the exact same thing to you!” He replied back aggressively. “Did you not hear what Lady Kaede said about not harming this child? Or do you simply do as you please?”

He spat out a small collection of blood from his mouth and picked himself out of the water, his glare never ceasing. By this point, he noticed Kagome had quickly moved away from him, standing beside Aiko and Naomi as he and his guys were surrounded by Daisuke and his men. “I do as I please. Someone needs to teach her a lesson of respect!”

“Do you three feel the same way?” Asked one of the farmers to Satouru’s friends. “Do you feel you can do as you please to the women in this village without any consequence?”

“What exactly have you been doing to our daughters behind our backs?!?” Another bellowed, causing Mitsuki and the others to shrink back behind their leader.
Daisuke clenched his fist. “If you feel that this is of no consequence, then we have a problem…”

Although it was certain they were about to get a beating of a lifetime, Satouru never faltered. His scowl was replaced by a sickening smirk as he looked upon Daisuke’s injury and back at the fuming girl, Kagome. “I get it now. She’s caught your attention after feeling you up earlier. I heard from the other villagers how she had her hands all over your upper thigh. And here we thought you were loyal to your wife. Who knows what you and this wench have been doing while your wife isn’t around.”

As his friends shrunk back even further, this time away from their leader, gulping as the rage became more apparent on Daisuke’s face, Kagome suddenly moved. She approached Satouru, who looked on curiously with an arched brow. Not bothering to show any decency, she raised her leg, despite wearing a knee length kimono, and kicked him in the jaw.

He fell back once more into the water, but there was no laughter. No one said anything, but looked at Kagome with widened stares. It was the first time, no, the second time this woman had dealt out her own kind of punishment to those who had mistreated her.

Aiko gasped at the sight, and Naomi only sweat dropped. They were surprised because it wasn’t normal for a woman to go up against a man, but to see it happen right then, left them speechless.

Doing her best to calm her breathing, Kagome glared at Satouru. This man just sent her over the edge. This was the last straw. “I am not a wench. I am not a bitch and I am most certainly not a man stealing whore!” She seethed, her hands clenched at her sides. “I am so sick and tired of hearing all your mouths and all the crap that comes out of it about me! You make me sick! All of you are disgraces!”

“K-Kagome…” Aiko was trying to pull her away, and this time, she let Aiko pull her off to the side, away from a glowering Satouru.

At that moment, a vein was clearly visible upon Daisuke’s forehead. As he offered Kagome an apologetic look, he looked to his men beside him, huddled around Satouru and the three troublemakers. “I believe the girls have done enough for today. Why don’t you head off home early? I believe they have worked hard, right guys?” He asked his friends.

They nodded.

Daisuke motioned for the girls to leave while he settled the situation himself. “I’m pretty sure Satouru and his friends would be happy to finish what the girls have left, along with their own.”

Mitsuki couldn’t help but growl at this. “This will take the whole day!”

One of the farmers laughed. “Well I suggest you three get started then. We’re not moving from here until every last grain of rice is picked. That includes fixing the stalks you destroyed.”

The troublemakers looked in the direction he pointed, and they saw three rows of rice completely destroyed, the stalks trampled on and ripped apart due to their actions. As the three sighed, they were motioned to work immediately.

As Satouru sat there, watching Kagome and her two friends retreat from the rice paddies, he noticed the ebony haired woman stop before turning to look back at him. To his confusion and surprise, she stuck her tongue out at him and used her thumb and index finger to form the shape of an L on her forehead. Satouru didn’t understand the gesture, but he was pretty sure she insulted him.
“You’ll regret this, bitch…” He mumbled under his breath.

As the women fled up the hill away from the rice paddies, Daisuke approached Satouru, cracking his knuckles in the process. “Now what were you saying about my disloyalty towards my wife?”

Ψ

While it was obvious Daisuke was laying it on Satouru, Kagome was pleased the situation was over, but she had a feeling it wouldn’t be for long. Still, she felt awfully uncomfortable, especially after Mitsuki had groped her through her kimono. Kagome shuddered.

Aiko was walking beside her, a hand placed to her chest as she tried to calm her raging heart. The entire situation made her sick to her stomach, and the fact that Kagome had hit them twice, was enough to bring chills down her spine. “Thank goodness it’s over. I wasn’t sure how much my heart could take…”

Hearing this, Kagome softly smiled. “I felt nauseated during the entire ordeal, to be honest. I felt like a weight has slightly lifted itself off my shoulders.” It felt good fighting back, but it still left her feeling slightly irked.

“Kagome, you surprised me…”

Kagome looked at Aiko bemusedly. “What do you mean?”

How could she put this? “It’s just that, you weren’t afraid at all, and you fought back so strongly as well. Kagome you’re very different from the rest of us…”

She sweat dropped. She supposed it wasn’t normal for a girl to respond back just as violently as the guys. In this era, women mainly kept to themselves, and according to their customs, the men always came first. “I-I’m sorry. I couldn’t stand still while this was happening. I’m not going to let a guy do as he pleases to me. I deserve better than that.”

Aiko nodded. “Thank you, Kagome. Thank you for avenging me back there. It really meant a lot,” She smiled, and Kagome flushed at this, feeling slightly embarrassed.

“Oh, it was nothing, really.”

Even so, Aiko was truly grateful. When she noticed Naomi had fallen behind on their walk back to the huts, Aiko stopped, followed after by Kagome. “Are you okay, Naomi?”

The brunette with freckles nodded. “I … feel I should apologize…”

“For what?” Kagome asked.

“I selfishly stood by and did nothing to help you,” Naomi replied, her face reddening shamefully. “I only thought of myself. Forgive me. I didn’t want them to come after me later on…” She lowered her head to Kagome, her eyes closed as she awaited some form of discipline.

If that was what was bothering her, then there was no reason to apologize. “Don’t worry about it. Guys like that will never prosper. In fact, I’m glad you didn’t involve yourself, Naomi. The situation was already worse enough, and I didn’t want you dragged into it.”

She looked up at this, her expression surprised but thankful nonetheless. “Truly? Thank you!”

Kagome only waved her hands in front of her, sweat dropping at the girl as she continually bowed
her head to her. “It’s okay. Really.”

“Kagome, if you don’t mind me asking, what was the sign you did while we were leaving?” Aiko asked.

“Huh?”

Hearing this, Naomi mimicked the exact sign Kagome had used towards Satouru. She formed her fingers into an L and placed it upon her forehead as she looked at Kagome for clarification. “This sign?”

Seeing this, Kagome sweat dropped once more, before a small laugh escaped her. “Oh, that’s the sign for loser.”

“Loser?” Aiko questioned before musing upon the word. What did it mean? “I’m confused by the word…”

Kagome scratched her cheek, pondering on what word would be more easily understood. “Loser as in … an idiot. A dumb person, to be exact.”

“Oh, I see!” Aiko exclaimed, mimicking Naomi as she recreated the same sign above her own forehead, much to Kagome’s amusement. “Maybe I should start using this…”

Naomi giggled at the thought. As they continued their way into the village, the other villagers sent them strange looks, and embarrassed, the two girls quickly lowered his hands to their sides, blushing as Kagome laughed at them.

‘I hope I didn’t accidentally start the loser trend…’
Unable to remain in this village, despite Kaede's rising suspicion that Kagome was anything but ordinary, Kagome puts her plan into action and sneaks out of the village. Little did she know demons were the least of her problems that night.

Shortly after the chaotic situation within the rice paddies, Kagome and Aiko found themselves at the lake down the hill from the village. It hadn’t been long since she had last bathed, but after having been tripped into the murky water and felt up by Satouru and Mitsuki, she felt she needed to scrub every inch of herself.

Aiko remained near the edge of the waters, watching as Kagome furiously scrubbed at her porcelain skin. As her brown eyes searched the vicinity for any watchful eyes, she deduced it was just the two of them.

“Why don’t you join me?” Kagome called, but Aiko was hesitant.

“We don’t often bathe, Kagome. Once every week is enough for our humble village. We don’t exactly get the luxury to bathe like the rich, with their scented oils and perfumes,” She replied.

Kagome was sure she heard that somewhere before, but still, how could they simply bathe once a week? With her long hair, Kagome had to frequently wash at least three to four times a week, otherwise her hair was an oily mess. “I think we deserve another bath, especially after what we went through up in the rice paddies.”

Aiko pondered. What could it hurt? No one else was around to see them. As she watched Kagome scrub at her hair, Aiko decided to go for it. Removing her old kimono, folding it gently as she laid it upon the grass, she stepped into the water.

Noticing this, Kagome glanced over her shoulder, her blue eyes watching as the girl approached her, wading through the water towards her. Aiko had the body of a young teenager, her breasts much smaller than Kagome’s, yet she was just as curvy, though much slimmer.

When she settled herself into the warm water, she removed her ribbon from her hair, allowing her long strands to fall upon her back, submerged as she scrubbed gently. She couldn’t help but look at Kagome curiously, a nagging question which had burned itself into her thoughts since earlier that day. “Kagome, what is a nurse?”

Kagome blinked at this, and briefly pondered how she should tell her. Of course, the only women in this time period who were capable of healing others were normally holy women, but despite that, there were only male doctors. “A nurse is what we call … a woman who is capable of healing others, making sure that person is comfortable…”

“So, your mother is a priestess?”

“Not exactly. My mother works alongside many doctors to provide for the injured. She helps everyone no matter the age. Although I live on a family shrine, she isn’t a priestess. My
grandfather however, he lives by the words of Buddha.”

Aiko nodded, still not entirely sure what was so different between a nurse and priestess. However, she found it very odd that her mother worked alongside male doctors; the thought was entirely unheard of. “Still, I’m surprised your mother and yourself are knowledgeable in western medicine.”

“Why is that?”

“Well the practice is completely banned from Japan,” She replied. Then again, Kaede had strangely allowed Kagome to tend to Daisuke’s wound with such a method. As she looked each way, hoping no one was listening, she leaned into Kagome, her voice lowered to a whisper. “Kagome, did you come from overseas?”

“No, I was born in Japan. I’ve never gone overseas. My mother, however, did several years ago,” She replied, wondering why Aiko was trying to keep their conversation a secret.

“I see. That makes sense. Listen Kagome, I don’t think you should go around practicing…” She leaned in again to whisper. “western medicine. It’s a forbidden practice that will cost you your life, if you’re caught.”

Hearing this, Kagome’s blue eyes widened. Kagome didn’t realize what she had just done to help Daisuke could put her own life at risk. As if her life wasn’t already hell enough.

Noticing her discomfort and sudden paranoia, Aiko patted her on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. Lady Kaede won’t say anything. I’m sure she has asked Daisuke to keep quiet about this as well. So, don’t worry.”

Even so, the very thought of someone hacking off her head because she had tried to help someone left her feeling unsettled. Then again, what did it matter? Kagome wasn’t planning on staying. When night came, she would leave this village and make her way back to the place she woke up in within the forest. After everything she went through, it still felt like a dream. If she was brought here, surely there was a way to return.

Eventually after their bath, they made their way through the village, ignoring the curious stares of those passing them. It was obvious they realized the two had bathed, and although it was none of their business, it was still strange to them. Fortunately, no one said a word, continuing on their way to continue their chores.

“So Kosuke said he wanted to have lunch with you,” Aiko suddenly voiced.

She nodded. “It’s already past noon, but I haven’t seen him until this morning.”

Pausing in her trek, Aiko turned to Kagome before lowering her head apologetically. “I’m sorry, but I won’t be able to join you two during lunch. I just remembered I have to take care of some things. I hope you do not mind…”

Kagome waved her hands in front of her, shaking her head in the process. “No, it’s alright. Don’t worry about it. I’ll meet you back at the hut?”

Aiko nodded. “Yes. I shouldn’t be too long.”

With that, the young woman left Kagome as she ran off around the corner of the huts. Kagome wondered what it was the young woman had to do that caused her to run off quickly, but she didn’t linger on the thought for long.
"No, give it back!"

The sound of boyish laughter and a child crying brought Kagome out of her musings. Turning her head, she saw a small little girl, standing in a circle of four boys, crying as she reached for her small straw doll.

"Give it back! That’s mine!"

The boy snickered at her futile attempts to return it, and Kagome couldn’t help but narrow her gaze.

"Why you want it back? It’s so ugly!"

"Yeah, it’s ugly!"

From Kagome’s perspective, the boys looked at least ten years old while the little girl seemed a little younger. The girl was dressed in a pale pink cotton kimono, her long black hair pulled back in a low ponytail, with two strands of hair shortened on either side of her face. The boy, however, looked exactly like the punks who had approached her in the rice fields, only a lot younger. The sight of this, angered Kagome.

"Please, give it back! Mama made it for me!"

"Your mom’s dead! You need to grow up!"

"Yeah, grow up!"

Tears fell from her large brown eyes as the boys laughed at her. Kagome felt a slight pain within her heart when the boys had shouted about her deceased mother. How awful. How could they treat her so coldly?

Deciding to put an end to their mischief, Kagome approached them, swiping the small straw doll out of one of the troublemaker’s hands, much to their surprise. “That’s enough. That’s very heartless of you.”

The boys backed away, looking at one another as they saw the anger emanating from the older woman’s stare. Should they yell back at her? What would she do to them if they did? They weren’t naïve; they heard from some of the adults what this woman had done to the guys in rice paddies, and they weren’t sure if they should mess with her or not.

“Well?” Kagome glared, and it was enough to send the boys running off, screaming fearfully. Once they were gone, Kagome turned to the little girl, whose face was wet and red from tears. Bending down, she handed her the straw doll, and she took it happily. “Are you alright? Just ignore them. They’re jealous you have such a cool doll.”

The child sniffled, wiping her face with the sleeve of her kimono. “Thank you…”

“What’s your name? My name is Kagome.”

“Ume…” She replied softly, her head lowered timidly at the beautiful girl before her. “Mama named me after plum blossoms.”

A smile graced Kagome’s face, and she stood up, holding her hand out to the child. “It’s a beautiful name. Ume, do you want to play with me for a while?”

The little girl was surprised by this, and almost immediately a large smile spread across her face. “Yes!”
As he finished hauling in more wood for High Priestess Kaede, Kosuke leapt off the seat of his cart, wiping the sweat from his brow. By now, it was well past two in the afternoon, and still he hadn’t met up with Kagome and Aiko for lunch. Patting his oxen gently for another day of hard work, he untied the reins, leading it inside a large gated area within the village.

After which, he found himself walking around the village, carrying with him a small basket filled with delicacies he had quickly put together earlier in the day. From one end of the village to the other, his brown eyes searched high and low for the girls. During his walk, he happened upon Aiko, who was helping an elderly woman outside a hut. That’s right; if he remembered correctly, Aiko was always helping those in need around the village, especially the elderly who couldn’t get around as much.

“Afternoon, Aiko,”

Turning at her name, Aiko greeted Kosuke as she supported the older woman. “Have you finished Lady Kaede’s errands?” She asked.

“Yes. I know it’s late, but I’m about to take my lunch break…”

Aiko nodded. “I see. I’m sorry, but I won’t be joining you and Kagome. I completely forgot I had other things to do around the village.”

That was understandable. Still, he didn’t want her to go hungry during the day. As he rummaged through his small basket, he pulled out a couple rice balls, and Aiko took them gratefully. “I made plenty.”

“Thank you, Kosuke.”

“Do you happen to know where Kagome is?” He asked, looking around the area once more for any signs of the girl.

Aiko pondered. “She could be back at my hut. If she isn’t, I’m sure she is around the village some place.”

“I see.” With another nod, he waved goodbye to Aiko, before making his way towards the woman’s hut. It wasn’t too far from where he was, and he made it within a couple minutes. Knocking on the outside of the hut, he waited for a response, but there was none. Curious, he pushed back the flap and stepped inside. “Kagome?”

Strange. She wasn’t inside. His only guess was that she was somewhere outside. Surely, she wasn’t still working, especially on an empty stomach? He pressed forward again, this time searching around the fields and all throughout the village a second time, but there was still no signs of the young woman. Where had Kagome disappeared to?

Just as he was about to give up, he recognized a couple people sitting atop the hill above the village, and as he approached, walking up the incline, he recognized the taller individual as Kagome. A smile brightened his cheeks, and he called out to her. “Kagome!”

At the sound of a masculine voice calling out, Kagome whipped her head around, her gaze landing on a familiar man jogging up the hill to greet her and Ume. “Kosuke!”

After finally reaching the top, he settled down beside her and the little girl, wiping the sweat from his forehead once more. Here he thought he would never find her, but she was here all along. “I
was searching for you.”

Kagome flushed, smiling as she sweat dropped. “I’m sorry. I was spending some time with my little friend.”

At the mentioning of friend, Ume’s head perked up, and her brown eyes widened at Kagome. Friend? Did she hear right? This older woman was her friend? “Really? I’m your friend?”

Kagome nodded, patting her on the head before brushing back some loose strands out of her face. “Of course, you are.”

Curious, Kosuke leaned forward, smiling at the little dark-haired child on the other side of Kagome. She was holding tightly to her arm, eyeing him curiously. “Hello Ume. What is that?”

Lowering her large eyes to her lap, the child held up a small assortment of flowers entwined by the stems. “It’s a flower crown. Kagome made it for me…”

“It’s very pretty!” He complimented, causing the little girl to blush at his words.

“Kagome was teaching me how to make one. She said you need to gather the prettiest flowers and tie their stems together until it forms a circle,” Ume replied, holding up another flower crown to Kosuke. “See?”

Kosuke nodded. “I see! It’s amazing. I’ve never seen a flower crown before.”

Noticing the basket at his side, Kagome saw the familiar shapes of onigiri within, wrapped by seaweed. The sight practically made her mouth water. To her embarrassment, her stomach grumbled, earning a chuckle from the man beside her. Blushing, she tried to hide her embarrassment, but Kosuke only laughed.

“Please, help yourself. I’ve made plenty,” He explained, handing Kagome a couple rice balls.

Excited she was eating something other than porridge, Kagome took the rice balls from Kosuke, giving the other to Ume beside her. “Here you go, sweetie.”

Ume only blinked at the food. “For me?”

“Yes,” Kagome replied.

“Yes?” A large smile fell upon her face as she continued eying the food. It was the first time someone besides her father had offered her any food, and it looked so tasty too. “Thank you!”

She was such a cutie! From the looks of it, it seemed the little girl never had anyone else to look after her or play with for that matter. When Kagome asked about her father earlier, Ume mentioned that he was always working in the fields until sun down, and she only ever saw him briefly. It was sad to think about it, but Kagome was glad she could spend a little time with her today.

Ume’s mouth was slightly covered by small grains of rice, and with a spare handkerchief, Kagome wiped away the grains, causing the child to blush as she chewed her food.

“You are very good with children,” Kosuke remarked, and Kagome couldn’t help but smile at this. “Do you have any of your own?”

Kagome’s blue eyes widened. “Me? No, I don’t have any children.”

“Truly? I’m a little surprised to hear that,” He replied, watching her. “I take it you are unmarried?”
She nodded. “I guess it’s weird, right? It seems a lot of girls my age already have children and husbands…”

Kosuke supposed that was true. Still, a beautiful young woman such as her still single? Well it left Kosuke curious. “I’m sure you’ll find someone to start a life with.”

“Oh … well I’m not really looking to get married, at least, not any time soon,” She replied, sweat dropping.

“Really?” Either way, Kosuke was kind of glad she was still single. She was an interesting woman, very different from all the other girls out there, but that wasn’t a bad thing. “I’m sorry it’s only rice balls for lunch. I haven’t had time to fix up anything else.”

“It’s okay. I haven’t had these in so long. I’m actually glad I got to eat some. Thank you Kosuke.”

As the three sat here, taking in the scenery of the woods before them with the village behind them down the hill, Ume eventually fell asleep, her head nestled upon Kagome’s lap. As Kagome tenderly ran her hands through the child’s hair, she couldn’t help but look over at the man beside her.

Realizing he’d been staring, Kosuke looked away, doing his best to fight off his embarrassment. What should he say? “Has … the day been well for you?”

“Well … there was some happenings that put me off this morning.”

He blinked. Happenings? “Did something trouble you while you were working today?”

She nodded. “Well, let’s just say there are still some people in the village who don’t like me very well. Aiko got caught up in it, and well … I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors by now.” Kagome couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’m afraid I haven’t heard…” He replied. “Early this morning I left the village to gather firewood for Lady Kaede. I just recently returned before I went to search for you.”

“I see.”

“Are you alright?”

Kagome nodded. “I’m alright. I’m not very used to living here. To be honest, I really would like to leave and find my family, but…”

“But?”

She sighed and her shoulders slumped. “It’s just that, Lady Kaede doesn’t want me to leave. She thinks it would be better I stay here. Not to mention she has every village man keeping their eye on me, so it’s difficult for me to just leave.”

That was troublesome. Then again, he kind of understood what the old lady was doing. “Those woods are dangerous, even if they belong to our High Priestess. It’s not safe in the mornings or at night. We have been lucky so far that our village hasn’t gone under attack.”

“What do you mean, dangerous?”

“Well, there are demons out there,” He replied,

His words brought her alarm. Wait a minute, what? As she sat there, pondering his words, Kagome
recalled Kosuke explaining to her about the story of the forest. He mentioned a half demon who had tried protecting the village long ago against an evil demon. “Demons...” To be honest, Kagome had yet to see even a trace of a demon roaming around, and she wondered if there were many. “Kosuke, how come I’ve never seen any demons around the village? I’ve been here for over a week now, but I haven’t seen anything…”

“It’s probably because of Lady Kaede’s barrier.”

“Barrier?”

He nodded. “So far we have been lucky this year. Her barrier surrounds the entire village, and even demons who are far away can sense it. Sometimes we get a couple strays, but ever since she put up the barrier, our village has been rather peaceful. However, conjuring this barrier takes its toll on our High Priestess. She’s not as young as she used to be, so that means eventually our barrier will fall.”

“I see. I take it only priestesses have this sort of power?”

Kosuke nodded. “As far as I know, yes. It would be nice if we could have another priestess within our village, but I doubt that would happen. With our luck, our village won’t last long, and neither will our protection.”

“It won’t last because of the barrier?”

He shook his head. “Since our harvests have been poor this year, as well as last’s, the protection we get from Edo will eventually be stripped from us. Our Daimyo lives there, but he can’t foresee our protection for much longer if things continue worsening for us. If things continue as they are, we will no longer have a home to call home.”

That was terrible. To live in an era where there was danger around every corner, and needing to succeed in life in order to be protected seemed rather harsh. How could Kagome hope to live such a life with these people?

“Although it might seem like I’m trying escape by leaving the village days at a time, that’s not truly the case,” He admitted. “Of course, I want this village to prosper, and even if people see me as the type to slack off, I’m honestly doing more than that. During my travels, I have been searching for those with spiritual abilities to aid our village.”

Kagome furrowed he brows. “You’ve been trying your hardest to help everyone…”

He nodded. “Now a days, it seems many priestesses and monks are living within wealthy villages, especially those such as Edo. If you don’t have money, then you are turned away. I can remember a time, long ago, when they helped everyone, regardless of wealth or poverty…”

So even those kinds of people have become cruel. How was that not surprising? Sometimes life wasn’t fair.

Ψ

Sitting within her hut, Kaede found herself pondering about all that had happened earlier within the day. When Kagome had surprised her with her knowledge of Western Medicine, Kaede couldn’t help but believe she was indeed from a different line of people.

Her conversation with Daisuke regarding her supposed spiritual abilities left Kaede stumped. Was it possible she came from a line of priestesses? Kaede remembered sensing something within the
girl, yet she couldn’t make heads or tails if that something was good or bad.

“Kagome … what are ye?” There was a knock outside her hut suddenly, and already knowing who it was, Kaede beckoned them inside. “Come in.”

The sight of a young woman with long brown hair, held back by a plain black hair tie, with straight bangs covering her forehead, stepped inside the small hut. Without a moment’s pause, she lowered herself onto her knees before the High Priestess. “You called for me?”

“Sit, child.”

Doing as she was instructed, Aiko stood up and approached the elderly woman before taking a seat across from her.

“What have ye learned about her?”

For a moment, Aiko was silent, recalling all that had happened within the morning. “Kagome is a strong person and she is a lot braver than most women I’ve met. Her knowledge of certain things … confuses me, but it’s clear to me she isn’t from around here…”

It was just as Kaede thought. “Go on.”

“This afternoon, there was some trouble within the rice paddies…”

Kaede’s eyes narrowed at this. “Trouble? What sort of trouble?”

Aiko gulped, realizing she had suddenly upset the older woman, but she had to tell her. The elderly priestess had every right to know what transpired while she wasn’t looking. “Kagome and myself were confronted by Satouru and his three friends … it seems they are against her living within the village,” She explained. “I was surprised by Kagome’s sudden change in personality. She mentioned that women have every right to voice their thoughts and opinions…”

Kaede frowned at this. “I see…”

“She also said, without women, there wouldn’t be any men. Lady Kaede, I’m afraid that Kagome believes herself equal to everyone, no matter their gender or status,” Aiko replied somewhat hesitantly.

How interesting. Kagome was indeed a strange person. Where on earth did she come from? “I have never heard of such a thing. This is probably why she is so eager to leave…”

“Where do you think Kagome came from?” The young girl asked. “For her to not know about the practice being banned, and her strange manner of words, not to mention her clothing … Do you believe she came from overseas?”

Kaede wasn’t entirely sure. “I believe there is more to her story than what she lets on. Tonight, I will be speaking to her about her place in the village. If her story is deemed believable, then perhaps I can lessen her burden.”

“Forgive me for saying this, but I thought you said she wasn’t a prisoner…”

“She isn’t,” The older woman replied. “If we let this child leave now, as she is, there is no certainty of what might happen to her. Aiko, continue keeping watch over her. Ye are likely her only friend in the village, someone she can put her trust into.”
She nodded. Aiko didn’t feel right about any of this. Although it was an order to watch over Kagome, it still made her uncomfortable. Aiko didn’t want to just watch her, she wanted to just be friends with the girl, but it seemed Lady Kaede had other plans.

“Where is Kagome now?”

“With Kosuke, I believe...”

Understanding, the older woman sighed. If she was with him, then she was sure that was just fine. “Very well. Ye may leave now.”

Aiko hesitated. There was something else weighing heavily on her mind. She felt she couldn’t leave without telling her everything else. “There is one more thing … Lady Kaede.”

The High Priestess arched a brow. “What is it?”

“It’s … about Satouru…”

Ψ

Realizing two hours had flown by so quickly, Kosuke stood up, his basket at his side completely emptied of its contents. As he looked upon the darkening sky, he looked down at his side, watching as Kagome gently tried to stir the sleeping child.

“Ume? It’s time to go home,” She cooed.

Stirring from her peaceful sleep, Ume rubbed her eyes tiredly. As she looked up at the motherly figure sitting before her, Ume leaned into her warmth. “Are we leaving?”

Kagome nodded. “Yes, sweetie.”

A little disappointed by this, the child reluctantly pulled away from Kagome and stood up. With her flower crown and her doll held tightly to her chest, she took Kagome’s hand and followed the two down the hill towards the huts.

On their way, they saw many of the villagers finishing up their chores in the fields, many retiring to their homes to spend time with their families. When they neared Ume’s hut, they were welcomed to an empty home.

“Papa is still working,” Ume explained.

Kagome frowned at this. She honestly didn’t want to leave the child by herself. “When will he return?”

“Not until the moon is high in the sky,” Ume replied.

“Then would you like to stay with me until your daddy comes home?” Kagome asked.

From her elated grin, the little girl couldn’t help but jump up and down, her hand tightening around Kagome’s. “Yes!”

Then it was settled. As Kagome and Ume made their way back to Aiko’s hut, Kosuke left to inform Ume’s father that his daughter would be spending some time with a friend of his until he returned home. Kosuke did that so there would be no future misunderstanding, and afterwards, he made his way to Lady Kaede’s.
When the two girls neared the hut, they stepped inside, only to realize Aiko had yet to return. Where was she? Kagome wondered if she was truly busy throughout most of the days.

As Ume settled herself onto Kagome’s futon, Kagome couldn’t help but smile as the child played with her straw doll. She was combing her fingers through what appeared to be the doll’s hair, made from horse hair she thought. A sudden thought came to Kagome just then and she moved to approach the chest lying across the room. Aiko had mentioned her things were inside, and as she opened it, she saw her uniform folded within neatly, and her shoes tucked underneath.

A smile crept onto her face. Thank goodness, she still had her clothing. Sorting through them, she also found her school shoes as well. Everything was accounted for, and for that, she was extremely thankful. Looking back at Ume, who was distracted by her doll, Kagome turned back to the chest, and reached for her school ribbon, slipping it off her school blouse before closing the chest.

Returning to the child’s side, she bent down and handed her the blue and white pleated ribbon. “Here. For your doll.”

Her eyes lit up at the beautiful thin cloth, and as Kagome handed it to her, she took it into her small hands, eyeing the fabric as if it were out of this world. “It’s so beautiful. Where did you get it?”

“It was given to me three years ago,” She replied. Well, she couldn’t actually tell the child about her high school, now could she? In this day and age, being taught was a privilege, and only those with money could afford it. If Kagome told them the truth about herself, she would no doubt face terrible circumstances, of which she didn’t want to face. It was best to keep it a secret, for now.

As the hours passed and darkness fell upon the village, Ume had long since fallen asleep. During the time, Kagome had busied herself with cleaning up the hut. She felt she at least owed that much to the girl, especially considering she gave Kagome a roof to sleep under. However, there was still no sign of Aiko, and Kagome wondered if something happened to her.

Pushing back the flap to her hut, Kagome gazed out to the streets of the village. Small lanterns were lit here and there, but no one but the dogs and chickens wandered the paths. Was it possible Aiko was with Lady Kaede?

As she turned back inside, she saw Ume was slightly stirring in her sleep, her large brown eyes blinking as she tiredly stared at Kagome near the door. Her doll was still held protectively to her chest. “Are you ready to head home?”

Ume nodded. “Papa should be home,” She yawned, picking herself up from the futon.

With her hand held out to the small girl, Kagome exited the hut, following the same route Kosuke had led them earlier. Eventually they arrived, and to Kagome’s relief, Ume’s father was at the door looking out.

“Papa! I’m home!” Ume exclaimed, running towards her father who enveloped her with a tight hug.

From what Kagome could see in the darkness of the night, he was a rather large man, masculine in his arms, his chest and legs, with a short scruffy beard and his dark hair pulled back in a top knot.

“Thank you for looking after my child,” He thanked her.

With a respectful tilt of her head, Kagome smiled. “It was nothing. Good night Ume.”

The child waved backed. “See you tomorrow, Kagome!”
After saying her goodbyes to the child, Kagome turned and made her way back to Aiko’s hut. As she passed the stray dogs and chickens on her trek, she finally arrived at the hut. Entering inside, she sauntered across the wooden floor boards and opened the chest. Taking her shoes and uniform into her arms, she crept back out into the darkness of the night once more.

It was now or never. Even though Kaede told her yesterday she wished to continue the conversation, Kagome knew she couldn’t wait much longer. No one was watching. It was the perfect opportunity, one she might not get again.

“I’m sorry Aiko … Ume … Kosuke,” She softly muttered to herself. If she got any closer to these people, she would want to stay, and staying was not on her agenda.

As she tiptoed around the huts, careful of anyone noticing her, she suddenly pressed her back against one of the buildings, her breath caught in her throat. From the corner of her eye, she saw a man making his rounds down the street, his eyes looking each way for any signs of suspicions. From the looks of it, he was one of the men on night duty, and if he saw her, her plans would surely go to waste.

Kagome waited a long minute, watching him from the shadows of the hut she leaned against. Eventually he continued on his way, around the corner and out of sight. Relieved by this, she took one last look around the village before dashing as quickly as her legs could carry her up the hill.

As soon as her back was to the village, she descended the steep incline, past the fields until she was standing before the entrance of the woods. Her heart was drumming loudly in her ears, and she placed a hand to her chest to steady her breathing.

“Well, there are demons out there,”

Kagome remembered the words Kosuke said to her during lunch. There were demons out there in the woods, and she was sure it wasn’t as safe as it was during the day. ‘What are you doing, Kagome? Don’t let this hold you back.’

Taking a deep breath, Kagome slowly made her way forward. She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, but she tried to ignore it. The Goshinboku Tree was somewhere in the woods; if it brought her here, then surely it would take her back home. Right?

Yet as she pressed on, the distinct sounds of twigs snapping behind her brought her to a complete halt. That sinking feeling within her grew stronger, and she had every nerve to just run, but fear caused her to pause. Something or someone was behind her. Was it a demon? Maybe it was a dog? Surely it wasn’t a chicken…

But before she could ascertain just who or what it was, she was immediately grabbed from behind, a rough and calloused hand covering her mouth which prevented her from screaming. As she struggled to fight off her captor, she found it difficult to do so as her arms were pinned to her sides. To her worst fear, she was dragged into the woods, desperately kicking her legs to escape.
Evening Disturbances

Chapter Summary

Taken hostage by her kidnapper and dragged into the Forest of Inuyasha, he was only the least of her concerns. Now there was a terrifying centipede demon after her. By some mystical means, perhaps even the work of her family, Kagome returns to her world beyond the Goshinboku Tree. Maybe now, everything would fade away.

She was nervous, but she was so close to escaping. The forest was just in view, and as her long legs carried her across the fields, the more paranoid she became.

“Well, there are demons out there.”

Kagome paused, remembering the words Kosuke had said to her during lunch. There were demons out there in the woods, and she was sure it wasn’t as safe as it was during the day. ‘What are you doing, Kagome? Don’t let this hold you back.’

Taking a deep breath, Kagome slowly made her way towards the entrance of the woods. She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, but she tried to ignore it. The Goshinboku Tree was somewhere in the woods; if it brought her here, then surely it would take her back home. Right?

Yet as she pressed on, the distinct sounds of twigs snapping behind her brought her to a complete halt. That sinking feeling within her grew stronger, and she had every nerve to just run, but fear caused her to pause. Something or someone was behind her.

Was it a demon? Maybe it was a dog?

But before she could ascertain just who or what it was, she was immediately grabbed from behind, a rough and calloused hand covering her mouth which prevented her from screaming. As she struggled to fight off her captor, she found it difficult to do so as her arms were pinned to her sides. To her worst fear, she was dragged into the woods, desperately kicking her legs to escape.

Deeper and deeper into the woods she was dragged, and along the way, she had lost her straw sandals. Her feet were scratched up, bleeding as she relentlessly struggled, but this person wouldn’t release her. Multiple scenarios crossed her mind in that moment. Was she going to be killed? Was she going to be harmed in any way? What was going to happen to her?

As she was pulled deeper into the woods, Kagome felt the hairs on her arms stand up and she refused to give up her struggles. They were far from the village and Kagome kept looking back, hoping someone would save her, but there was no one. No one but the tall, looming trees around her.

Eventually her captor stopped, and Kagome quickly took that moment to bite down hard on the person’s hand. To her slight relief, the person cried out in pain, before pushing her to the ground roughly.

Kagome’s eyes widened at the familiar sound of a masculine voice, cursing at her for biting him. It couldn’t be. As she looked up at the tall man standing before her, she saw it was none other than
Satouru.

Ψ

His footsteps quickened as he ran through the village. The lanterns led him towards Lady Kaede’s hut, and as he forced his way inside, without showing the proper respect to the High Priestess seated within, he fell to his knees. Panic was etched into his face, and he cried out to the elderly woman.

“What is wrong, Tadashi?” Kaede asked, her eyes widened alarmingly as she was not expecting any one to run into her hut.

Kosuke, who was sitting across from the elderly woman, drinking a small bowl of tea, acknowledged the man warily. From the look on his face, and his heavy breathing, something must have happened. “What’s going on?”

“That girl, Kagome! She has been dragged into the Forest of Inuyasha!” Tadashi blurted.

Kaede’s eyebrows furrowed, but as she attempted to stand, Kosuke held out a hand to stop her. “Who would do such a thing?”

“S-Satouru!” The man cried out, throwing his head to the floor before the woman. “I-I saw it with my own eyes while I was patrolling around the village! I fear the worst will happen to her!”

In an instant Kosuke was on his feet and out of the hut without a moment’s pause. As he left, Kaede motioned for Tadashi to wake the men of the village immediately to begin a search party, and he left as well, leaving Kaede’s hut.

As he ran down the street, he was called after by Aiko, who was only now beginning her trek back to her hut. He only stopped briefly, telling her to go inside, but she grasped his arm in confusion.

“What’s happening? Why are you running like that?” She asked. Yet as she looked into his eyes, noticing the seriousness behind his stare, she was caught off guard when she heard the village bell ring loudly throughout the village. The bell signified that there was something wrong, either they were under attack or the situation was more complicated.

“Kagome. Satouru has dragged her into the forest,” He replied hastily before pulling his arm from Aiko’s grasp.

Aiko turned back to Kosuke, her eyes widening in alarm. “Oh my goodness!”

Although she was frightened by the situation, watching as the villagers sprang from their huts, the men gathering their farming tools in hand, she watched as Kosuke took off through the night, towards the Forest of Inuyasha.

Aiko’s face paled. It couldn’t be. While she was away, Satouru got his hands on her friend. One by one, the men of the village darted past her, and she did her best to avoid any collision with their sharp hoes and scythes.

“What am I doing...” She questioned herself. Now was not the time to stand idly by while this was happening. Without a moment to spare, she fled in the direction Kosuke ran off, her steps quickening as she reached the steep incline of the hill. Her heart drummed loudly within her chest, her pants quickening as she forced herself further. Before she knew it, she was standing before the entrance to the woods, outside the safety of the barrier.
Somewhere, deep within the darkness of the woods, Kagome was struggling to resist Satouru’s wrath. What was he going to do to her? As Aiko squinted, trying to pinpoint any silhouettes within that might seem familiar, she saw nothing but the numerous lofty trees. Her legs trembled, and although her thought process told her to move, she couldn’t; her feet were completely grounded to their spot, frozen. Aiko was frightened; she was frightened of Satouru, and she was frightened of demons.

“You… Kagome…” She cried out, but there was no answer. As she moved in place nervously, she felt something brush up against her feet. Curious, she looked down, noticing familiar clothing lying strewn upon the ground. Bending down to pick it up, Aiko recognized the clothing belonging to Kagome. “You were planning to run away…” She collapsed onto her knees.

Ψ

Kagome scooted away, her eyes widened at the man towering before her. Satouru. It was definitely that creep. From the looks of it, his cheek was slightly swollen, and he had an obvious black eye, his lip bleeding since earlier.

“You little bitch … I told you you’d pay!” He seethed, approaching her slowly. “You thought you could get away with your insolence earlier? You were wrong to think so…”

She gulped, struggling to back herself away from him. He was going to kill her. “Get away from me!” She cried out frightfully, but this only seemed to amuse him. “I’m warning you!”

When he refused to stop, she only continued backing away, yet as she moved her hands around the ground, hoping to find something to defend herself with, she felt something small and rough brush across her fingertips. Without even looking, she knew it was a rock; it was better than nothing.

“Frightened, are we?” He asked her, smirking at her retreating form. Eventually she would find herself backed into a tree, her escape entirely cut off, and then he would deal out the revenge he’d been dreaming of since that afternoon.

Without a moment’s pause, Kagome chucked the stone at Satouru’s skull, and to her relief, he stopped, holding his hands to his head achingly. With this distraction, she got up and ran for it.

Her best choice was to run back to the village; it was her best option, as much as she didn’t want to. As she ran, dodging past trees and bushes, she heard Satouru directly behind her. He just wouldn’t let up.

‘Someone will save me, right? They’ve got to!’ Her mind screamed as she looked back at the man chasing after her. “Grandpa! Mom! Anybody?! Whoever you are, please, somebody help me!” She cried out, hoping someone within the woods would hear her plea, but there was no answer. If only this were a nightmare she could wake up from at any moment, but that wasn’t the case; this was real, as unbelievable as it seemed.

“You can’t run forever, Kagome!”

As she glanced back, she saw he was gaining on her. She was scared. She wanted to return to the safety of her mother’s arms, to the safety of a locked door, anything to get away from all this.

With every twist and turn she took, she realized she wasn’t nearing the village at all. It was to her absolute horror she was most undoubtedly delving deeper into the woods, further away from anyone who could save her.

To her absolute horror, the most cliché thing happened to her at that moment; her foot snagged
itself onto a fallen log, and she tumbled onto the ground, her arms and legs scraping against some stones. Struggling to pull herself up, she was about to get back up to run, but she was grabbed from behind once more, her back pressed against his chest.

“Let me go!”

Annoyed by her persistence, Satouru pants came out heavy, his grip tight up on her. “Quit your yapping! No one can hear you!” When she refused to stop, his hold upon her became rough, warning her to stop. With one arm wrapped tightly against her waist, he used his free hand to grasp her chest, gripping her painfully.

Kagome cried out. This wasn’t happening. He was going to rape her! As much as she tried to struggle, her arms were pinned down to her sides as he fondled her disgustingly, smelling her hair in the process. “No!”

He chuckled darkly, enjoying the feel her body against his. As he fiddled with her brown kimono, he attempted to slip his hand into it to get better access to her soft flesh underneath, but Kagome made it difficult to do so.

With a hard kick to his foot, unprotected by any shoes, he cried out painfully, but his hold on her did not loosen. Instead, she was pushed down onto all fours, his body pressed up against her back. His harsh pants brushed against her ears as he nimbly tried to untie the obi around her waist, his knee pushing apart her legs to separate them.

Unable to even keep herself upright with his weight upon her, her face was pushed into the cold soil, and Kagome felt her kimono become looser on her as her obi fell onto the ground. This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t happen! But it was happening.

His hands roamed her body, slipping past her open kimono, kneading her breasts, and she cried out helplessly for him to stop, but he wouldn’t. He squeezed her breasts, while his other hand found her panties, his fingers mercilessly trying to slip in between the fabric to feel her, but her persistent struggling made it difficult.

“No! Get your hands off me, you pervert!”

A dark chuckle escaped him as he licked her neck, enjoying her gasps from his ministrations. “But your body is responding well to my touch, Kagome.”

He was a liar. His touch made her skin crawl, and she wanted so badly to vomit. He was trying his utmost to get his hands into her underwear, but she only pressed her thighs tighter together, preventing him from going any further. “Get off me!”

“No until you are completely submissive to me, bitch!”

“I’m not a b—“ Before she could say anything, he had turned her onto her back, one hand holding her arms above her head while the other reached to untie his pants. Kagome’s eyes widened, and she tried her best to get out of his grasp, but it was futile.

Kagome kicked her legs, hitting him in the sides with her knees before delivering a swift kick to his upper chest, which forced him back somewhat, but not enough for him to completely get off her. As he struggled to hold her down while attempting to remove his pants, he eventually pressed his entire weight upon her, preventing her from moving any further.

He was heavy, and she found it difficult to breathe. Yet he was leaning into her, his face nearing her own as he hoped to kiss her, but she turned her head away fearfully. Not her first kiss. Not any
To her dismay, he grasped her face roughly and her lips met his, his tongue forced into her mouth as he explored her inner and moist cavern. It was disgusting. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. Satouru wasn’t pulling away from her, and he only prolonged the kiss, but Kagome couldn’t take this any longer.

Determined to hopefully put an end to this, she bit down hard on his tongue, the taste of blood suddenly filling her own mouth. In an instant, he pushed his weight off her, still looming over her form, holding a hand to his mouth as the blood slipped from his lips.

“You fucking wench!”

His large hands found her neck suddenly, squeezing it in hopes of knocking her unconscious, but Kagome held on, trying her best to pull his hands from her neck. Relentlessly, she kicked her legs, her mouth opening to regain oxygen, but he was determined to end her here and now.

It was to her relief; her prayers had been answered. One moment Satouru was choking her, and the next, he was lying flat on his back a short distance away from her. Immediately sitting up, closing her kimono around her to hide her shame, her blue eyes looked up at the person standing before her, shielding her from harm.

“Kosuke!” He had come to her rescue, and just in time!

After having finally caught up to them, following the trail left behind by Kagome’s struggling, he almost didn’t make it in time. Yet the sight of Satouru sitting above Kagome completely set him off, and he pulled him off her, kneeing him hard in the stomach before throwing him onto the forest ground.

He was relieved she was alright, and by her appearance, it didn’t seem like she had been harmed. Kneeling at her side, her scrutinized her disheveled appearance, his hands brushing against her cheeks worryingly. “Did he touch you?”

As she fiddled with her obi, tying it around her waist as tightly as she could, she nodded to him. “I’m alright. Thank you for saving me.” However, she couldn’t stop her body from trembling at what could have happened. If he hadn’t arrived like he did, she would have suffered and quite possibly would have been killed.

Although he still wasn’t convinced, noticing the handprints around her neck where he’d choked her, he turned his glare over his shoulder, watching as Satouru grumbly tried to regain his standing. Realizing he would be on his feet within moments, Kosuke turned back to Kagome, helping her to her feet before pushing her away from the area. “Go in that direction back to the village. I’ll take care of him.”

“But Kosuke!” She cried, shaking her head disapprovingly. She was thankful he saved her, but she wouldn’t leave him out in the woods alone with this creep. There was no telling what Satouru would do to him. When she noticed the creep reach out towards Kosuke in a threatening manner, Kagome shrieked. “Watch out!”

Unable to avoid his approach, Kosuke was tossed to the ground, where he painfully fell onto sharp rocks. The stone’s rough edges pushed themselves into his flesh, and he did his best not to cry out in pain. “K–Kagome run!”

She didn’t. Instead she knelt at his side, trying her best to help him up. “I’m not leaving you
behind.”

“You should mind your own business Kosuke and stay out of my affairs! This doesn’t concern you!” Satouru growled, stepping close to the two. Since Kosuke had fallen, he turned his sights back to Kagome, who was glaring angrily at him. “Now then, where were we?”

At his approach, Kosuke regained his standing, placing himself between Kagome and Satouru. “You’ll have to go through me first!”

“Kosuke…”

Satouru’s gaze narrowed. It seemed he had lost his erection, no thanks to this bastard. Since the girl was still hanging around, he was sure he could get her again and have his way with her, but first he had to get rid of this annoyance.

“Kagome run back to the village!” Kosuke replied. “I’ll try holding him off.”

It was now clear to her what Satouru’s intentions were, and she felt nervousness in the pit of her stomach. He was going to kill Kosuke. Could she outrun him back to the village? Was it ok to leave him alone against this brute?

“Kosuke … are you sure?” She didn’t want to leave him. Everything in her gut told her to stay with him, but he wanted her to flee to safety.

“If you are away from here, I’ll be able to focus on the fight. I don’t want any more danger to fall upon you,” He replied. “Don’t worry yourself. Just hurry up.”

Nodding, Kagome quickly darted around Kosuke, narrowly missing Satouru who tried to grab her at the last minute, and as she fled through the woods, in the direction he had pointed, Kagome wondered if she should take that chance to escape from everyone entirely.

The village was just beyond the trees and as she paused on her trek half way, Kagome couldn’t help but worry about the young man who had stepped in to save her. Would he be alright?

Something told her to simply return to Kaede’s hut but the rational side of her said to go back and help the guy.

Grimacing from his place on the ground, Kosuke struggled to stand up, watching his opponent cautiously. So far, he hadn’t chased after the young girl, but he was pissed he lost his chance. Standing up, he dodged another punch, side stepping before grabbing Satouru by the waist, forcing him down onto the ground. It was difficult holding him there.

“Satouru enough! You’re a better man than this! What has gotten into you?”

He growled before kicking him off, this time pinning the young man below him. “I warned you to back off! Why should you care what I do with that wench?”

Kosuke struggled beneath him. “Don’t you understand that she deserves better than that?”

“Deserves better? The wench had it coming parading around the woods dressed like some whore! Of course, I wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity like this!”

He was an animal, and Kosuke wondered just how many women he had come to harm during his years. If Kaede knew, he would literally be kicked from the village. “Sorry to break it to you but you can’t have her!”
At this, Kosuke managed to raise his knee into the man’s gut, and as his opponent winced at the slight injury, he rolled out of the way to regain his standing, but Satouru was quick to retaliate, knocking him from his feet once more, causing Kosuke to hit the back of his head on a rock.

The injury caused him to pause, grimacing as fresh blood seeped from the wound. The sight of Satouru hovering over him urged Kosuke to back away, but his efforts proved useless when he backed into a tree.

“I’ll teach you never to interfere again!” With a raise of his arm, he hurdled his fist straight for Kosuke’s face, but the hit never came. Instead, a resounding smack was heard, the sound resonating all throughout the woods, followed after by the sound of a body falling onto the forest floor.

To Kosuke’s surprise and relief, it was Kagome. She had returned, and with a rather large tree branch in hand, she had smacked Satouru in the back of the head, and he laid there, unmoving at his feet. “Kagome…”

Her hand was held to her chest, and as she tried regaining her breathing, she stepped closer to him. “Are you okay?” She asked, chucking the branch as she bent down to help Kosuke to his feet. As he struggled to stand, Kagome noticed a trail of blood staining his clothing. From the sight of fresh blood oozing from the side of his head, she jumped back. “You’re bleeding!”

He waved it off. “I’m fine. Come.” Now wasn’t the time to be standing in the woods. He was bleeding, they both were, what with Kagome’s feet cut up during her struggles prior. If they remained any longer in these woods, he was sure the scent of their blood would bring danger upon them. “We must quickly return to the village.”

“Here, let me help you. You’re bleeding pretty badly…” She despondently replied, but he only ignored it. As she looked down at Satouru, lying unconscious before them, Kagome couldn’t help but feel her eye twitch. “What about him?”

Kosuke looked him over. As much as he would love to leave the idiot behind to be feasted upon by the demons, he knew he would eventually be overwhelmed by guilt. “We should carry him back. Lady Kaede will be informed about this matter in great detail. Whatever punishment he receives will be of no consequence to us.”

Carry him back? But how could they manager that? With Kosuke injured, Kagome knew her strength wasn’t enough to lift the man and carry him all the way without having to stop multiple times to catch their breaths and rest. She wanted to flat out leave him behind, but her better judgement got the better of her. “Fine…”

Yet as they attempted to lift him from the ground, a strange wind blew through the forest, followed after by a high-pitched growl. The wind chilled them, and they turned their heads in question at the sudden drop in temperature.

The hairs on Kosuke’s arms immediately sprang up, and his eyes cautiously searched the woods, eying the trees suspiciously. Something was out there, and that something wasn’t human. “We must go.”

She saw the fear in his eyes, the sudden rigidness in his posture as he pulled Kosuke ahead. As she glanced behind her, she thought she saw something move through the trees, but her better judgement told her to quickly follow after Kosuke. Was it a demon?

Before either of them could put any distance between themselves and the source of their alarm, a
fierce wind swept past them, knocking them off their feet entirely. Satouru’s body was flung a short distance away as the two struggled to regain their standing.

“What was that?” Kagome cried as she slowly rose to her feet, but before she could say anything more, she was immediately silenced when Kosuke raised his arm in front of her. As her eyes followed his, the sight of a horrifying creature towered before them.

Numerous black insect legs moved on their own accord, its length abnormally long for any normal sized bug Kagome had ever laid eyes upon. What made this insect even more strange was it had the torso and head of an ample breasted human woman with fair skin, her eye brows small and rounded above her wide eyes. Long black hair fell along its slithering reddened body, and its six arms held out on either side of its torso.

It couldn’t be. It was impossible! How could it be that this demon was alive once more? Kosuke backed away, his brown eyes widening fearfully at the sight of Mistress Centipede. Somehow, she had revived once more, and this time, to terrorize them.

The sight of this creature frightened her, and she couldn’t help but tremble as its body slithered this way and that, inching its way closer to the pair. “W-What is that thing?!”

“I thought I sensed incredible powers … it’s you, isn’t it?”

What was it talking about? Its voice sent chills down her spine, and Kagome couldn’t help but suddenly notice its large fangs peeking out from its mouth. That thing was a demon. Of course, it had to be a bug demon!

Not bothering to pay the creature’s words any attention, Kosuke bent down and grasped a few stones in hand, putting himself between Kagome and Mistress Centipede. “Back away demon!”

In an instant, its tail like body swung towards them, knocking him off his feet and hurdled him out of its path. The effects of its attack pushed Kagome off her feet, and she fell onto the ground, her blue eyes startled as she saw Kosuke lying a distance away from her, struggling to lift himself up.

“Kosuke!” She cried.

It turned on Kagome, lifting its body higher into the air, its multiple hands opening and closing as it hoped to fling itself at her to obtain the power from her little human body. “I must have it! I must!”

All at once, it sprang towards her, and Kagome quickly dodged the attack, falling onto her side as it passed her. Its legs barely brushed across her skin, causing her to slightly tense up.

“Kagome don’t let it touch you!” He cried out. “This monster is capable of paralyzing its victims!”

Well wasn’t that lovely? As it hurdled its body for her once more, its arms extended out to grab her, Kagome flung herself out of its path once more before jumping to her feet seconds later.

With one last look behind her, Kagome sprinted away from the beast, realizing it was following after, not at all interested in Kosuke or Satouru. ‘This demon … it’s after me!’

“Kagome!”

As she fled behind trees, and leapt over bushes, she briefly glanced back over her shoulder where Kosuke was struggling to back to his feet. “I’ll lure it away! Quick get help!” She wasn’t sure if he heard her or not, but the sounds of trees snapping behind her, toppling to the ground noisily urged
The men of the village bustled from the huts, scythes and farming tools in hand as they awaited their lady’s orders near the entrance to the forest. Kaede emerged, her aged form seated upon a brown horse, the reins held tightly in her grasp as she ushered it forward.

“We must find Kagome!” She replied, her voice loud as her eyes narrowed at the dangerous woods before her. The child was dragged there, and although she didn’t know the intentions behind it, she knew of the unspeakable dangers outside the barrier. Satouru was a fool for doing this.

Yet as she ushered the horse forward, her men following behind quickly, she sensed a demonic energy on the wind, one very familiar to her, one she remembered years before. It couldn’t be. This energy was foreboding and filled with malicious intent, the same energy belonging to a terrifying demon which perished fifty years ago.

“It can’t be … how is it possible…” Was she mistaken? No. She recognized the demonic aura all too well.

“Lady Kaede?” One of the village men called out, noticing a sudden shift in the High Priestess’s behavior.

She narrowed her gaze, her grip tightening on the reins as she ushered the horse forward into a full gallop, despite the village men protesting behind. If this creature was indeed alive, then that child’s safety was a top priority. Then again, perhaps this was what was needed to bring about the child’s full potential, the power lying dormant within her small body.

As the horse galloped around the never-ending trees, her five men following quickly behind on horseback, the remaining on foot, a fierce wind swept past them. Her horse reared its body back, shaking its head as it refused to go any further, but Kaede was persistent, nudging its sides with her feet.

“Lady Kaede, I think there might be a demon nearby!”

Kaede nodded. There surely was. “Search that way!” She ordered those on foot to search the surrounding area, and as instructed, they did just that, disappearing past the trees in search of the ebony haired girl. “We must not leave one inch of this forest unsearched! Find Kagome!”

There was a shout up ahead from one of her men, and Kaede turned at this, her heart caught in her throat. They had found something. Pulling on her reins, she pushed her horse on, those on horseback following just as quickly.

Eventually they arrived upon an area where the trees were forcibly uprooted from the ground, lying all over the small clearing, branches lying strewn here and there messily. The work was obviously that of a demon, and there was only one demon capable of doing just that.

Those on foot crowded around Kosuke, who was slightly injured from his fall mere moments ago. As he was helped to his feet, while the others assisted Satouru, who was still unconscious from his hit in the head, Kaede called out to Kosuke.

“Are ye alright? Where is Kagome? What has happened here?!”

Straining to keep himself upright with the support from the guys, he looked off in the direction Kagome had fled, the path where the trees were uprooted. “We were attacked. You spoke long ago
about a monster that once dwelled within these woods when you were a child. I believe that same monster has resurfaced! It was as fearsome as you once described!”

“It is as I feared…” She followed Kosuke’s line of sight before looking back at her men. “Get those two back to the village!”

Ψ

Kagome wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep running. Her legs were hurting from her long strides through the forest, the terrifying monster hot on her trail. It seemed no matter which direction she turned, it was determined to sink its fangs into her.

“Get back here!” It screeched.

She had to keep moving. By now she was sure Kosuke had returned to the village safely. Now the only question for her was, should she head back in that direction?

‘I just want to go home…’

Ducking under a fallen log, her legs carried her down a familiar path, one she remembered traveling over a week ago. The area was less dense, and as she pressed on, she ran past two familiar graves, her eyes widening as a sense of excitement filled her.

The graves! That meant she was almost to the tree! Just a little further; she could do that, right? As her steps quickened, Kagome briefly glanced over her shoulder, but to her astonishment, the monster was gone. For some reason, it had completely backed off, and it gave Kagome just enough time to put some distance between herself and it.

The Goshinboku tree came into sight not long after, and as she finally stood before it, her hands brushing onto the rough bark, she couldn’t stop the tears from filling her eyes. She had finally made it, back to the tree which had brought her to this hellish place.

When she finally stopped before it, Kagome raised her fists, pounding onto its rough exterior. “M-Mom … Souta … grandpa!” She cried out.

It had to work. Somehow it had to take her back home, back to her family, back to her own era. Kagome didn’t belong in this world; she didn’t understand it and she feared the monsters.

“Take me back! Take me back home!” She cried, pounding onto the tree harder, her hands scraping against the bark, but that didn’t stop her. “Please!”

To her disappointment, nothing was happening, and she found herself staring intently at the tree, looking for any signs of distortion like before. There was nothing.

“Souta! Anyone!”

Ψ

Year 1990

“Great spirit of the tree, bring Kagome back to us!”

The loud jingling of bells resonated upon the Higurashi Shrine that fateful night as the full moon was well above them, its light gleaming upon the elderly priest and his ceremonial staff.
As he stood before the great Goshinboku, his staff raised high above his head, he continued his chants. Beside him, Souta was holding a small bucket of clean water, purified since that morning by his grandfather. One after another, the boy threw water onto the bark of the tree as his grandfather circled it.

“It’s not working…” Souta muttered dismally, but his grandfather only ignored it, resuming his repetitive chants.

More over a week ago, his sister had been taken by the tree, pulled through and gone without a trace. It was the craziest thing he had ever witnessed in his life, and if he had heard of trees swallowing people, he wouldn’t have believed it.

“Great spirit of the tree, bring Kagome back to us!”

Mrs. Higurashi watched from her kitchen window as she prepared a midnight snack for the two. Since this morning, for days on end, her grandfather and her son stood before the old tree, murmuring chants and sprinkling water onto its bark in hopes of bringing back Kagome.

“How long has it been…” Mrs. Higurashi pondered this as she rinsed her hands in the sink, her eyes downcast as she thought of her daughter.

Well over a week ago, after her graduation, they had returned home to have supper and celebrate. Nothing had seemed off; Kagome was helping Souta practice with his soccer, and shortly after, that’s when she heard Kagome and Souta’s screams from the yard. Mrs. Higurashi thought nothing of it at first, but when she heard Kagome’s scream continuing, she knew something was wrong.

When she ran out the door, followed after by grandpa, she saw Souta pounding mercilessly upon the old tree, tears falling from his eyes. Her daughter was nowhere within the vicinity, and when they approached Souta, he explained that the tree had swallowed Kagome.

It was an unbelievable story, at least to anyone else who would have heard it, but she believed her son. Souta had never lied to her, and having seen the fear upon his face, she knew it had to be true.

Grandpa had been sure the tree was cursed, spouting nonsense that it was a demon, like usual. She knew better than to call the police, and she wanted to believe her daughter would return to them soon, but she was growing wary as the days dragged on. Was her daughter okay?

“Great spirit of the tree, bring Kagome back to us!”

Sighing, she returned what was left of the lunch meat and cheese back to the refrigerator and returned the bread back into the cabinet. With two plates filled with sandwiches for the two, Mrs. Higurashi set the plates onto the dining table in the living room and exited the house to join her family outside.

With the bucket completely emptied of its contents, Souta looked at his grandfather, who was already making his hundredth oscillation around the tree, his staff jingling with each swing.

“Grandpa, I think we should stop for the night.”

Lowering his staff, he looked at Souta and back at the tree. It was no use. No matter how many times he said his chants, it just wasn’t working. Perhaps he was doing something wrong? Surely he was doing everything by the book, just like his ancestors.

“Why don’t you two come in? I’ve made snacks,” Mrs. Higurashi said, standing behind the two, her hands pressed gently into the old man’s shoulders. “It’s getting cooler out. You’ll both catch cold.”
The old priest sighed, his staff lowered as he followed beside his daughter. “I just don’t understand why my chants aren’t working…”

As he watched the two slowly approach the house, Souta looked back at the tree where he had thrown the holy water. Kagome. Was she alright? Where inside the tree did she go? He was sure he hadn’t imagined the whole thing.

“Souta, come inside dear,” Mrs. Higurashi called from the porch, his grandfather beside her looking back dismally.

Looking back towards the house, he couldn’t help but release a sigh. With the bucket held loosely in his hand, he began his slow walk towards the house, but a sudden wind brushed past him and with it, he heard a voice.

“Souta! Anyone!”

Brown eyes widened at the sound, and Souta turned towards the tree behind him. That voice! He recognized it all too well. “Kagome?!” He cried out, approaching the tree suddenly, his hands gliding upon the rough bark. “Kagome! Kagome, are you there?!"

Upon seeing her son return before the tree, calling out to her daughter, Mrs. Higurashi immediately ran from the porch, her heart pounding anxiously. Did something happen? Had grandfather’s chants started to work?

“Kagome! Can you hear me?!” Souta cried out, banging his fists onto the tree repetitively. He was sure he heard her voice just now.

“Souta?” Mrs. Higurashi called, her hand pressed onto his shoulder curiously. Her eyes scanned the tree, hoping to find some sign of her daughter within in, but she didn’t see anything. “What happened?”

“Souta! Mom is that you?!”

Mrs. Higurashi’s hands flew to her mouth, her eyes widening as tears flooded her vision. Her baby girl, her baby girl was there! “Kagome! Kagome, are you alright?!”

“Sis! Where are you?!” Souta cried.

As grandpa Higurashi approached the tree, his eyes squinting past his daughter and grandson’s shoulder, he suddenly saw the tree’s bark distort, swirling before their very eyes. It had worked! His chant had finally worked!

As the family stared at this strange phenomenon, the swirling distortion suddenly showed a forest on the other side of the bark and right before their eyes, they saw Kagome. Their daughter was dressed in a ragged brown kimono, her face dirtied and her hair in tangles along her back. All in all, she was there before their very eyes, and she was alive.

Ψ

Kagome’s eyes widened, and she pushed herself closer to the tree, feeling the familiar rippling effects before her, but she couldn’t seem to push herself into the bark to return home. “Mom! Souta! Grandpa!” Tears fell from her eyes.

“Kagome, where are you?” Souta asked, looking past Kagome at the strange woods behind her.
As she wiped at her tears, she couldn’t help but cautiously look back, hoping there were no signs of that centipede monster. Thankful the area around her was peaceful, she turned back to her family. “I know this sounds unbelievable … but I think the tree took me back in time. I’m in the Feudal Era.”

“The Feudal Era? How is that even possible?” Grandpa asked, eyeing the tree warily. He never knew this old thing had such powers. Perhaps it really was demonic. “Don’t worry Kagome. We’ll get you out of there!”

Her hands pressed against the hard bark, but she couldn’t fight off the tears from falling. She could finally see her family again, and they were so close yet so far from her.

“Demon, bring back my granddaughter!” The old man bellowed, raising his staff before the Goshinboku expectantly. “With the power of my staff, I command you to bring Kagome back!”

“Don’t cry, honey,” Mrs. Higurashi said soothingly, touching the bark as she looked upon her crying daughter. “We’ll get you back.”

“Mom…” Her shoulders trembled, and she wanted so badly to hug her family again. “This world is awful…”

As grandpa continued his chants, more aggressively this time, Souta couldn’t help put hit the bark with his fist once more, not caring if his knuckles bled. Despite his mother’s worry, she didn’t stop him. To his relief, the area around his hand felt like liquid and it slipped through onto the other side. It worked!

When his hand slipped through the bark somehow, Kagome’s eyes widened at the sight. The tree was once again allowing someone to passage through, and she realized this was probably her final chance returning home.

“Sis, my hand! Take it!”

He didn’t have to ask her twice. She reached for his hand, and grasping tightly onto her, he pulled with all his strength, managing to partially bring her wrist on the other side of the tree. So far it was working, but his strength alone wasn’t enough.

To Souta’s relief, his mother joined in while grandpa continued his chanting, believing that by doing so would keep the portal open longer to bring Kagome back entirely. As the two struggled to pull, something unexpected happened and a strange jolt of electricity pushed them apart.

Falling back onto her rump, Kagome looked up at the tree, her family on the other side just as surprised. It was as if there was a barrier keeping her from returning home.

Souta almost cursed, his fists banging onto the bark once more. “What happened?!”

“A barrier?” Mrs. Higurashi asked.

As perplexing as it seemed, grandpa didn’t give up, and he felt sweat accumulate upon his forehead, dripping down the sides of his face as he waved around his staff. Eventually, exhaustion overwhelmed him and he lowered it.

Something on the other side of the portal caught Souta’s attention. It was fast, its enormous body slithering just behind his sister, its hands reaching out towards Kagome. “Sis, behind you!”

She turned suddenly, witnessing a few trees toppling over beside her, and she saw the towering
form of the centipede before her, its fangs glistening in the moonlight.

“I must have it! I must!” The demon bellowed.

Upon seeing the entire form of Mistress Centipede, the Higurashi Family nearly shrieked at the sight. It was a terrifying creature, the likes of which they had only heard of in grandpa’s stories. “What the heck is that thing?!” Souta cried.

“Demon begone!” Grandpa showed, waving his staff before the tree, but his efforts were futile.

This wasn’t happening. As she warily watched it, she turned back to the tree, her face streaked with tears as she banged her fists onto the bark. The tree had to take her back. It just had to! “Please, take me back! Take me back home!”

As Mistress Centipede began closing in behind the young girl, her family watching in horror, grandpa pushed Souta of the way and forced his fist into the bark of the tree, the bark distorting around his entire wrist. When he did this, his hand reappeared on the other side with his staff held out to his granddaughter.

Kagome gasped, recognizing the golden and elaborate staff mainly used in ceremonies. The look on her grandpa’s face told her it was her battle to win against. Without a second thought, she took the staff from his outstretched hand and turned as quickly as she could towards the centipede demon.

“Give me the sacred jewel!”

“Stop it!” She cried, pushing the staff towards the approaching demon.

As the demon opened its arms to grab onto the girl, a sudden gust of wind propelled itself from the staff, and the centipede fell back, its entire body collapsing onto the ground.

Though her eyes were closed when this happened, the young girl couldn’t help but open her eyes, gasping when she saw the demon sprawled out on the ground, its three arms ripped from its torso. Had the staff injured it?

“How did that happen?”

Her family was left speechless at the sight, and her grandpa couldn’t help but rejoice in a celebratory dance. Unfortunately, the situation between the demon and Kagome was far from over.

It’s eyes suddenly shot open, bleeding red as its true form emerged. Kagome fell back at the sight of its sudden transformation. Its once porcelain skin had unexpectedly shed itself before her very eyes, revealing blotchy reddish-purple flesh underneath. Its appearance was more demonic and frightening than before.

It wasn’t over yet! She held the staff before her in defense, her legs spread apart as she prepared to leap out of the way if it should jump at her. But it was merely staring at her, its body convulsing as heaved before her. There was a hungry thirst in its eyes, and Kagome stepped away.

It was going to eat her, she was sure of it. Swallowing her fear, she held the staff tightly before her, aiming it at the beast. “I’m not afraid of you!”

Mistress Centipede moved suddenly and her movements were so fast, its entire body had wrapped itself around Kagome tightly. It was done playing cat and mouse with its victim, and it approached her form, its teeth prepared to sink into her flesh where it sensed the power.
“It’s crushing me…” Kagome gritted her teeth, her arms bound at her sides as it’s disgusting body tightened around her. She couldn’t move. Any tighter and she was sure her bones would break.

How strange, even as its body constricted around the human, for some reason she was not affected by its paralysis. Inside her, or more precisely, it sensed the Shikon No Tama, a Jewel once said to exist years ago. It had resurfaced, and it was within the human’s chest, shining brightly before its very eyes.

With that power, it could become whole once more and more powerful! It leaned into her, its fangs inching closer to the child. Yet even as it approached the girl, Mistress Centipede couldn’t help but hear mysterious screams somewhere within the woods calling out for it to stop. Wherever those voices were coming from, it paid it no attention.

“L-let … go! Let go of me!”

Without any warning, a sudden burst of blue energy radiated off the girl. The light was so bright and intense, it blinded the demon, burning its flesh with an incredible amount of power.

Releasing its hold on the girl, it slithered away, covering its face with one of its arms agonizingly.

“It hurts! It hurts!”

As Kagome fell onto the ground, scraping her arm and legs from her fall, she achingly pushed herself onto her hands and knees and looked back briefly at the monster. The demon collided dangerously against the trees of the woods, its elongated body swiping this way and that as it shrieked.

“Kagome!” Souta cried out suddenly.

Looking back, Kagome saw that his hand had once again forced itself through the bark of the tree, and determined to try once more, she leapt to her feet and reached out.

An arrow, blessed with spiritual powers, suddenly soared past the girl, its aim directed at the beast. As Kagome grabbed onto Souta’s hand, unaware of the arrow, a blinding pink light lit up the woods behind her suddenly. Witnessing the bright light, Mrs. Higurashi, Souta and Grandpa pulled with all their might, and with their strength combined, they finally broke through the barrier.

Propelled through the barrier of the Goshinboku, the momentum behind her fall forced Mrs. Higurashi and Kagome onto the ground, her daughter held tightly in her arms. It had worked!

“Mom!” She cried, hugging her mother just as tightly.

“Kagome! Are you alright?” Mrs. Higurashi asked, pulling away to smooth back her daughter’s tangled hair. There was dirt all over her baby’s face, and on closer inspection, she noticed a trail of dried blood at her bottom lip. Had someone hit her?

Before Souta could jump for joy and embrace his sister, something smacked him in the back, and he turned questionably. Looking down at his feet, he fell back onto his butt at the sight of the demon’s head lying upon the ground, its bleeding red eyes gazing back at him unmoving. “Ahh!”

Upon seeing this, Mrs. Higurashi held her daughter tightly in her arms, gasping at the sight. Grandpa was fast, and reaching for the staff at Kagome’s side, he picked it up and slammed its non-decorative base at the head of the foul beast.

In an instant, its head suddenly disintegrated, its ashes returning back into the bark of the tree, back to that terrifying world. Believing his priest powers were still just as great as they were years ago,
he turned to his family, his chest puffed outwards proudly.

As the boy looked at his grandfather in amazement, he saw the distortion upon the bark of the tree suddenly close. It was as if there hadn’t been a portal there to begin with. “Whoa. Gramps you did it!”

“Of course! I told you we would bring Kagome back. It takes a rigorous amount of time and effort, Souta,” He preached, and the child couldn’t help but smile brightly.

Since the Goshinboku tree had returned to normal, and the fact that she was back home with her family, Kagome could do nothing more but let her tears fall. It was like she had woken up from a bad nightmare, but the memories and the bruises remained.

“It’s alright Kagome … You’re safe now,” Her mother soothed, rubbing her back softly.
The Legendary Bandit

Chapter Summary

The treasure hidden deep within Spirit World, five hundred years before the events of YuYuHakusho, is revealed to have a connection to the world Kagome transcended. A well renowned thief steals into the fortitude to steal the treasure, and surprisingly enough, manages to escape his bounty to the Feudal World along with his band of thieves.

500 Years Ago

Becoming a Lord required both power and wealth, and in order to obtain these two things, they settled for thievery, becoming one of the most notorious bandits of the Makai. Their kind was feared for centuries on end, and it wasn't surprising a handsome reward awaited those who were brave and strong enough to take their heads. None prevailed, however, and they made their name known across the lands, bringing trepidation to the hearts and eyes of powerful leaders.

Descended from a lineage of Silver Kitsune, the last survivor of his clan, his power far surpassed that of many upper-class Youkai. Banded together with a group of rogue and terrifying men, he made a name for himself among the Makai, establishing himself as the Alpha of the pack.

Youko Kurama. Better known as the Legendary Fox Youkai, a ruthless killer who preyed upon the weak, establishing his dominance upon all who stood in his path. Riches consumed his thoughts, and with their powers combined, they desecrated village after village, working their way up to strongholds and palaces.

One such palace stood before them under the glistening full moon of Spirit World, a world that harbored the existence of all three worlds. The grandeur of the palace gleamed in the midst of the River Styx, its fortitude extended high up in the skies, protected at all sides by expert Youkai they had yet to approach.

Approaching the castle head on would bring forth a challenge to the thieves, and preferring stealth above all else, Youko went on ahead of his group. With less numbers, there would be less of a distraction and it would make breaking inside the fortitude much easier. He was followed after by his most trusted companion, choosing to fly in the shadows of the night while the others remained outside, hidden by the shadows of the foliage.

Ψ

The ruler in charge of overseeing the protection of all three worlds, was Prince Koenma, the son of Great King Enma of the Spirit World. Tasked with the duty at hand, his entire being was challenged endlessly, foreseeing that the balance within all worlds remained at peace and never straying.

Sitting within a large ornate room, the ceiling a vibrant teal color and the walls a light shade of blue, marble pillars at every section of his office, Prince Koenma’s eyes fell upon his three
monitors before him. Each monitor depicted the signs of life within each of the three worlds before him.

The first was the Human World, a world where all mortals reined supremacy among the other, challenging those of higher power with actions of war, wealth and prestige. The world was void of any Youkai, though there were the occasional few accidents where lesser Youkai would somehow escape into the world, though they were apprehended just as quickly as they descended into forbidden territory.

The Second monitor displayed the Sengoku Jidai, or more commonly referred to as The Feudal Era, a world forever frozen in a timeline of feudalism, a world in which both humans and Youkai coexisted, though not on friendly terms. Unlike the Human World, which was forever progressing with its knowledge and evolving throughout the centuries, the Sengoku Jidai, however, would remain in its dormant state forever. This world fascinated the young prince, and through his reports and many findings within books upon the world, he became aware of great priestesses and powerful Youkai through its legends, far different than those belonging in the Makai. The Sengoku Jidai was a world that possessed lower leveled Youkai, however, they were just as terrifying as those in the Makai.

Often, he found himself reclining back in his office chair, looking through old text which once belonged in the world. How interesting life was back then, and if he could, he would love to travel there, but doing so would most likely disrupt the flow of time and confuse the citizens of that era. Although he had never been to all three worlds, all he could do was watch through his monitors and read through all reports governing those worlds.

The last monitor displayed a hellish red sky overhead, barren wastelands, mountainous regions, forests which never ended and deserts as far as the eye could see. That world was inhabited by the most powerful and fearsome Youkai ever created, and it was home to lesser Youkai, those of a kinder nature often terrorized by the darkness of the Makai.

Between the Human world and the Makai, Prince Koenma was always watching, waiting for any sort of disruption to surface. The Youkai in the Makai were ill tempered, crazed and knowledgeable of the Spirit World, their technology slowly advancing in a more sophisticated way than that of the Human World, and it was slowly beginning to bring fear into the eyes of those in the Spirit World.

Should their technology surpass that of Spirit World, then the protection of all three worlds would fall into catastrophe. While his father was constantly away on business, Koenma feared for the safety of his people, knowing one day, when his father was away, something dreadful would conspire against him. It was bound to happen, and at any given time. There was only so much the young prince could do with his supremacy.

A headache was forming, and he rubbed his temples achingly. For days on end, things were peaceful, and as surprising as it seemed, even the Makai was peaceful. Despite the constant threats of war within the Human World, which was nothing to be surprised about, he couldn’t help but stare at his monitor towards the hellish red skies of the Makai.

Something wasn’t right. Why was it so quiet? Why were his reports regarding that world minimal these days? Koenma was far used to numerous stacks of paper atop his desk, but these past weeks there was hardly anything worth mentioning. Peaceful within the Makai? Impossible.

He sat back in his chair, sighing. In all honesty, he was bored. Nothing was happening, and of course that was always nice, but for some reason, he couldn’t seem to wrap his brain around it. While there was nothing normally happening within the Sengoku Jidai, he couldn’t help but look at
that particular monitor, hoping to find some sort of entertainment on the other side. As he flipped through each camera to that world, he only saw common village people working in their fields, Youkai terrorizing them here and there, but there wasn’t much to note. That’s why he liked the Sengoku Jidai; it was more peaceful than the other two worlds, and he was glad it would remain that way for eternity.

The sight of lightening lighting up the dark clouds of Spirit World outside his window took his eyes away from the monitors. It seemed another storm was approaching. Soon rain fell from the Heavens, and he watched the storm through his window near his desk tiredly.

Deciding to turn off the monitors for now, he leaned himself onto his large desk, his small hands holding his head tiredly. Perhaps if he rested his eyes, he would focus better on the few remaining reports. Yet as the thunder clashed outside and the rain fell heavily, Koenma’s eyelids closed.

He was so close to falling into slumber, when suddenly an ear-piercing noise sounded in his office unexpectedly. His head popped up at this, and he turned in his office chair, his large brown eyes darting around fearfully and somewhat angered at his disturbance.

“What was that?!” He asked aloud.

The doors leading into his office burst open suddenly, the shrill screeching of the castle alarms resonating all through his palace became much louder and deafening. Jorge was at his door, a tall Ogre Youkai who acted as Koenma’s assistant. He was an ordinary sized blue ogre with a single small horn protruding from his forehead, his long balding blonde hair lying over his shoulders messily and a brown loin cloth concealing his nether regions. In an instant, the Ogre was at his side, his dark eyes wide with fright.

“What it is Ogre? Why are the alarms going off?!” Koenma asked, his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Thieves have entered the palace, sir!” Jorge exclaimed frightfully, palming his hands nervously before the young prince.

Ψ

Their strides were quick; it was far easier than they expected to sneak inside, however, as anticipated, the alarms of the Spirit World sounded deafeningly in their ears. Their task was simple, steal something most precious from the little brat ruling this world and make their escape.

It wasn’t long until the two Youkai stood within a large open area of the fortitude, the white glossy tiled floors beneath their feet and large pillars stretching immensely high towards the ceiling, the glass above displaying the darkened skies and lightening outside. The inside was just as breathtaking as it was outside, its grandeur perking the fox’s curious interest to pillage the entire palace inside and out.

The glint in Youko’s eyes didn’t go unnoticed by the Kumori beside him smirking knowingly. As his dark indigo eyes scanned the large ornate room, he turned back to the fox. “Where should we start first, Youko?”

He mused, his arms crossed as his amber eyes shifted around the room. What they were searching for it lied deep inside the palace, most likely protected with various traps. Judging by the mere size, it would take them some time to pinpoint the treasure’s source, and time wasn’t exactly on their side. “Don’t bother wasting time with the small rooms before us. It’s unlikely something so
precious would be left wide in the open.”

Understanding, the two shared a knowing stare briefly before once again taking off in long strides throughout the palace, avoiding the eyes of the guards running through the corridors. Their passage through the fortitude was rather long, and yet the guards had yet to pin point their exact location. As they avoided numerous rooms, avoiding the cameras rotating at every corner of the palace, jumping from one platform to the other of the multiple floors where business Ogres fearfully ran in disorder, they eventually came upon a short passage, one which diverged in multiple directions beyond the maximum security.

Youko sniffed the air, his knowing grin broadening at the scent, one which he was sure had reached Kuronue as well. “We are close.”

The doors leading into Koenma’s office suddenly burst open, and a young blue haired woman wearing a pink kimono stepped inside, her wide amethyst eyes widening fearfully. The office was empty, and from her perspective, the young prince was nowhere within the vicinity.

“Koenma, sir!” She called, hoping to catch sight of him somewhere, but after a moment’s pause, she realized he was not there. Worryingly, she was about to turn back towards the doors when something moved from the corner of her peripheral vision.

A certain blue skinned Ogre with blonde hair suddenly poked him head up from behind Koenma’s desk, his eyes squinted towards the doors where the ferry woman stood. Delighted it wasn’t a Youkai who sought to end his very existence, Jorge smiled at the woman before looking down under the desk. “Koenma, sir, it’s only Botan!”

Furthering her approach into his office, Botan stepped around the work desk, only to bend down noticing the young prince underneath, his head covered by his little hands as he quaked in fear. “Sir, are you alright?”

For a moment, he only turned his head to acknowledge her, before eventually pulling himself out from under his desk. After picking himself up shakily to his feet, he pointed his finger at the monitor, his eyes fearfully looking at Botan.

Blinking confusedly, the Grim Reaper turned her eyes towards one of the monitors beside the desk, and looking closely, she saw a terrifying sight. Two Youkai had managed to slip within the palace, and judging by Koenma’s behavior, she had a feeling these weren’t just ordinary thieves.

“No wonder the Makai has been so quiet as of late!” Koenma’s voice shook. “The Makai’s most terrorizing Youkai has slipped past our security!”

“How, Sir?” Botan asked, rewinding the footage to get a better glimpse of the two individuals. How was it possible Youkai had gotten into the Spirit World? As she paused the video a few seconds later, she squinted her eyes at the screen. The blue haired woman made out two men, their hair long about their back and they were dressed in roguish clothing, similar to bandits she’d seen in photos through the reports.

“Youko Kurama,” Koenma replied, causing the woman to turn in surprise.

Botan gasped, her eyes widening frighteningly at the name. How was it possible he was within the Spirit World? What did he want? “Sir…”

Koenma didn’t know what he was after either, only that it meant trouble. He was much too afraid
to step foot outside his office, and he was sure his guards were doing everything in their power to secure the palace and track down the thief and his companion. “I’m sure he plans to end my life.”

“For what reason?” Botan asked.

He looked up at her, as if it wasn’t already obvious. “Why else would a Youkai with such power swoop right into the Spirit World? I’m sure he hopes to seize control, just like any other from the Makai!” He shouted before holding his head dismally. “If my father finds out about this, I’ll never live to see the sun again…” Unless Youko Kurama killed him before his father had the chance.

Noticing the distraught expression upon his superior’s face, Jorge knelt down beside the toddler and placed his large hands upon his shoulders soothingly. “Don’t worry, sir. I’ll protect you with my life! There’s no way we’ll let that happen!”

“But why would he come here of all places…” Botan muttered to herself, not sure if she believed Koenma’s worries. From her understanding, Youko Kurama was a ruthless bandit who sought after the most prized treasure any one could lay their hands upon. If he’s come to the Spirit World, then surely, he must be after their most prized…

Botan’s eyes widened alarmingly. It couldn’t be. Was he after that, of all things? If he was, then it made perfect sense. She turned towards her boss, her eyes wide with anxiety. There was only a matter of time before they reached the room securing their most precious treasure.

In an instant, the blue haired woman ran from the room, causing both Jorge and Koenma to look on confused as the double doors closed loudly behind her.

Ψ

No later than they arrived, Youko and Kuronue found themselves within a large chamber deep within the fortitude. The scent permeating from within filled the two with a thrilling sensation, the power flooding from the three floating orbs lying in the middle of the room.

As they approached, taking their time to access the room warily, they realized it was completely void of any others. The sight of the orbs became clearer as they approached, and once they stood within a few feet of them, they looked upon them with anticipation.

An illuminous light was enwrapped around each of the three orbs, glowing various colors of Red, Blue and Yellow, and within the center of them, darkness settled itself, swirling ominously. There was nothing surrounding them, merely an invisible barrier which Youko had sensed when they first arrived into the room.

Kuronue looked on curiously, placing his hands upon his hips as he scrutinized the treasure Spirit World guarded. “So, which one is it?”

Youko chuckled, his amber eyes landing on the Yellow orb before them. He could smell the scent of Youkai and humans emanating off its power, and he was sure it led into one of the three worlds.

Following his companion’s gaze, Kuronue accessed that particular orb, before looking back at Youko, his arms crossed. “If we take this, we can finally escape Spirit World’s hunters? Wouldn’t they pursue us within that world as well?”

Youko chuckled. “While the Makai was indeed a world reining of supreme Youkai, there is no doubt the bounty placed on our heads has increased dramatically within the days. Then again, I’ve grown quite bored teasing the Youkai…”
Kuronue smirked, shaking his head at his companion. “Of course, you would say that,” He laughed. “This world is inhabited by both humans and Youkai … I’m surprised, Youko,”

“And why is that?” He arched a silver brow.

“You have decided to escape to such a world, knowing full well it doesn’t compare at all to that of the Makai. Then again, what other option do we have? You’ll soon be living amongst the humans and weaker level Youkai.”

Indeed, that was very true. “Don’t forget our motives, Kuronue.”

The Kumori only nodded before extending his hand into the barrier, watching amusedly as the electricity zapped at his arms. It stung somewhat, but he managed to grasp the orb very carefully within his grasp, its mere weight a lot lighter than he first anticipated. “I’m surprised by how easy this was…”

Youko’s ears shifted atop his head, and he craned his neck towards the double doors above the staircase leading towards the exit. Kuronue’s eyes followed after catching a familiar scent on the other side, and not bothering to run, they merely watched as the doors swung open.

The S.D.F., an elite class of powerful Youkai who were responsible for securing the boundaries of Spirit World, as well as monitoring all Youkai from the three worlds, fled into the room. Their black gloved hands were extended outwards towards the two Youkai below the steps, their fingers glowing a white hue.

Youko and Kuronue recognized the nine fighters as the hunters that routinely sought them out during their risky endeavors within the Makai. Each member possessed incredible levels of powers, yet they knew they didn’t stand a chance against S class Youkai, such as themselves.

The S.D.F. acted as a military group for The Great King Enma of Spirit World, performing their duties tirelessly in all the three worlds. There was never a moment when their charade let up. The nine hunters wore identical uniforms, such as multi-colored bluish gray vests baring the red emblem of Spirit World, with black shoulder and elbow pads, worn over long-sleeved white shirts and loose-fitting gray pants. These hunters were a force sometimes worth avoiding, and Youko was close to finding their existence rather bothersome.

And yet, as they silently scrutinized the nine members of Spirit World Security, they couldn’t help but notice a woman in a pink kimono push herself through the crowd of hunters, her finger pointed directly at them aggressively. Her amethyst eyes heatedly glared in a fiery determination at the two thieves. “Stop right there!”

Author Notice:

If there was one thing I wanted to change in this fanfiction, it was the Feudal Era. According to Koenma, there are three treasured orbs kept safe within Spirit World: The Human World, The Makai and the Sengoku Jidai. The Sengoku Jidai is a world which remains frozen in time, and is not correspondent with the Human World whatsoever; it's a world of its own and will never evolve over time; it was a gift to Koenma from his father. I named the orb Sengoku Jidai, even though it's not technically an era, perhaps the correct term would be Warring States World, Feudal World, or something like that, but for the story, I'll likely leave it as it is.
However, for Kagome's perspective, she wouldn't know that she is in a world that's constantly frozen in time, repeating it's histories over in a loop. She would think she went back in time, which, in a sense, she did, but she's not in the human world any longer. The Goshinboku acted as a portal, in a mystifying way and led her into this other world. So, forget the well, since it's used so much in fanfiction; I thought this might be an interesting change. So, according to Kagome, this is the Feudal Era, even though technically that's incorrect. :P Hope no one is confused about that.
Kagome's Decision

Chapter Summary

A premonition warns Kagome of something terrible soon to come, and when she notices the Goshinboku Tree glimmering in the night, she comes to a risky and terrifying decision.

Year 1990

July 10th

It was like a dream to her, one which she thought she wouldn’t awaken from. No, it was more like a nightmare. The people, well some had treated her kindly, but the majority over all, left Kagome feeling rather unpleasant. Yet after everything that had transpired over her long week’s stay in the Feudal Era, Kagome was back home, back where she belonged.

Since her return, she learned her family had tried all they could to bring her back. Grandpa had gone completely into his priest ritual mode to purify the Goshinboku of its wickedness, praying for her safe return, and Kagome wondered if it was indeed his powers which transcended hundreds of years through the Higurashi Family.

Then again, Kagome couldn’t help but wonder why it happened and how it was even possible. How had the Goshinboku opened up a portal to a world several hundred years into the past? Was it the work of Kami? Was it something supernatural? If she could, she would believe it was nothing but a dream, something she thought up in her imagination, but Kagome knew better. Of all things, it had to be her tree on her family’s property, especially happening on the day of her graduation.

It didn’t make sense. None of it.

It’s been a month now since her return. She’d spent ten days within the Sengoku Era, ten painful and tiring days scorned and berated by the people. The bruises she had accumulated in the past had already healed, yet she still had the small scars on her feet during the many hours of farming in those endless fields, not to mention she lost her straw sandals somewhere in the woods after escaping that Youkai.

But despite that, Kagome felt weird ever since returning. All that she had suffered within the past, especially the things that might have happened to her, changed her way of thinking. She felt strange, and she felt a lot more cautious than ever before. Not once had she stepped near the Goshinboku tree in her yard; she feared it might send her back in time once again.

Ever so comforting, her mother had done her best to ease Kagome’s distress, and as the days passed, she felt the past become slightly more distant from her memory. If anything, she wished she didn’t remember any of it.

Yet, an interesting turn of events happened after her return; her brother Souta, had rigorously become interested in reading more into the history of the Higurashi family. Books upon books,
grandpa laid out for him, pulling them out from the confines of the deepest part of the shed, the old scrolls yellowed with age, but still legible even many centuries.

Kagome wasn’t sure why her younger brother became so interested, even after the terrifying ordeal she went through, but she only hoped it wouldn’t distract him from his friends or his classes. Kagome on the other hand focused her time spent with her mother, helping out around the shrine as well as searching for a job to ease her distractions and help her family.

Ψ

A sigh escaped Kagome, her thoughts returning back to her tiring days in the Warring States Era. Even after one month back home, she still couldn’t rid her thoughts of it and all that happened. The Youkai … Kosuke, High Priestess Kaede, Aiko and even the little girl Ume; they were constantly in her thoughts, and one person in particular she placed to the back of her memory; the mere mentioning of his name made her shiver with repulse.

“Kagome? Earth to Kagome? Are you still with us?”

Yuka’s hand waved in front of the ebony haired girl’s face, and returning back to reality, Kagome blinked at her three friends sitting with her at the restaurant. What? They were all looking at her, confusion etched upon their faces.

“Whoa, where were you at just now?” Eri asked, smiling at Kagome as she sipped her glass of tea. She flushed, embarrassed she hadn’t been listening, and quickly apologized. “Sorry. I’ve had a lot on my mind recently.”

While Ayame was obviously confused by this, Yuka and Eri on the other hand couldn’t help but slyly smirk at her, their thoughts entirely focused on one question, one which left Kagome sweat dropping.

“Oh really?” Yuka inquired, her hands pausing before her salad. She leaned forward on her elbows, looking at Kagome closely. “Kagome, have you been seeing a guy these days?”

“Huh?” Where did that question come from? Well it wasn’t really a guy so to say, but Kagome couldn’t exactly tell them she somehow managed to time travel through her tree in her yard; they’d think she was nuts and possibly urge her family to seek professional help. “N-no, it’s not like that…”

Eri didn’t believe her. “Then why is your face so red? Huh?”

Her face was red? Was she blushing? Kagome almost had a notion to reach for her pocket mirror in her skinny jeans to take a look, but noticing her three friends suddenly smiling at her from the table, she realized her face did feel a bit warm.

Upon seeing this, Yuka smirked. “You are definitely hiding something from us. Spill it, Kagome.”

“Yeah. Who’s this guy you’ve been seeing?” Eri also questioned.

“W-What makes you think there’s a guy involved? Besides, I haven’t had time to date since graduation ended and besi—“ Kagome was cut off.

“Excuses. Don’t try to talk your way out of this one, Kagome,” Eri interjected. “A lot of things can happen after graduation, and we haven’t seen each other in a month, but there is definitely something going on. We know you too well, Kagome.”
“So, fess up, or we’ll get it out of you one way or another,” Yuka replied back.

Well this certainly took a turning point. What would she say to them? Of course, she couldn’t tell them about the Feudal Era, but, Kagome supposed there was someone that definitely warmed her thoughts.

Somewhat timidly, Kagome took a sip of her drink through her straw, her eyes doing their best to avoid the stares of her three friends. The more she thought about it, the more embarrassed she felt, and yet, she couldn’t help but smile. “Well … there is someone…”

“I knew it!” Yuka and Eri exclaimed loudly from their seats across from her. When they noticed the curious stares from the others in the restaurant, turning their heads in their direction, their faces reddened slightly, but their attention remained focused on their best friend.

“So … when did you two meet?” Yuka inquired, her hand now positioned under her chin, her salad completely forgotten in front of her.

“What’s he like?” Eri asked, talking in between mouthfuls of her food steaming before her.

Ayame, who was seated beside Kagome this entire time, looked at her almost endearingly, her eyes alit with wonder. “You have to tell us all about him, Kagome.”

Kagome couldn’t help but sweat drop at their enthusiasm and awaiting response from her. “Uh … well … I haven’t known him for very long. It was … kind of by coincidence that I met him…”

Was coincidence the right term for how they met?


Kagome fiddled with her half empty glass, swishing its contents and ice cubes around awkwardly. “Um … he … his car lost a tire on the road. I happened to be nearby when it happened when my mother and I were out shopping.” Lies. Lies. Lies. It was all she could really manage to say without bringing confusion to her three friends. “I helped him out as best as I could.”

“Oh, well … it was raining,” Kagome replied, a little more confident with this reply. “I had an umbrella on me, and I didn’t want him to catch a cold. I mean, no one was helping the guy at all,
Eri pondered this, both she and the other girls accepting the idea quite easily now that they thought about it. In their minds, it was actually a very sweet thing Kagome did, and it wasn’t completely out of the norm for her character either.

“I see. So, from there, you two have been talking nonstop, I take it?” Yuka asked.

“Well … not exactly. I’ve only talked with him a couple times after that…” Kagome replied, taking another drink. The second time she saw him, he had invited her to a picnic, which had been so sweet, but Kagome thought better than to bring that up; if her friends knew about that, they would try to pry more.

“So, tell us his name. We’re dying to know!” Eri replied.

Telling them his name wouldn’t be a problem. “Oh, it’s Kosuke. I don’t know his last name though.”

“It’s a traditional name. What does he do for a living?” Yuka wondered.

At this, Kagome paused in her musings. What did he do again? From her understanding, he mainly ran errands for High Priestess Kaede and a little bit of carpentry work and farming; then again, everyone was practically a farmer back in those times. “He enjoys traveling around and seeing new places. As for work, he fixes houses. I’m not sure what else though.”

“He sounds like a decent guy. So, I take it you have exchanged numbers?” Ayami asked, but Kagome only responded with a shake of her head. “What? How come?”

“Oh … well … he doesn’t have a cellphone…” Lies again. Well, it was sort of a lie, but explaining it would prove a little difficult. “He doesn’t stay in one place for too long, and he isn’t really into technology like the rest of us.”

Yuka nodded in understanding. “He seems like a down to earth kind of guy that enjoys the simple things in life.”

“If you ask me, he kind of sounds a bit boring…” Eri replied back, shrugging as Yuka and Ayame sent her a disappointed look. “I mean, if I had a boyfriend, he has to at least have a cellphone, otherwise, how would we communicate and know to hang out or go on dates?”

“What about sending letters? That’s always a romantic thought,” Ayame beamed, but her friends only sweat dropped at her old-fashioned ideas.

“Who sends letters anymore?” Yuka laughed.

Fortunately for Kagome, her friends didn’t press her any further about Kosuke or her love life. After eating, the four spent the rest of the day shopping at the mall, most of their purchases spent on clothes and makeup.

When evening came, Kagome said her goodbyes to her friends before walking up the steps towards her family shrine with a pleasant smile etched upon her face. It was good to see her friends again after their short time apart, and already, she felt her tension slipping away from her. It felt good to get away and enjoy herself and talk with her friends like nothing had happened, and she had a feeling it would only get better.

During her climb up the long stone steps, she paused suddenly, her expression suddenly shocked
and displeased. Her blue eyes looked at her three shopping bags in her hands and she frowned. She was supposed to go out and get some applications today, but she completely forgot.

“I think I spent too much money in one day…”

However, she knew her mother wasn’t one to pressure her into doing anything, especially getting a job. They made enough money to get by, and Kagome did her part around the house to help out, but it still upset her. Her mother was the only provider in the family who held a good job working as a nurse. Grandpa was already retired long ago, and Souta was still too young to be out working. Now that she graduated from high school, she felt she needed to do something to help out. First thing in the morning, she would start looking for a job.

Motivated by this thought, Kagome made her way up the rest of the incline before reaching her house and stepping inside. Once within the warm house, she was greeted by her brother sitting on the couch watching television with grandpa who was quietly reading the newspaper, with Buyou lying at his feet asleep.

Noticing his sister was finally back, Souta turned towards her. “Hey sis. Welcome back!”


The familiar sound of her mother humming in the kitchen filled her ears, and as Kagome shared a smile with her brother, she couldn’t help but ruffle his hair, something she knew he hated but did it anyway to tease him.

He made a face at her as she passed but otherwise continued watching television. As Kagome made her way into the kitchen, the wonderful aroma of a baked pot roast filled her senses.

Her mother was unaware of her return home, standing before the oven as she pulled out the large pot roast, sitting it on the stove top before turning off the oven. Without a single thought, Kagome wrapped her arms around her mother’s shoulders, startling Mrs. Higurashi, though when she noticed her daughter was behind her, she relaxed.

“Oh, you’re home. Did you have a fun time with your friends?” She asked.

Kagome nodded before pulling away. “I didn’t mean to stay out too long. We ended up going shopping after, and I think I bought too much,” She replied, referring to the bags near the couch in the living room.

Her mother turned at this, noticing the three shopping bags in the other room, and she smiled at her daughter. “There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s been a while since you and your friends have seen each other. By the looks of it, you seemed to have enjoyed yourself.”

“I did. It feels like it’s been so long since I had time for myself,” she replied, however when she said this, she couldn’t help but bite her lip. Not again. She was bringing up that situation again, and she knew her mother was still troubled by the incident.

Although she sensed her daughter’s troubled thoughts, Mrs. Higurashi did not say anything, her smile remaining intact. “Well supper is ready. We haven’t had pot roast in a while.”

Ψ

Musashi Province (Feudal Japan)
A month had passed since the incident regarding the girl Kagome, a girl whom High Priestess Kaede could not push from the forefront of her thoughts. Ever since the day she was brought to her humble village, the old woman knew there was something different about her, and it wasn’t just her style of clothing; there was something emanating from deep within the girl, something lying dormant.

As the old priestess sat within her hut before the burnt-out fire, her thoughts traveled back a month ago, when Daisuke had injured his leg. The girl, Kagome, had treated his wound with the practice of Western Healing, something which was prohibited within Japan and only seen primarily overseas, and yet, Kaede allowed her to treat him.

It was at that moment, Kaede knew something was different about the girl, and she recalled her conversation with Daisuke then.

Flashback

“I have had my suspicions about the child since she first arrived upon our village, Daisuke. There is something within her, something I cannot ascertain at this moment.”

“What do you mean?” Daisuke inquired curiously.

“I sensed a power within the child, but I cannot gather whether or not it is good or bad,” Lady Kaede replied, pondering as she revisited the days before. Was it possible she possessed powers similar to Kikyou? Although Lady Kaede failed to master her spiritual abilities years ago, she wondered if it was possible this child held the same potential as her deceased sister. Then again, was it possible the child possessed other worldly powers, powers of sinister origins?

“Could it be possible she is a woman born with the power?” He asked, but Kaede wasn’t certain.

“If so, then her knowledge would make better sense, but I believe there is more to this child than we know,” She replied. “Although she claims her mother taught her these foreign practices, I’m sure there is a blood line within her family that parallels that of priestesses and women of spiritual healing.”

Hearing this, Daisuke’s mouth opened in surprise. If that was the case, then it made better sense. If Lady Kaede sensed something within the girl, then it had to be true. “It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth to hide this wound from my wife…”

“As it should. Ye must not remove the bandages in front of anyone but myself, Daisuke. For now, we must watch the child.”

He nodded. “I understand,” Yet as he watched the elderly woman, he noticed how her expression had become more serious as of late. “I take it this is why you haven’t allowed her to leave the village, am I correct? You are curious of her powers.”

The old woman softly smiled at his reply. “It would seem she is not aware of it yet. Sending her out into the world to return to her family, wherever they are now, would put her life at risk,” She replied, and Daisuke finally understood the old priestess’s intentions. “As of late, the air has been strange. I have a feeling something is about to happen, something that may pose a threat to our humble village…”

His frowned deepened. “Do you suppose it could be a demon?” He asked, but the old woman simply shook her head. Another thought came to mind, and it left Daisuke somewhat uneasy as he
sat there. “If it’s possible this child is indeed a priestess, do you think it might be possible we may have angered the gods for mistreating her?”

Kaede shook her head. “I am not sure. Whatever the case, we will know very soon.”

End Flashback

The girl disappeared from the village that very night, and with news carried from a witness patrolling the village, Kaede learned it was Satouru who had dragged her into the Forest of Inuyasha. Knowing Satouru’s personality well and having seen his otherwise barbaric and mistreatment towards other women, Kaede urged the men of the village to find Kagome. It wasn’t simply a manner of rescuing her from Satouru’s malicious intentions, but simply that of the dangers which lurked outside the barrier.

Since it seemed the girl held some sort of dormant powers within, Kaede worried for her safety. If she could sense the power so easily from Kagome, Kaede knew the Youkais of the forest would seek her out, and that was something Kaede could not allow. In the wrong hands, the powers of a priestess would bring about disorder and chaos to the world, and as of right now, there were very few priestesses around who could stop it. If she truly was a priestess, one who possessed powers like her deceased sister, then it would prove a blessing to their village; Kaede wanted to believe that.

It wasn’t long after when Kaede sensed a demonic aura within the woods. In an instant, she knew it was Mistress Centipede, a Youkai which once terrorized the people fifty years ago, but was slain by a group of Demon Slayers. Kaede’s sister, Kikyou, had purified the bones and tossed its remains into the Bone Eater’s Well which lied deep within the Forest of Inuyasha. Somehow, that Youkai had revived, and just as she feared, it targeted Kagome.

How it revived, she was uncertain, but as she took control of the horse and galloped further into the forest, it was then she witnessed an extraordinary scene. The girl, Kagome, was standing before the Great Tree of the Forest, a radiant blue glow emanating from the tree as she touched it. As Kaede remained hidden, watching as Kagome spoke to the mysterious voices resonating from the tree, it was then that Mistress Centipede appeared.

Kaede remembered drawing back on her bow, her aim pointed towards the Youkai as it’s true form emerged more terrifying than before. A hand extended out of the bark, holding in its possession a decorative golden staff, and Kagome took it, hoping to fight the Youkai, much to Kaede’s surprise and disbelief. Within moments after, Kagome was caught within its vice like grip, but before Kaede let loose her arrow, something happened. A sudden burst of blue energy radiated off the girl, and the light was so bright, it blinded the Youkai.

Although it was merely a morsel of her powers, it was to Kaede’s understanding that her powers were beginning to manifest from its dormant slumber. While Kaede stood transfixed by the sudden revelation that Kagome was indeed born with spiritual powers, she suddenly noticed Kagome’s powers had scorched the flesh of Mistress Centipede. The Youkai dropped her immediately after, and Kaede watched in surprise as the girl ran towards the tree. It was then the High Priestess saw a hand extended from the bark once more reaching for the girl, and within seconds, Kagome had disappeared.

Mistress centipede recovered from the attack after that and unexpectedly threw its body towards the tree, but aiming her arrow, Kaede hit the Youkai, her arrow piercing its neck, easily decapitating it, though it’s head disappeared after that.
After Kagome’s unexpected disappearance, Kaede took the remains of the Youkai and just like fifty years ago, threw its bones into the Bone Eater’s Well before casting a chant to purify it of its wickedness. Shortly after that, they returned to the village, and when Satouru finally awakened from unconsciousness, High Priestess Kaede confronted him about his actions. Kosuke, who was slightly injured but otherwise fine, explained it was Satouru who dragged her into the woods and had attempted to rape the girl, but Satouru denied such accusations. Since Kagome was no longer with them, wherever she disappeared to beyond the Great Tree, Kaede kept Satouru under close watch and restricted his movements from his hut.

As Kaede sat there in her hut that late night reminiscing the events which took place a month ago, she looked out the open window. It was well past midnight, and with a crack of her shoulders, she retired to her futon. Yet, she couldn’t help but look across the room, her eyes landing on the decorative staff lying against the wall. Several questions weighed heavily on her mind.

Where had she disappeared to?
Would Kagome return again?

Ψ

Year 1990

Fire.

Scorching hot fire burned the small village before her, and as Kagome stood there, watching helplessly as the people fled from their blazing huts, the embers spreading over the straw roofs, Kagome fell onto the ground, her blue eyes widened fearfully.

Horses with faceless riders galloped through the throng of people, and as she sat there, taking the scene in, she watched fearfully as many were cut down in front of her.

From a distance, she saw a familiar face within the chaos. Her aged face and long grayish hair pulled back in a low ponytail down he back, an eye patch covering one eye and a bow held tightly in her grasp, Kagome knew it was High Priestess Kaede. The old woman was trying to stop the men on horseback, but they were merciless, their swords brandished in the moonlight.

A child ran past her, falling onto her knees suddenly a short distance away. Kagome recognized the little girl as the one she befriended in the Feudal Era; it was Ume. Dirt covered her reddened cheeks, and fear clouded her expression.

Kagome called out to the child to run when she saw a rider approach her, the horse’s large feet stopping just beside the child and his sword raised. Immediately, Kagome shot up to her feet, her legs carrying her slowly, but it all happened too quick, even as the tears fell from her eyes.

The rider leaned over on his stead, and with his sword raised, he swung at the child. Fear stilled Ume and in an instant, she fell onto the cold ground, her eyes unseeing as a pool of blood poured around her corpse.

“No!” Kagome cried out, the strength in her legs failing her as she fell to her knees.

A sick and twisted laugh resonated from the rider, and as if not seeing her, he urged his horse towards another victim, slashing them until they fell onto the ground just as the little girl. This wasn’t happening.
“Stop! Please!”

As the embers closed in around her and she watched helplessly as the bodies piled up before her, Kagome felt a sudden wind sweep past her, and with it, a voice whispered to her.

“Return to us priestess … Save us …”

Kagome looked up, her head turning to look around her, but she saw nothing but sudden blackness. The village was gone, the riders and all the corpses. Nothing but an endless darkness encompassed her, and she felt an eerie chill sweep over her. “W-who are you?”

“Return to us … priestess … Help the people…”

Return? Priestess? Kagome wasn’t a priestess; she was an ordinary girl who belonged in the present time, not the past. Help the people? How could she help them? Why was this voice still calling out to her? “Who are you? Please, leave me alone!”

The voice seemed to belong to a woman, and yet she couldn’t identify who it was that was speaking to her; Kagome wasn’t even sure if it was a voice or one she imagined.

“Thus … is your fate …”

Her eyes snapped open suddenly, and as she laid there within her room listening to the crickets just outside her open window, she turned on her side. Sweat coated her forehead and cheeks, and she lifted herself into a sitting position, pushing away the blankets.

Not again. This was the tenth time she had this dream, and it was always the same. Why was this happening to her? Had the events which took her to the past truly traumatized her to the point where it now affected her sleep? She wasn’t sure, but Kagome sat there for a short time musing.

Her hand crept to her chest, feeling the fast beats of her heart drumming loudly. Ume’s death, as well as others within the dream frightened her, and she was still feeling the effects of it. It felt so real and the fire, she was sure she felt those flames near her.

As she sat in the darkness of her bedroom, Kagome couldn’t help but turn her attention towards her open window. There was a light shining outside her front yard, and curious, she lifted herself from the bed and made her way towards the window. Feeling the cool breeze from outside, she noticed something peculiar within her yard, and that something was the tree. There was a familiar blue glow surrounding its bark, and Kagome couldn’t help but back away from her window cautiously.

“It’s glowing…”

Was it possible the tree was responsible for those dreams each night? Was the tree calling out to her to return? Grandpa said the tree was an evil entity and he forbid her from ever going near it, and of course, Kagome wasn’t bothered by that at all; she didn’t want to go near it again.

However, she couldn’t erase the image of Ume dead from her thoughts or that of others. It had felt so real, and for some reason, her heart was still pounding quickly as if something was about to happen. Nervousness settled itself into the pit of her stomach, and she paled at the thought of returning to that world.

There was a nagging thought that surfaced. “What if the village will be attacked just like in my dream…” Was it possible the voice or the tree sent her a vision of the future of that Era? “Save us … save the people?” That’s what it said to her, but she was in no means a priestess.
What would she do? If returning meant she could possibly save the people, then it would only be right to do so. But, what if she went there and she couldn’t return to her own time? The thought of being separated from her family worried her.

“I don’t know what to do…”

A few minutes went by, and as she stood there contemplating the situation, Kagome finally made up her mind. If she did this, there was still the possibility she could return home, after all, her family pulled her back through the tree before. If this also meant she could save lives and put an end to her nightmares within the present, then she was all for it.

“I’m risking a lot by doing this … I must be crazy…” She whispered to herself as she flipped on her light switch.

Looking around the room, she began shifting through her closet for a set of clothing to wear. She was definitely not going to wear a skirt again, not after what happened last time. She paused for a moment realizing she had left her school uniform behind in the past, wherever it was, was of no consequence to her now. Grabbing a couple coat hangers which produced a navy-blue tank top and light blue Capri pants, Kagome quickly removed her pajamas and slipped her shirt and pants on.

The first order of business was to get a decent sized backpack to take her belongings with her. Unfortunately for her, she only had her small school backpack and that would in no way hold all her belongings she would take back with her. That wouldn’t do at all.

A sudden thought came to her. Her brother Souta had a hiking backpack in his closet that would be perfect. The thought of taking it without his permission slightly troubled her, but it was for a good cause. Ever so quietly, she opened the door to her room and crept into the hallway, careful of making a sound which would awaken her family.

Stepping down the hall, she found her little brother’s room which was directly across her mom’s. Opening the door slightly, thankful it wasn’t locked, Kagome snuck inside. The room was dark, but she was thankful for the moon peering in through his closed window. From the sounds of it, Souta was still asleep, softly snoring as she shuffled in his closet. After feeling around for the backpack, she found it easily enough and made her way out of the room silently apologizing to Souta.

After returning to her room, Kagome placed the backpack on her bed and quickly began sorting through her drawers. She made a mental note in her mind of all the things she would take back with her. Clothing wasn’t much of an issue, but she certainly needed underwear and bras. As she pulled out ten pieces of underwear of various colors and patterns, and an assortment of different colored bras, some sports bras, she folded them neatly and put them inside the backpack.

Moving over to her shoe rack, she grabbed a pair of New Balance shoes and tossed them inside as well, along with a couple sticks of deodorant, hairspray, chapstick, Pepper Spray for self-protection, a small tube of lotion, a comb and hairbrush, hair ties, and a whole box of newly bought pads before moving towards the bathroom down the hall. Not sure how long she would be gone for, she decided personal hygiene was the most important out of anything else she would take with her.

Once more, Kagome silently apologized, this time to her mother as she grabbed a new package of ten bars of Dial White Soap, five large bottles of various shampoos, a few tubes of Crest Toothpaste and five toothbrushes. Kagome carried all of these back to her room, making two trips to her bedroom before stuffing them inside the backpack.

After this, she looked around her room one more time before flipping off the light switch and
closing the door behind her. Walking silently down the hall, she made her way down the creaking steps before arriving in the living room where she sat her backpack down on the sofa. Moving towards the bookshelf, she grabbed a couple books belonging to her grandfather, one regarding the History of the Feudal Era and the other Youkai Myths.

After throwing those onto the couch, she made her way into the kitchen and as quietly as she could, she began rummaging through the cabinets before grabbing her mother’s favorite cooking pot and a small frying pan.

“I’m sorry mom, but I’m going to borrow this…”

She couldn’t take the pot and frying pan without taking a few utensils as well such as a few forks, spoons, knives and a ladle. Kagome also reached for a few packages of ramen noodles, a few cans of soup and a container of chicken and beef broth. As she ran back and forth to her backpack, realizing the contents inside was becoming rather heavy, she realized there was still enough room for a few more items.

“What else do I need…”

As she made her way around the front room, she moved over to the fireplace and noticed a small box of matches and a lighter sitting on the shelf above it. Smiling, she took those in hand and placed them into one of the pockets of the backpack.

Another item came to mind and she quickly ran up the steps back to her room before entering inside. As she moved around some of her belongings, she found a couple notebooks which had hardly been used and took those along with a few pencils and pens. While she was in the past, she could document everything into those notebooks just in case something happened.

Since it was rough living in those days, Kagome still remembered acquiring injuries while she was knelt in the fields, and she remembered the first aid kit in the bathroom. Once again, she left her room and sorted through the cabinet before pulling out a white box with a red cross in the middle of it. Inside were bandages, gauze, ointments, peroxide and alcohol. This was a definite must have item if she was going to be staying in the past for a time.

Was that everything on the list? Kagome mused for a moment. No, there were still a few more things she needed. The last items were a flashlight, some batteries, and she supposed she could take a water bottle with her as well. All those things she found downstairs.

As she stood before the couch, looking down at her backpack, she couldn’t help but sigh. There was a lot of stuff inside it, and somehow, she managed to close it with the zipper without it breaking or getting caught. She could unload everything at Aiko’s when she returned, if she was still welcome there.

“This is it…”

As she was about to lift the backpack onto her back, she paused. If for some reason she wasn’t able to return home, she wanted something to remember her family and keep with her just in case. Looking around the living room, she saw various portraits of her family, two in particular caught her eye and she reached for them, putting them in the front pocket of the backpack.

With everything prepared, Kagome looked at the clock on the wall. It was 3:45 am in the morning. After looking around the room once more, she flipped off the light switch to the kitchen and living room before exiting out the front door, locking it behind her.
The tree was just ahead, glistening its radiant glow, and she approached it, looking back at her house one last time. This was it. There was no going back after this. Pausing before the tree, Kagome looked upon its bark, and as she did, the bark slowly began distorting before her. Eventually, she saw the forest on the other side, but to her worse fear, she saw flames in the distance.

“It can’t be. It really is on fire!” She gasped. Her dream hadn’t been a lie. There was still time, she was sure. She could jump in and make a run for the village before anyone got hurt and—

The door to the house opened suddenly and Kagome turned in surprised, noticing her little brother looking out towards her in confusion. “Kagome, what are you doing?”

Silent for a moment, Kagome only watched as he approached her, his eyes scanning her attire and the familiar backpack on her back before shifting his eyes towards the glowing tree behind her. His expression suddenly understood, and he fisted his hands. “Souta…”

“You’re planning to go back!?”

She nodded. “I have to. They need me, Souta.”

Having heard this, he wanted to scoff at the very idea. He remembered how she returned, bruised and bleeding from an apparently struggle a month ago. His sister hadn’t said anything as to why she was bruised, but he knew his sister returned a different person since that day. “Those people were terrible to you and held you hostage. Why would you want to go back? Not to mention there’s demons there!”

Her expression fell at this, but she nodded again. “Yes. I know, Souta.”

“Then why?”

Kagome turned back to the tree and pointed, and as her brother moved to look by her side, he saw the flames through the bark of the tree. “I keep having dreams, and in those dreams, the people are attacked and the village I was kept in was in flames, everyone murdered,” She explained. “I keep having these dreams, Souta, and a voice telling me it’s my fate to return and to save the people.” As crazy as that sounded, she wasn’t sure how she could save them. Kagome didn’t blame her brother if he didn’t believe her, but to her surprise, Souta was silent, taking this all in.

After all the crazy things he saw as of late, he didn’t think his sister was crazy all. Well, the idea of returning to that terrible place was crazy in itself, but still, he didn’t feel comfortable with his sister making such a rash decision. “What if you can’t return home…”

Dropping her backpack beside her, she turned and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “Don’t worry. I’ll come back, I promise. If I was able to get through before, I can do it again, I think,” She reassured him.

Souta hugged her back, his arms encircling her waist. He didn’t like this. He didn’t want his sister to leave him, his mom and grandfather. “Don’t go…”

Pulling away from him, she kissed him on the forehead and smiled at him tenderly. “I don’t like it either. Take care of mom and grandpa for me, okay?”

He nodded, resisting the urge to pull her away from the tree. “If you can’t get back, I’ll come through the tree and bring you back.”

Hearing this, she wanted to laugh, but she only smiled back with a nod. “I’m leaving now. Take
care of everyone. I love you Souta.”

And just like that, Souta watched miserably as his sister stepped into the bark of the tree, her figure disappearing through the distortion. Seconds later, the tree closed behind her and the glow emanating from the tree vanished. Souta rushed forward, his hands falling onto the rough bark, and his vision blurred. “Kagome!”
Dawn's Repentance

Chapter Summary

Kagome's premonition was more than simply a dream; and she hoped to circumvent it by any means necessary. But what can she do against a group of rogue bandits and their sharp swords?

Musashi Province (Feudal Japan)

In the dead of night, her legs carried her through the foliage of the forest towards the burning embers in the distance. The contents within her hiking bag noisily shuffled against the strain on her back as she pressed forward. Her heartbeat was fast and she couldn't stop the worry and fear from overwhelming her; if this was anything like her dream, then what could she really do to help these people?

This was crazy. The situation was entirely crazy. Nothing would have ever changed her mind to return to this place, nothing except this. The fire in the distance and the dream had been enough to urge her from her bed and towards the tree. She was absolutely crazy for doing this, after everything she was put through in this world, and yet, she felt sympathy for some of the people.

Her hands clenched around the secured straps of her hiking bag, and she pushed herself further past the thick trees of the forest. The beat of her heart pounding erratically within her chest and a familiar sense of terror pulling in her lower abdomen brought renewed fear into her. It felt almost like De Ja Vu, running through these woods, but this time, there wasn't a crazed man behind her.

Just as the trees became less dense before her, her legs carried her towards the exit and she found herself standing before the village enwrapped by hellish flames. Horrifying screams resounded in her ears, and she watched almost helplessly as the people fled through the fields and from their huts.

Nine roguish men on horseback, their forms covered by tattered kimonos and armor, rode through the village with their swords drawn. They were laughing manically at the scene, chasing the villagers while few were fighting against the village men who had their farming tools drawn defensively.

Kagome turned her head each direction, her eyes surveying the damage around her. Smoke filled her nostrils, and she held a hand over her mouth, her blue eyes catching sight of a familiar old priestess a few distances from where she was standing. It was High Priestess Kaede!

The High Priestess must have noticed her as well, her widened old eyes noticing her almost immediately through the smoldering haze. Her bow was held securely in hand, and an arrow notched and prepared, but she was distracted by the sight of the young girl. “Kagome? Ye have returned?”

Hearing the distinct sounds of a horse galloping towards her, Kagome quickly turned her head and in an instant, she managed to narrowly jump away in time before being trampled. As she pushed
herself up on all fours, she suddenly found herself coughing as the smoke entered her lungs. This was terrible and it was playing out the same way as her dream.

Looking back towards the elderly priestess, Kagome watched in horror as a bandit rode up beside the old woman, her arrow missing its target. As Kaede backed away fearfully, he swung his blade, and Kagome’s eyes widened as blood filled her sight.

“No!” Kagome cried out, watching helplessly as the old woman fell onto her back, her body trembling from her open wound on her arm. No, this was exactly how it happened before!

As the women and children frantically tried to outrun their pursuers, they were suddenly cornered by two men on horseback, their backs against the burning huts. To Kagome’s utter surprise, she saw some of the bandits jump from their steeds and chase after the young girls before grabbing them roughly, binding their hands with rope before carrying their struggling forms to their horses.

How horrible! How awful! They were kidnapping the women, and only Kami knew what would befall them after all this. Kagome had to do something, anything, but she didn’t know what to do. Remembering she had a dagger in her hiking bag, she pulled it off her back and searched the front pockets quickly.

As she rummaged through the pockets, her heart loud within her ears, she finally found it and pulled herself up to her feet, her bag secured on her back once more. Careful of the bandits riding past, their torches held high and their swords drawn, Kagome ran to Lady Kaede’s side before falling to her knees.

“Kagome…” Her haggard voice drew out.

Surprised she was still alive, Kagome leaned over her, inspecting the injury on the old woman’s arm. Blood seeped from her open wound, and Kagome feared an artery had been struck. “Are you alright? Can you stand?”

With Kagome’s help, the old woman managed to sit herself upright, her old hand holding tightly to her wound to stop the bleeding. And despite the chaos happening before them, Kaede couldn’t help but stare at Kagome confusedly. “Why have ye returned?”

It was a question which surprised her. Why indeed? Of course, now wasn’t the time for asking questions. There were more pressing matters happening this very instant. “We can talk later, right now we have to get out of here!”

As Kagome attempted to help Kaede to her feet, she found it almost futile as the wound pained her too much to stand. This wasn’t good; at this rate, they would be attacked. Even if she had a dagger, she had a feeling she couldn’t unarm nine bandits on her own.

The fire spread amongst the roofs littered with an abundance of hay, and Kagome watched horrifically as many huts collapsed. She only hoped there were no civilians inside.

Through the smoldering blaze, she made out a small figure of a child standing in the middle of the path, whose dark hair and bright fearful eyes looked upon the scene before her terrifyingly.

“Ume!” Kagome cried out through the screams around her, but the child did not hear her. A rider caught her eye, his horse charging towards the little girl a short distance away, and Kagome instinctively moved, dropping her backpack beside the High Priestess who called out for her to wait.

Her legs rushed her forward, and Kagome watched as the child stood frozen in fear as the rider
closed in on her, his sword suddenly drawn. It happened almost in seconds, and with adrenalin coursing through her veins, Kagome managed to grab the child, leaping out of the way just in time as the horse passed. With her arm held out to brace herself onto the ground, she and the child rolled a few times in the dirt before Kagome pushed herself to her knees, the child held tightly against her chest.

Tears stained the child’s cheeks, and a cry wailed from her lips. Ume was obviously scared, holding herself against Kagome’s chest for safety. “Papa … got hurt…”

Hugging the child close, Kagome couldn’t help but turn her glare towards the rider, who at this point, came to a complete stop, pulling on the reins of his horse before glowering at Kagome. “Ume, I need you to run. Alright? Don’t look back and just run.”

The child shook her head frantically, crying as she clutched herself closer to Kagome’s chest. Her shoulders trembled and renewed tears fell upon Kagome’s collarbone.

As Kagome searched around the settlement, she saw a few huts not yet consumed by fire, and ushered the child to one furthest away from those in flames. “Go inside there and hide. You’ll be safe there.”

Although Ume was hesitant, she did as Kagome instructed and fled from the girl’s side, careful of avoiding head on collision with the other riders.

As soon as the child was safely inside and away from the chaos, Kagome pulled herself up to her feet and glared at the bandit, approaching her with a rope held tightly in his grasp. It was obvious he intended to take her just as the other women, but Kagome wouldn’t let that happen.

As he advanced towards her, Kagome took notice of his appearance; unlike the others, he was more handsome although a little scruffy in the chin area. His long shoulder-length raven hair was messy in appearance, and his dark brown eyes watched her, and Kagome couldn’t help but notice his left eye was more faded than his other, telling her he was blind in one eye. A long-ragged scar swept down his upper eyebrow and across his eye in a downwards trail which ended just at his upper cheek. From his appearance alone, especially that of the many scars upon his bare and tanned arms, it was clear to Kagome he had seen many battles in his lifetime.

Gulping nervously, Kagome stepped back, and he approached her ever so intimidatingly. There was a chuckle which resounded from his throat, and Kagome felt her legs become shaky with anticipation. Well, a small dagger was probably not the best weapon of choice against someone like him, but it was better than having nothing. “S-stay away! I’m warning you!”

He seemed to find amusement from her words, arching a dark black eyebrow at her as he closed in upon her, tightening the rope in his grasp. Without a second to spare, however, he lunged at her, and Kagome quickly side stepped away, her dagger held out in front of her. “Little girl, you’d best put away your blade. You’re no match against me and my men,” He warned.

How very astute of him, she thought. “What do you want from us?”

He blinked at her before a chuckle escaped him. “I’m sure the answer is quite obvious. We have come for the women, of course.”

“He seemed to find amusement from her words, arching a dark black eyebrow at her as he closed in upon her, tightening the rope in his grasp. Without a second to spare, however, he lunged at her, and Kagome quickly side stepped away, her dagger held out in front of her. “Little girl, you’d best put away your blade. You’re no match against me and my men,” He warned.

“Why?” Well, it was a stupid question; Kagome was pretty sure she knew the answer as to why they wanted the girls, and the very thought made her sick to her stomach. Were men always such pigs in this time period? “Never mind, don’t answer that…”
He moved once more towards her, taking the moment of distraction to catch her off guard. As he grasped her wrist in one hand while narrowly missing her dagger, he caught her other hand easily enough before knocking the blade out of her grasp. As he held her tightly in his grip, he forced her onto her back, pushing her arms above her head as he laid partly on top of her. “You are a very strange woman, quite appealing to my eyes.”

Her breath hitched in her throat as he moved a calloused hand down her sides, barely touching the sides of her breasts. His touch caused her to shudder, and worried he might try something in the middle of this chaos, she kicked her feet at him, bucking her hips against his groin in hopes of throwing him off her, but he remained against her, this time pushing himself up to his knees, however his groin pushed against hers as he smirked down at her.

“You sure are feisty for a woman. Alright, I’ve decided. I like your spunk. You are a prize worthy of taking. I’ll make you mine tonight.” He used his free hand to tie the rope around her wrists tightly.

Hearing his words, Kagome felt nauseous to her stomach. “Like hell I will, you creep! Get off me!”

He was accessing her state of dress, her strange kimono which seemed nothing like the other women’s; in fact, it was a two piece, her top light blue and sleeveless showing off her succulent porcelain skin, which told him she wasn’t one who worked in the fields like the other peasants. Her breasts, though covered by the strange and soft fabric, were displayed before him, plump and ample and were practically begging to be fondled and sucked; they moved and bounced with each movement as he struggled beneath him, and his mouth practically watered at the sight.

The second article of clothing were similar to men’s trousers, only fitted much tighter and were no longer in length than her ankles; they were a dark blue in color, and he saw every outline of her buttocks and her thighs. The material, he noted, was much rougher than that of his own, and as he slipped his hands between her thighs to rub against the material, he couldn’t help but notice her struggling become more persistent.

Although he was tempted to entertain himself with her gorgeous body; the thought, in itself, aroused him greatly, but he otherwise held himself back. Pushing himself off his feet, he pulled at the rope and drew the woman to him roughly and against his powerful chest. Before he could place her onto his horse and take off, he was caught off guard when he saw something move towards him in his peripheral vision.

He staggered back when a fist effectively punched him square in the jaw, and he fell back against his horse and onto his arse. Looking up angrily, he caught sight of a young man with dark brown hair pulled up in a high topknot, his eyes glaring angrily as he took the woman into his hold securely.

Kagome gasped, her face reddening when she recognized who had jumped in to save her. “K-Kosuke!”

He offered her a brief look, one which was pleased to see her again, but his eyes quickly returned to the bandit who was now regaining his footing. “Stand behind me. I won’t let this thief make off with you.”

“Mighty words from a farmer,” The bandit leered, stalking towards him as he cracked his knuckles. Compared to himself, the boy was a lot smaller in form and less robust as he and his men. Knocking him out would prove quite easy.

However, Kosuke was prepared as he placed himself between kagome and the bandit. He was fed
up with all of this. Not once had his people lived peacefully without falling into poverty. Not once had they received protection from their Lord, and above all else, his village was pillaged by bandits, and his own house destroyed in the smoldering blaze.

“Kosuke…” Kagome couldn’t help but fear for his safety.

The bandit moved, his sword suddenly drawn as he charged at them, and with quick reflexes, Kosuke managed to move Kagome aside as the bandit lunged. Barely managing to dodge the blade, the sword slicing through his top Kimono, tearing at the brown fabric, Kosuke countered with his fist, but his attempt proved futile when he was pushed roughly to the ground, the bandit standing above him snickering.

A curse left Kosuke’s mouth, and he pulled himself to his feet, once more positioning himself between the woman he adored and the ruthless bandit. There was no way he was going to let this beast get away with this; it had to end now.

“Step aside or I’ll slice you in half,” His words came out as a snarl towards Kosuke.

There was no denying Kosuke was scared, his body clearly shaken with an undeniable fear. Despite the tension within the situation, Kagome couldn’t help but fearfully look between the two. Kosuke, from what she knew from the short times she’d spent with him, was a man who did not take up swordsmanship, but preferred to travel and help out in the village. Seeing him like this, protecting her and unarmed worried her.

“Kosuke…”

The bandit wasn’t naïve to the situation either; it was clear the farmer was a fool, trying to display a heroic act, however, his fear betrayed in the form of trembling legs. The man was incredibly stupid to think he was any match against him, and he scoffed at Kosuke. Without another word, he lunged forward again, this time calculating the farmer’s movements closely.

Kosuke turned his body, his hand prepared to catch the bandit’s wrist to hopefully disarm him, but the rogue bandit intercepted his move. In one quick motion, the bandit pulled his arm away at the last minute and knocked him under his chin with his elbow, and Kosuke staggered back, his face contorted into a painful expression.

The bandit used this chance to knock Kosuke off his feet entirely before striking his face with his fist. With each swing, blood coated the bandit’s knuckles, and a laugh escaped his throat. Killing him would prove too easy, and as the bandit raised his blade to plunge through the farmer’s chest, he was unexpectedly attacked from behind.

A painful cry fell from his lips as the sharpness of a small blade pierced his shoulder and fresh blood seeped down his right arm. From his peripheral vision, he saw it was the woman with the long raven hair and white skin. Angered, he turned and grabbed her wrist, and ripped the blade from his shoulder despite the painful sting before tossing it onto the ground. As she fought to pull herself away from his strong hold, he found himself tiring of her persistent struggling.

“Let me go!”

“That’s enough. There is no escape now, woman. Now if you don’t want to see your friend dead, I suggest you stop your foolish struggling!” He warned, and at this, Kagome stilled, her eyes widened as she looked back at Kosuke’s unmoving form on the ground.

A feminine shriek cried out a short distance away, and as Kagome was forced towards the horse by
the roguish brute, she caught sight of a familiar face behind her, whose fate was just the same as Kagome and all the other young women of the village. It was Aiko, a girl she had come to know and befriend within the village a month ago. “A-Aiko!”

Two rough looking bandits were on either side of her, their arms encircled around her waist and the other bounding her hands with rope. Aiko was screaming incessantly, but they only found her screaming amusing before one of them threw her over a large black horse before mounting it behind her.

Looking back at the village in flames, Kagome tried to locate Ume and High Priestess Kaede, but she couldn’t see anything. Kagome saw nothing but the movement of the horses riding through the village, their prizes claimed as they began ushering their horses out of the settlement.

She was forced atop the horse, her body entirely stilled as she felt the robust man jump on behind her, one arm encircled tightly around her waist. This was actually happening. Although she didn’t witness as much bloodshed as she had in her dream, she realized her predicament was a lot direr than she first envisioned it.

Ψ

Not long after their kidnap, the bandits guided their horses through the woods, down a path not yet familiar to Kagome. They continued riding for what seemed like an hour or more before they arrived upon a traveled path quite far from the village. Kagome didn’t recognize the area, and as they urged their horses further, they eventually arrived at a secluded area surrounded by many trees. All the while, the young girls who had been kidnapped, nine in total from what she noticed, had been awfully quiet since, their fear obviously apparent on their pale complexions.

A dilapidated hut came into view through the foliage, and Kagome saw that the hut was almost in shambles, a door left ajar and the other missing from its hinges. The curved roof had holes in it, and the small porch encompassing the outside was still somewhat intact if not growing green mold on its surface in certain places.

As the men leapt from their steeds, grabbing the women somewhat roughly from the horses, the girls, including Kagome, were forced inside. Some of the girls refused to walk and thus were either dragged or thrown over the men’s shoulders.

Once within, Kagome realized the shabby hut was actually a small shrine, although very much abandoned by priests. She made out the familiar ornaments which were decorated upon the walls similar to the shrine back in her time, and large, almost golden, statues of Buddhas against the furthest wall.

Kagome and the other girls were pushed onto their knees in the middle of the old temple, the splintered old floor boards rubbing against their ankles and feet, and the bandits stood behind them guarding the exit. Everyone was quaking in fear, huddled together as they assumed the worse would befall them.

There was a sudden hand on Kagome’s shoulder, and as she glanced to her right, she saw the bewildered eyes of Aiko staring at her. Her expression told Kagome she was surprised to see her after so long since her disappearance. There was a certain relief within her gaze, a look which read she was thankful to see her again. “Aiko…”

“Kagome,” She replied, her voice at a whisper. “You’ve come back? Where did you go?”

It was obvious there were many questions clouding the young woman’s thoughts, and as much as
Kagome wanted to explain, she realized now was not the time or place to discuss this. As Kagome put a comforting hand on Aiko’s trembling shoulders, she turned her glare towards the person seated at the very back of the room, and Aiko followed her line of vision curiously.

“Hey boss, we caught the girls just like you said we should!” One of the men remarked from behind the crying women.

From across the room, the figure of a very large and robust man, was dressed in samurai attire before them. His red plated armor was made from a series of oblong-shaped pieces of steel, similar to that of the other bandits, with a long green sash knotted at his waist. Chain mail like plates were wrapped around his calves, and as he moved to position himself standing, Kagome and the other girls realized he was well over eight feet tall.

The girls shivered in fright, huddling closer, but Kagome remained firm, her eyes glowering at the troll like man, whom the bandits referred to as their boss. So, he instructed his men to kidnap these women? What exactly was he going to do with these girls, if not harm them brutally?

“Hand over the jewel … right now…” His deathly voice called out, his eyes almost unseeing as he stood there before them, his blade drawn.

Jewel? What jewel? What was this guy talking about? As Kagome looked around the room, she noticed the women didn’t seem to understand either, looking among themselves fearfully. As far as Kagome knew, the villagers weren’t the type to wear jewelry, and she wondered if it was possible one of them had stolen from the bandits.

“What’s he talking about?” Kagome mumbled under her breath, but Aiko only shook her head just as confused.

“I fear we won’t get out of this alive…” Aiko murmured.

When the girls refused to answer, one of the bandits, the one who had grabbed Kagome earlier, approached the women with a scowl. “You heard the boss. Hand over the jewel! We’ve busted our asses snatching you wenches from the village. If you want to return safely, do as he says!”

What? What? This entire kidnap was over a stolen jewel? Who stole it? And was the jewel really worth attacking the village, attacking the High Priestess and burning up the huts?

As Kagome looked at the women around her once more, crying in fear, she felt she had to do something. If she didn’t do anything soon, she had a feeling there would be bloodshed. Determined to straighten out this misunderstanding, Kagome pushed herself to her feet, much to Aiko’s surprise. “Listen, I think you guys must have the wrong people. We never stole any jewel from you. Can’t you see how scared they are?”

The bandit in return arched a brow at the woman. “Pretty brave to speak up,” He remarked. “The jewel wasn’t stolen from us, girl. The boss says he has sensed the jewel within the village, a jewel which holds extraordinary powers. One of you has it within your possession.”

“We don’t have a jewel!” Kagome bit back, her bound hands clenched tightly. “I don’t know what you are talking about! Some magical jewel? You attacked the village over something like this? Do you know how many people have gotten hurt because of this nonsense?!"

Her temper surprised them, her pointed accusations towards them reprimanding them for their actions. The girl was obviously fearless, perhaps even naïve, but she was certainly very different from the other girls.
The women who were huddled together were surprised by Kagome’s outburst, their dark eyes widening with every word that fell from her lips. This girl, the one who had arrived to their village well over a month ago, they remembered treating her terribly, and yet, she was standing in front of them, trying to protect them.

Her hands were suddenly shaking and she felt her legs tremble. Perhaps that was a little too much? The bandits were glaring at her, a couple stepping closer towards her but not enough to reach out and grab her. Her words had angered them, that much she was certain, but she wasn’t in the wrong. “Listen, you have the wrong people. Just let us go.”

“Yuuta, this girl is not like the rest,” One of the bandits remarked.

Yuuta was the very man who was standing in front of Kagome, accusing the women of having the jewel in their possession. Hearing the remark from one of his fellow bandits, he nodded in agreement. “Indeed. Her manner of dress is not like the women, and she dresses in clothes quite similar and yet different from men. She is a very interesting woman…”

Kagome only glowered at his smirk. This was definitely not good. All eyes were upon her, including the boss who had not once left his spot, but his unseeing eyes were upon her. As Kagome accessed him, she realized there was something weird about their leader, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. All she knew was that this entire situation was suspicious.

“Bring her to me…”

Kagome’s eyes widened a fraction when the leader pointed his finger at her suddenly. This was definitely not good. What was he going to do to her? When she turned back to look at the bandits and Yuuta in front of her, two bandits reached for her, both anxious to grab onto her. Without much space to move and with her exit blocked at all sides, she was grabbed by two of the men before being dragged towards the boss.

Yuuta looked on as the woman was pulled away from him, accessing the woman before looking back at the other village girls, who were stricken with fear and curiosity.

“Let me go! Get your hands off me!”

“Settle yourself, woman!” One of them remarked, smirking at her futile attempts to pull away.

Forced to stand in front of the towering leader of the bandits, Kagome felt her legs quake somewhat fearfully. He was a lot bigger up close than she first imagined. The two bandits on either side of her held her still before him as the leader accessed her, his unseeing eyes looking her up and down.

“Hey boss, try taking it off with one swing, like a dandelion!” One laughed, pushing Kagome slightly forward in hopes the boss would tear through her clothing to reveal what laid hidden beneath. The bandit almost licked his lips with anticipation.

How disgusting. “No, let go!” She cried.

“Stop squirming, sweetie. We’ll treat you real good aft—“

The bandit never got a chance to finish his sentence before a blade struck him down from his shoulder to his thigh, tearing through his flesh in a quick motion. The sight of his blood bursting from his body startled Kagome suddenly, and she fell back onto her butt, desperately trying to back away from the sight of the dead bandit.

“Y-you killed him…” Kagome stuttered out, completely horrified.
At the sight of this, everyone in the room fell into complete silence, especially that of the bandits. The leader stepped across the corpse of the fallen man and towards Kagome, his sword swinging beside him, and at his approach, Kagome and the other bandits backed away warily.

“Give it to me … the jewel, right now,” The leader replied.

Once again, he swung his sword, and Kagome had no choice but to run out of its path, her legs following after the retreating bandits who were just as afraid of being killed as her. “What are you doing?!” She cried out, surprised the leader would even inflict harm onto his own men, but the leader wasn’t listening.

The women who had been bound by their hands, huddled on the floor with one another, also fled, but this time, they ran from the hut entirely, leaving Kagome and the bandits within against the brute. Although she was left within the hut, she was thankful the girls safely escaped.

Kagome ducked as the sword swung in her direction, narrowly missing her head and as she struggled to crawl way under his legs, her hands still bound in front of her, Kagome managed to put some distance between them. How bizarre was this entire situation? What was wrong with this lunatic? Sure, they were all lunatics, but going so far as to attack even his own men was a little overkill.

Unexpectedly during her pursuit from the leader, Kagome was grabbed by one of the bandits and he turned her towards the leader roughly, his face contorted with fear. “Boss! Boss! Where are you aiming? She’s who you want!”

A twitch developed under her eye, and as she watched the troll man approach them slowly, his feet causing the small shrine to quake with each step, she felt her legs begin to tremble. Annoyed, she whipped her head to glare at the bandit with his hands placed onto her shoulders, who merely looked on wide-eyed as the shadow of their leader closed in on them. “Can’t you tell there’s something wrong with your boss?” Kagome cried out. This caught the bandit’s attention, as well as the others within the room, and Kagome continued. “Now isn’t the time for any of this. It’s clear he isn’t in his right mind!”

At her words, they seemed to hesitate. Their eyes glanced to her and towards there fearless leader. They seemed to notice this as well, and yet they weren’t sure what to do, especially now that the table had completely turned on them as well. Their boss never behaved like this, and most certainly never brandished his own sword at them either.

Yuuta, who’d been standing by, watching the boss with as much suspicion as Kagome, seemed to agree with the woman. Something was most assuredly wrong. “Her words are not false,” He began, accessing the leader with each movement before moving forward to grab Kagome’s bound hands, pulling her roughly towards him and out of the way.

Within seconds after this, the leader swung his sword into the floor, and the bandit who’d been mere inches within range of the blade let out a shriek of surprise before running across the room where the other bandits stood hesitantly. “Give it to me!”

“Let go of me!” Kagome struggled to pull herself out of Yuuta’s grasp as he guided them backwards. She noticed that his eyes remained fixed upon the leader, and she was certain her words had affected him and the others. “What are you planning to do?”

“Woman,” Yuuta began, but he was cut off when Kagome interrupted him.

“It’s Kagome.”
His eyes, well his good eye that was, looked upon her curiously, before he nodded in understanding. “Well then Kagome,” He began once more before grasping his dagger at his side and cutting the rope bounding her wrists together. “Tell me, do you notice anything strange about him?” He asked.

Blinking at this, Kagome turned to look back at the leader, his unseeing eyes almost locking with hers and Yuuta’s. She noticed how his strides towards them were slow, his expression never wavering and his complexion awfully white, almost ghostly like that of a corpse. “Is he sick?”

Yuuta only shook his head. “A month ago, after one of our many pillaging’s, we returned and found him lying here unmoving. We thought he had died from an unsuspecting attack, but there were no wounds upon his body,” He explained, pulling Kagome once more out of harm’s way. “Whatever happened, changed him entirely. I thought perhaps it was sickness which had changed him, or perhaps a heart attack, but I’m beginning to think there’s more to this than we first thought.”

She listened to Yuuta, her eyes returning back to the leader, his movements unsteady and uncertain. At this very moment, he was ignoring the other bandits who were well on the other side of the room, watching horrifyingly as he continued slashing his sword wildly about. “There’s something else that’s bothering me…”

Yuuta’s eyes glanced to hers for a brief moment. “What is that?”

“There’s a putrid smell emanating from this entire hut,” Kagome replied.

Yuuta’s eyes widened at this. “So, I wasn’t the only one who thought so…” He replied. “Although there is no visible wound, there’s definitely something rotting in the air.” That smell was definitely coming from their leader, he was certain.

The blade crashed down mere inches away from her and Yuuta, and they separated from each other, Kagome fleeing to the other side of the shrine with the other bandits. Looking back towards the exit, she wondered if they should escape, but something stopped her. From her line of sight, she saw that Yuuta had brandished his own sword, prepared to fight against the giant of a man.

“He’s crazy! No one can win against the boss!” One of the bandits replied beside her.

“Yuuta is the strongest among us though. Maybe he can get through to the boss…”

Get through to the boss? Were they nuts? There was definitely something wrong with him, and yet, the bandits still held some kind of hope that the boss would return to normal. Well, whatever normal he used to be.

“Kagome!” A familiar voice called from the exit of the shrine, and looking back, Kagome noticed it was Aiko, who was fearfully trying to get her attention. “What are you doing? Hurry, we must flee!”

As Kagome moved towards the entrance of the hut, she peered out, her eyes widening when she realized the other girls were out there waiting for her. “You’re all still here?”

Aiko nodded, her large brown eyes looking back towards the leader slowly closing in on Kagome. “He’s after you. Quick, we must escape.” Her hand grasped Kagome’s wrist to pull her with her, but Kagome didn’t budge. “Kagome?”

As much as she wanted to escape with them and return to the village, Kagome couldn’t help but look back. “Even if we run, I have a feeling he will only follow us and more people will die…”
Aiko seemed to understand. “Then … what can we do? He’s a large man…”

Looking back at Aiko, who was standing half way into the shrine, her hand holding onto Kagome’s wrist tightly, Kagome only shook her head. “Wait out there, if you can. I’m going to try and stop him.”

Hearing this, Aiko only gasped. “But Kagome…”

Kagome removed Aiko’s hand from her wrist and gave her a reassuring smile. “I’ll be fine. Watch over the girls. Whatever happens, don’t come inside. If you have to, run and don’t stop. Do you remember the way back to the village?”

Aiko nodded.

“Good.” With that said, Kagome gave Aiko a nudge out of the shrine and as she watched her friend rejoin the other girls, who looked back at the entrance with confusion and fear, Kagome turned back to the situation at hand.

Although he had expected the woman to flee the moment she neared the exit, Yuuta was surprised she did not. Her fearless eyes returned to their leader, and he had a feeling the girl was going to challenge him. “What are you doing?” He questioned her, moving to stand beside Kagome, his sword held out in front of him in defense.

“We have to do something, before this gets out of hand…”

“And what do you propose? Our only option is to kill him.” As much as it slightly pained him to do so, he knew he had no other choice, but his boss was a strong leader, capable of snapping two men in half with a single touch.

Ducking out of the way of the approaching blade, Kagome ran to the opposite side of the shrine, the other bandits suddenly following after her like frightened little girls, and she couldn’t help but sweat drop. Oh, how the tables had certainly turned. Looking back at the bandits, who were suddenly cowering behind her, Kagome felt her eye twitch. “Listen, now isn’t the time for this. So, get your butts in gear or else you might be next! If you’re real men, you’ll fight to protect the lives of your brothers!”

They blinked at her words, their eyes looking back at their leader before looking amongst the others. “But … he’s our boss … we can’t fight him!”

“Yeah! Bandits are loyal until death!”

“There’s no way we can go up against him…”

Kagome wanted to sigh. “Loyal? Your boss has completely abandoned you!” She replied, before pointing towards the corpse of one of the fallen bandit’s a short distance away, his blood puddled around his body. “There’s something wrong with your boss! If you don’t want to end up like him, then I suggest getting your butts in gear and fight! Do I have to tell you everything?” She questioned, her hands positioned on her hips.

“She … she’s right … boss isn’t himself!”

“But he is a lot bigger compared to us…”

When she realized she finally had their utmost attention and trust in the entire situation, Kagome looked back towards the leader, who was suddenly closing in on them once more. However, he
stopped suddenly, much to her surprise and as he hunched his body down, Kagome realized he was about to throw himself at them. “Watch out!”

Narrowingly missing his attack, everyone scattered in two different directions, the majority of the bandits following after Kagome fearfully, their screams loud and incessant.

The wall shook from the mere force of his weight as he slammed into it, and in sudden alarm, Kagome saw the wall collapse upon the leader, and a large portion of it also falling onto one of the bandits who had failed to escape in time.

“Not good!” Kagome cried out, running past the leader who’d collapsed onto the ground under the rubble. As she knelt down to assist the older man, his head void of any hair and dressed in a baggy light blue kimono top, she cried out to the other bandits. “Hurry, get the wall off him!”

“Sure thing boss!”

“We’re on it boss!”

Boss? What? Since when was she their boss? Although she wanted to tell them they were wrong to think so, Kagome kept her mouth shut and tended to the older man writhing in pain. They ran to her side and did as she instructed, lifting the wall together. As Kagome and Yuuta pulled the man from the rubble, noticing he’d hurt his back slightly, she swung his arm around her shoulder and helped him to stand.

“T-thank you for helping me … thank you…” The man replied appreciatively.

“Are you alright? Can you stand?” Kagome asked, and at his nod, she assisted him across the room slowly, the bandits keeping their eyes glued to the collapsed wall where their leader lay beneath.

Was it over? Kagome wondered if he would move out from under the rubble, but there was no movement whatsoever. A few minutes went by slowly, and Kagome couldn’t help but feel the hairs on her arms and neck stand on end. Somehow, she had had a feeling it wasn’t over, but curiosity got the better of her, and she found her legs carrying her towards the rubble.

“What are you doing?” Yuuta called out, noticing her foolish bravery, but Kagome only ignored his call. When he saw the woman standing before the rubble, the legs of their leader the only part of his body visible, Yuuta approached as well, followed after by the other bandits.

“Boss?” One of them called out softly.

“Is he…”

“What have we done? We…”

Realizing he wasn’t going to move any time soon, Kagome knelt down by the fallen leader’s side and pushed away at the rocks and support beams which had fallen onto him. As she did, she suddenly noticed something strange beneath his armor securing his chest.

‘Dry blood?’ Kagome’s eyes narrowed suddenly, and as she tugged down his plated armor to get a better look at his wound, she saw a large open gash through his chest, his heart completely torn from his body. She fell back in shock, covering her nose with her hand as the stench hit her.

From her reaction, Yuuta and the other bandits stepped closer and fell back at the sight as well. Their leader, was already dead. How was it possible? How was he even moving in the first place?
“I-impossible…” Yuuta murmured. Well that certainly explained the stench, but more questions surfaced. How did it happen? And how was his body still animated?

To their utter shock, a black feathered head poked itself out from the leader’s chest, a long black beak covered in dried blood and entrails looked upon them viciously, with razor sharp small teeth opened as it squawked. Its eyes set the bird apart from other birds, and in place of two, were three large scarlet eyes with slits for its pupils.

The sight brought fear into the bandits’ eyes, and Kagome couldn’t help but feel slightly sick to her stomach. How disgusting! The bird, for god knows how long, had made itself a nest within the man’s chest. Not only that, but it seemed as if it’d been feasting upon his innards.

“A demon!” Yuuta exclaimed, his hand clenched on his sword. So, the demon was the culprit behind all of this?

Kagome swallowed nervously as she eyed the strange bird. A demon? This was her second time seeing a demon of this world, and she was certainly glad demons no longer existed in her time. “I knew something was wrong. That bird made him a puppet.”

“So, it seems,” Yuuta remarked. “How much you want to bet our boss has been dead for a month now, boys?”

Yet before any of the other bandits could say a word, their eyes, including Kagome’s, followed a few rocks which suddenly fell off the pile of rubble covering their deceased leader’s body. The rocks collided with the ground near their feet, and there was slight movement from under the rubble, which suddenly alarmed them.

“H-he’s still—“Before she could finish her sentence, his body lurched forward from the rubble and his large hand grabbed the woman by her neck, lifting her as he regained his standing. She was dangling in the air by his powerful grip, her hands desperately trying to claw his flesh for release, but his hold was tight and deadly. She couldn’t breathe, and she fought for air.

“He’s moving!”

“How is it possible?!”

“It’s the work of that demon!”

“Yuuta … what do we do?”

Yuuta clenched his teeth, his hands tightening around the hilt of his blade. Although the mere thought of this disgusting demon possessing and making a nest within his leader’s chest upset him, Yuuta realized it was the woman the demon was after. Yet, she exclaimed she held no such jewel within her grasp, and Yuuta wasn’t sure what to believe. Perhaps it was a demon which had taken claim over his body, and if so, then killing him would exact vengeance upon his murder.

“Yuuta? At this rate, he’ll kill her!”

“We have to do something!”

“That person you see before you, is not the boss we once knew. He’s a living corpse possessed by a demon!” Yuuta exclaimed suddenly, his voice louder as his anger surfaced. “For his sake, we should rid him of the demon!” Fighting to control his emotions, Yuuta lunged forward and thrust his sword into the giant’s abdomen, much the other bandits’ surprise.
He staggered backwards, peering down at the blade plunged through his gut, his hold not once slackening around the fragile girl’s neck. “Unsightly humans, begone!” He bellowed before backhanding Yuuta aside, causing the bandit to fall back onto his side in slight pain. “I must have … the power … woman … give it to me…”

“What … are you t-talking … about?” Kagome desperately tried to ask, clawing at his hands in hopes he would drop her. What power? Why did this situation seem familiar to her?

As she fought for breath, she suddenly found herself remembering something which happened a month ago, the day she finally managed to return home through the Goshinboku Tree. Kagome’s eyes widened in revelation, remembering the sight of a terrifying centipede demon chasing her, its elongated body wrapped around her body demanding from her an incredible power.

Flash Back

“I thought I sensed incredible powers … it’s you, isn’t it? Give me the sacred jewel!”

“Stop it!” She cried, pushing the staff towards the approaching demon.

As the demon opened its arms to grab onto the girl, a sudden gust of wind propelled itself from the staff, and the centipede fell back, its entire body collapsing onto the ground.

Though her eyes were closed when this happened, the young girl couldn’t help but open her eyes, gasping when she saw the demon sprawled out on the ground, its three arms ripped from its torso. Had the staff injured it?

Its eyes suddenly shot open, bleeding red as its true form emerged. Kagome fell back at the sight of its sudden transformation. Its once porcelain skin had unexpectedly shed itself before her very eyes, revealing blotchy reddish-purple flesh underneath. Its appearance was more demonic and frightening than before.

It wasn’t over yet! She held the staff before her in defense, her legs spread apart as she prepared to leap out of the way if it should jump at her. But it was merely staring at her, its body convulsing as it heaved before her. There was a hungry thirst in its eyes, and Kagome stepped away.

It was going to eat her, she was sure of it. Swallowing her fear, she held the staff tightly before her, aiming it at the beast. “I’m not afraid of you!”

Mistress Centipede moved suddenly and her movements were so fast, its entire body had wrapped itself around Kagome tightly. It was done playing cat and mouse with its victim, and it approached her form, its teeth prepared to sink into her flesh where it sensed the power.

“It’s crushing me…” Kagome gritted her teeth, her arms bound at her sides as its disgusting body tightened around her. She couldn’t move. Any tighter and she was sure her bones would break. “Let … go! Let go of me!”

Without any warning, a sudden burst of blue energy radiated off the girl. The light was so bright and intense, it blinded the demon, burning its flesh with an incredible amount of power.

Releasing its hold on the girl, it slithered away, covering its face with one of its arms agonizingly. “It hurts! It hurts!”

End Flash Back

The Sacred Jewel? Was this the same jewel which the centipede demon demanded from her a
month ago? If that was so, then, even during her absence away from this world, the crow demon must have still sensed the jewel, or to be more precise, it still sensed her presence and it had the bandits attack the village because of this! Even as she thought about this, Kagome realized the entire situation was because of her. It was her fault the village suffered from the attack. Yet even so, she was just an ordinary girl.

‘I don’t know what Sacred Jewel these demons are talking about. I’m just Kagome!’

Yet even as she thought this, she couldn’t help but recall how her body tingled that very day and a warm light had shrouded her body and burned the centipede demon. As strange as it was, Kagome couldn’t help but find herself torn between what was real and what wasn’t. What was going on?

“At this rate, she’ll die!” One of the bandits exclaimed worryingly.

“We have to help her!”

“Yeah!”

As he picked himself off the ground, Yuuta lunged once more towards the animated corpse of their deceased leader, managing to slam into him from behind. The other bandits saw Yuuta’s plan and followed suit and as the leader struggled to turn his body fast enough to stop them, he felt the full force of their weight against his back, and he staggered forward.

In an unceremonious heap, the giant’s body fell upon the floor boards, his grip upon Kagome forgotten as she fell beside him, choking as she fought to regain oxygen into her lungs. His weight upon the floor caused the ceiling to crumble suddenly, and as the bandits looked up, they realized they had to escape from the shrine immediately.

“It’s coming down!”

“Hurry, grab the boss!”

“Boss are you alright?!”

It happened all too fast for Kagome’s liking. One minute she was being choked and the next she was lying on the floor struggling to breathe and then, she was picked up in the arms of one of the bandits and carried outside. She watched helplessly as the ceiling caved in within the shrine during their escape, dust filling the inside like a fog.

Yuuta was holding her in his arms securely, his eyes glued to the entrance of the shrine hesitantly. Was it over? Was the demon gone from this world?

Everyone’s eyes were transfixed horrifyingly upon the dilapidated house, and yet, somehow, the roof remained intact, refusing to collapse the building any further. The women, who were still bound by their hands, looked upon the structure before turning their frightful and curious stares towards the bandits and Kagome who was still held tightly within the arms of Yuuta.

It was fortunate everyone had escaped, and hopefully, the demonic bird had met its end. Looking up at the man holding her in his arms, Kagome blinked at him and when she caught his stare, she offered him a small smile of appreciation.

Noticing her discomfort, he placed her down onto her feet, accessing her for any injuries before approaching his men, whose stares were still directed at the shrine. He placed a hand on either side of his waist and sighed. “Our boss died long before we knew the truth, men. Do not blame yourselves.”
Unexpectedly, the bandits burst into tears, surprising Kagome and the other women suddenly. They fell to their knees, tears falling from their eyes as they shouted towards the heavens regretfully, and Yuuta stood before them, his head lowered and silent.

“Kagome…” Aiko was beside Kagome in an instant, her hand upon her arm softly. The brunette was baffled by the entire situation, her eyes suspiciously watching the bandits whose backs were turned to them that very moment. “We should go, before they notice…”

As she said this, Yuuta suddenly turned towards the women, and they frightfully stepped back. “Oh, that’s right. I forgot about the rest of you…”

Aiko took her position in front of Kagome, her dark eyes glowering at the tall bandit, but Kagome stepped around her, a gentle hand upon her arm and a smile to reassure her. “Kagome?”

“It’s alright. I … don’t think they mean us any more harm,” Kagome replied, her eyes returning to Yuuta who merely crossed his arms, nodding in agreement.

Approaching the women, Yuuta unsheathed his sword and cut the ropes around each of the women’s wrists, freeing them. When he did that, the women flocked around each other, their arms encircled around the other elatedly, but their eyes still revealed fear. “You’re free now. Go now and return home.”

Hearing this, Kagome was almost flabbergasted. Just go home? That was it? After everything they went through today and this was it? Just go home? Surely, he was joking? As the bandits regained their composure, wiping the tears from their eyes, they began walking away from the shrine, following after Yuuta, and Kagome couldn’t help but chase after them before blocking their path.

“Oh no you don’t! You guys aren’t going anywhere!” Kagome cried out, her arms held out on either side of her to stop them from leaving.

The nine bandits, including Yuuta, merely looked upon the woman curiously before looking at each other worryingly. Yuuta said nothing of course, and merely arched a brow at the girl, noting her bravery was still somewhat foolish and perhaps a bit naïve.

“Do you realize what you’ve just done? You panicked an entire village, burned it to the ground and kidnapped all these women, including myself!” Kagome reprimanded.

The bandits shrunk back from her loud voice, their heads suddenly dropping as her voice rose further and much louder.

“Although I understand the situation, somewhat, you can’t just walk away like nothing happened!” Kagome replied, pointing to the other girls who were huddled together, looking on with wide eyes. “They’re frightened and a long way from the village. What do you all have to say for yourselves?”

Put into a difficult position, the men fell to their knees before the woman, much to everyone’s surprise, as well as Yuuta’s. Their heads were against the cold earth, their eyes wide and pleading to Kagome. “We’re sorry boss! We didn’t mean for it to go this far!”

“First off, I’m not your boss. You don’t even know me, as a matter of fact,” She replied somewhat angrily, and they seemed to notice her hardened stare. “However, sorry isn’t enough. You shouldn’t go around acting like this. Do you realize the kind of danger that put everyone in? Including yourselves?”

Yuuta however, despite his mens’ apologetic repentance towards the girl, showed her no such act. “Why should we listen to you? We’re bandits. It’s what we do to get by. Our boss gave us exact
orders, and we never go against such orders. It’s the bandit code.”

“Even so,” Kagome retaliated. “hurting people isn’t a good way to get by in life! In case you haven’t realized, Karma can be a real bitch, and that crow right in there was your karma. It’s time you start changing your way of thinking and take up a more civilized way of living, or else something like this could befall you again. You’ve already lost one of your friends, do you want to lose another?” She asked.

“Please don’t be angry with us boss!”

“We’re really sorry!”

“What should we do?”

Kagome couldn’t help but sigh. What was she doing? Not only did she decided to return to this world to stop the attack from happening, but she wound up kidnapped and what’s more, she decided to challenge the deceased and reanimated corpse of the bandit’s leader. And now, here she was reprimanding these men for their unjust actions towards the very village which had mistreated her. She wondered if she was truly crazy.

Ψ

As the trees separated on the trek back towards the village, Kagome couldn’t help but sigh from her place on one of the steeds. Somehow, she had managed to talk the bandits into accompanying them back to High Priestess Kaede’s village, and the trek was taking a lot longer to reach, especially considering the women refused to ride side saddle with the other bandits, thus, preferring to walk behind Kagome and the bandits. Of course, it was understandable, after all she went through first thing in the morning, well before sun up, she wouldn’t want to be around them either, but it had to be done. The bandits had been insistent on her riding one of their horses, calling her their boss, as much as the title bothered her, but she was too tired to refuse and appreciated the offer.

Two hours drifted by since they departed from the dilapidated shrine, and she was sure after the roof had collapsed, the demon was well dead and rid of. As she turned her crystalline eyes towards the blue sky overhead, she realized it was possibly well past 9 in the morning. She arrived in this world somewhere around 4:50am, and already she was ready to fall into her bed and curl herself under her warm comforter back home.

Yuuta, who was holding the reins to her steed, leading everyone ahead, never said a word since they left. He’d been silent the entire trek, and not once had he tried to do anything to them, which Kagome was grateful for.

Eventually the village came into sight over the hilltops, and Kagome and the women felt instant relief flood them when they saw some of the huts still standing and the fire long since put out. From a distance, they made out the figures of the villagers walking around the settlement, some inspecting their fields.

When they finally neared the village, some of the villagers who were tending to their fields stood frozen at the sight of the bandits approaching, and fearful, they fled into their settlement with terrified cries. Not long after this, a bell rang out within the village and Kagome and the others watched as the village men ran towards the entrance of the village, their tools and axes held out in front of them; they were prepared to defend what was left of their home.

They must have noticed the women, the villagers pointing at their approach, and as Kagome
looked on, urging her horse forward, she could not see the High Priestess anywhere. Well, judging by how many people were guarding the entrance, it seemed many had survived the attack, and for that, she was thankful.

“They intend to kill us,” One of the bandits cried, walking beside Kagome’s horse warily.

“They have every right to. What we did was wrong.”

“Boss, do we really have to go through with this? We promise not to do it again…”

Kagome didn’t answer them; her attention was primarily focused on the villagers, trying to locate the little girl Ume whom she had come to befriend since her time spent in the village. There was no sight of her, Kosuke, nor that of the old lady Kaede either. However, there was one particular face she recognized within the group ahead, and it was a face which brought nervousness into the pit of her stomach.

Satouru.

He was standing at the entrance of the village, his dark brown eyes glaring at their approach and an ax held tightly within one of his hands. He was donned in a light brown kimono top, his beige trousers loose on him and his hair pulled back in a top knot. His three friends were gathered beside him as well, looking as menacing as always, but Kagome refused to show them any sign of cowardice.

Once they were near the entrance, several feet away from the untrusting gazes of the villagers, Kagome leapt from the horse. Yuuta held out an arm to assist her, but was ignored as the woman walked ahead of them, her fists clenched and her stare hard. The bandits fell behind the woman slowly, their eyes looking ahead worryingly, and the village women who were following after were somewhat hesitant of how the situation would play out.

Kagome took her time approaching, her eyes primarily glued to Satouru’s glowering gaze, and when she felt she was close enough, perhaps ten seven feet away, she stopped. “We’ve returned unscathed,” She replied, her nervousness tightening in her abdomen. “Lower your weapons. They are not here to fight or cause injury.”

Satouru squinted his eyes at her, eying her up and down suspiciously. He hadn’t seen her since the night he tried to take her for himself, and now she had returned and this time, with the bandits behind her. “Who are you to bark orders, wench?” He replied, scowling at her disgustedly.

She felt her eye twitch, but deciding against arguing back, she turned her head to look over her shoulder at the bandits. When she caught their attention, she nodded her head towards the villagers. “Well, don’t you have something you have to say?”

Almost immediately they rushed forward, their approach startling the villagers for a moment before they threw themselves onto their knees, their faces pressed into the dirt. The unexpected act confused everyone, the men and women gasping and pointing in surprise.

Kagome took a step forward in front of the bandits. “They’ve come to repent for their actions.”

Yuuta, who was somewhat reluctant to fall onto his knees, simply reclined himself against the dark coated horse, his stare noticing Satouru’s glare directed at the woman in front of them. When he saw Kagome give him a displeased look, Yuuta only scoffed, turning his head aside.

“We deserve death!” One of the bandits cried.
“We’re sorry!”

Hearing these words, Kagome blinked at the knelt bandits, her eyes widened in surprise. That was not what she meant when she told them to return them to the village and repent. She wanted them to learn from their mistakes, not ask to be killed. “You guys…”

Smirking at this and more than willingly to rid the village of these vermin, Satouru took a step towards them, his ax clenched tightly in his hold. This was exactly the opportunity he’d been awaiting since a month ago, after the stupid bitch escaped. Since her disappearance, he’d been on house arrest, accused of trying to rape her in the woods, and not even the High Priestess had trusted him. This was his chance, he thought, his chance to right his wrongs by defending the village from these heathens. “Seeing as how the women are back where they belong, I will put an end to your insignificance,” He replied.

Noticing this, Kagome suddenly placed herself between the bandits and Satouru, causing a sudden murmuring within the crowd. Somehow, she knew he would try something like this.

“Stand aside,” He barked, his eyes glowering at her.

“I can’t do that,” Kagome replied, her gaze just as heated.

His stare hardened. This wench was protecting them! He felt his body tremble, but it wasn’t out of fear; it was pure rage. He loathed this woman to the core, and he’d give anything to wipe that distrustful glare off her face. This woman who so dared to defy him was siding with these roguish men, and for whatever purpose, he didn’t know. “Why do you protect these bandits who have desecrated our village and kidnapped our women? You pity them? After what they have done?!”

“I do!” Kagome remarked back, her voice much louder which surprised him and everyone around them. Of course, she pitied these men, and she realized they were not entirely at fault for what they had done. All of this was a misunderstanding, kind of. “Although I am uncertain the extent of harm they have caused everyone, I’m sure no life has been lost because of this. Am I right?” No one was hurt, right? Or was she wrong?

Once more there were murmurings in the crowd and to Kagome’s surprise, she saw two familiar faces push themselves through the people. Kagome noticed it was Mayoko and Daisuke, the very two people who had taken Kagome in since her first arrival into this world.

“She is right. No one was killed during the attack. We’ve lost many huts but no harm has befallen any of us,” Mayoko replied, her husband nodding beside her, though he looked on curiously at Kagome and the bandits.

Relief instantly flooded Kagome. Thank goodness no one was hurt. She was sure the injuries many sustained were minimal, but other than that, no lives were lost. Turning her stare back to Satouru, who was visibly shaken by Mayoko’s words, Kagome went on. “Death is too much of a punishment. They are truly sorry for what they have done. All of this was a misunderstanding.”

“What misunderstanding?!” Satouru replied. “They come into our village in the dead of the night, engulf our home in flames and ride off with the women? Do you call that a misunderstanding wench?!”

Refrain from slapping him. Refrain from slapping him. Kagome did her best to keep herself calm and collected, but his arrogant self was making it quite difficult for her to remain composed. Nothing would be gained if she acted immaturely in retaliation. “You intend to harm them, but they have not once cut a man or woman down, nor that of a child,” Kagome countered. “You and
everyone else do not know the entire story behind why they raided the village. If you will, step aside and allow them to explain, then I’m sure you’ll understand.”

But to her dissatisfaction, Satouru did not back off and he took a step towards Kagome, his height exceeding her by three inches. “Sounds to me like you are siding with the enemy. It’s clear you know nothing of the laws surrounding such a circumstance. Death is the only punishment for their crimes. A simply apology does not suffice all that we have lost!”

“I won’t allow you to lay even a finger on them,” She replied, holding Satouru’s stare.
Mystery of the Sacred Jewel

Chapter Summary

Kaede reveals part of the mystery surrounding the Sacred Jewel. If demons were sensing its return, then it only meant one thing, the jewel has resurfaced.

For what seemed like minutes on end, but in actuality, a few seconds had passed, Kagome felt her breath hitch in her throat when Satouru took another intimidating step towards her. Kagome noticed how his eyes narrowed further, darkening as his gaze shifted to the bandits and back at her. It was obvious the tension between them was still pretty intense and uncomfortable, and while Kagome wasn’t purposefully trying to invoke his agitation, it was definitely clear Satouru planned to make her life a living nightmare, whether she wanted it or not.

Never in his life had Satouru met with such a difficult woman, one so morbid and strange. Unlike the other village women, she displayed herself tall and firm, her defiance more heightened than when she first arrived in their village. It was clear she had become more confident in her standing, perhaps even more brazen and clearly overstepping her boundaries with these barbaric men, and the longer he kept staring into her entrancing blue eyes, the more agitated he became. She was a woman he could not have, a woman who defied him with every means necessary, and she proved she was not like the other women.

“Glare at me all you want, but you don’t scare me, Satouru.”

Satouru felt the sides of his lips twitch at her words, and he fought to control the urge to smirk. He didn’t scare her? The last he remembered, she was beneath him in the Forest of Inuyasha some time back, crying and begging for him to release her, and now she wasn’t afraid of him?

He almost laughed at this before leaning forward towards her, his words lowered in a harsh whisper at her ear that only she could hear. “Is that so? Do you think you will be safe in this village now that you’ve returned? It’s only been a month since our exciting endeavors in the forest. Don’t think I’ve forgotten what happened back then…” His voice darkened suddenly, and he made sure that only Kagome heard his words before pulling himself away from her face. “Though the women have been returned, we are nonetheless grateful, however, we cannot accept such a punishment to slip by without severity. A crime has been made this day, and our Daimyo in Edo will be written to. I’ll be sure to mention you as well, girl.”

So that’s how he was going to play this? Why wasn’t she surprised? Write to the lord then; she didn’t care. However, the fact that he had brought up what he had attempted to do to her once before really irked her; she hated remembering how weak she felt that night, and she was sure if Kosuke hadn’t come to the rescue when he did, she wouldn’t have escaped Satouru.

Yuuta, who’d been leaning against his horse, his arms crossed as he watched the spectacle play out, couldn’t help but noticed Kagome’s sudden and unusual stance before one of the village men. Her shoulders, her legs and her entire posture was quite tense, her lips pressed together in a firm line and her eyes glaring distrustfully and angrily at one of the village men. Although he was seeing her emotions from a side angle, it was clear Kagome did not like this person.

As his brown eyes looked upon the man, whom Kagome referred to as Satouru, Yuuta realized he
was not someone to take lightly. The constant shift in Satouru’s gaze traveling along every curve of the woman’s body did not go unnoticed by Yuuta; it was clear he lusted for her, and in no way, did it look charming. However, as he looked further upon him, accessing him from head to toe, there was also something off about him; Satouru displayed himself in front of everyone in a manner of superiority, and there was definitely a hint of a violent nature emanating from his authoritative and distrusting stance. However, there was one thing Yuuta was most certainly sure of; there was definitely tension between Satouru and Kagome.

“Listen, I know we don’t get along, but can’t you see it from their perspective?” Kagome asked, and at Satouru’s unflinching glare, she turned her eyes to the other villagers, who were looking between the two, their eyes focused on them and the bandits warily. She had hoped they would say something, anything to her or at least back her up, but they said nothing, surprisingly. However, she did notice their murmurings behind Satouru, but it was clear he was taking leadership of the situation, and whatever the purpose was, it certainly ticked her off.

“A woman shouldn’t have a perspective in anything. A woman shouldn’t have the audacity to question the laws and persecutions of criminals and thieves, and she most surely shouldn’t act like a man,” Satouru suddenly retaliated, eyeing her strange clothing once more before scoffing.

A woman this. A woman that. Kagome knew all about it. That was definitely one of the shocks she had received from this time period, but she didn’t need to constantly be reminded of it. Yet, the more he brought it up, the more defiant she wanted to behave. Kagome wanted to tell him and everyone else that their laws were wrong, and that their views on women were unfair, but she knew if she said those words, her life would definitely become threatened. Besides, this wasn’t the modern era; this was the feudal era.

How could she persuade the villagers to reach a peaceful understanding with the situation at hand? And also, where was the High Priestess at?

“Now I’ll say it again,” Satouru began more loudly than before, his ax clenched tighter in his grasp. “Step aside.”

When he made to move past her, despite her stubbornness, Kagome moved along with him, her arms held out to stop his advancements onto the knelt bandits. “I won’t. If you’re going to kill them, you’ll have to go through me first.”

Satouru scoffed. Well, if that’s all it took, then he would happily oblige such a request. “Very well. You certainly wouldn’t be missed.” With a raise of his ax, he prepared to plunge the sharp edge into the side of her neck, hoping to slice her head clean off with one or two swings, but to his surprise, his attack was blocked by a long blade which intercepted his target.

The blade belonged to Yuuta, and the bandit found himself glowering at the ignorant villager. So, he intended to kill this woman, right there in front of the entire village? “From my understanding, what harm has she done? She risked her life to free your women, and yet you welcome your ax to her head? And here I was hoping for a peaceful compromise.”

“Compromise with a group of low life bandits?” Satouru questioned, his eyes focused on Yuuta entirely. His ax was barely inches away from Kagome’s neck, blocked by Yuuta’s blade, but he realized this ruffian was strong in terms of strength. “I don’t think so. Siding herself with you vile thieves is a crime in itself. You’re not welcome here, and if you even so dare as to take one step towards what’s left of our home, after you fucking bandits burned it to the ground, I will end your existence,” He seethed.

Caught between an ax and a sword near her neck, Kagome couldn’t help but suddenly pale. Her
blue eyes shifted from Satouru and behind her where Yuuta stood, the two men glaring heatedly before her. This wasn’t good. Not good at all.

“Kill the bandits!” Someone in the crowd shouted.

“After what they did, they deserve death!”

“We should burn them like they did our huts!”

“I never trusted that wench in the first place! Burn her!”

To Kagome’s absolute distress, the entire crowd became much louder, their confused and worried stares suddenly transformed into monstrous faces, their eyes glowering in her and the bandits’ direction. She swallowed nervously, her hands clenching upon her tank top. Among the crowd, Kagome noticed Daisuke and Mayoko, and to her relief, they had not joined in with the villagers. Instead, the husband and wife simply looked in her direction with concern.

Hearing this, Satouru smirked. It seemed the other villagers sided with him absolutely, and his stare upon Yuuta hardened. “You display yourself much taller than your men. I take it you are their leader?” When he didn’t respond back, Satouru continued. “Then you’ll be the first to die by my hand. Get on your knees. If you’re truly sorry for what you have done, then I’ll make your death less agonizing.”

“And why would I kneel before an arse such as yourself?” Yuuta questioned, his eyebrow arched. With the girl standing between him and the village farmer, Yuuta grasped her by the arm with his free hand and pushed her behind him and out of harm’s way; the action irked Satouru, but Yuuta didn’t care. “Go ahead and try to plunge your farm tool into me.”

“Y-Yuuta!” Kagome was flabbergasted, and she grasped his arm to pull him back, but he didn’t move away. “Are you crazy? This will only make the situation worse.”

The subtle way in which the woman grasped Yuuta’s arm, her expression showing her apprehension, was enough to truly irk Satouru, and yet, as he shifted his gaze between the two, a curious thought surfaced. Was it like that? His imaginings between these two brought a smirk to his lips, and he realized he finally had the wench cornered. “I believe I understand the situation perfectly. This wench is not only attempting to bargain for their lives, but has also bewitched these bandits!” Satouru exclaimed loudly to the other villagers to hear.

Kagome gasped, her hand tightening on Yuuta’s arm.

Satouru went on, pacing a few feet before them, his ax swinging threateningly at his side as he looked between the two. “It wasn’t even daybreak when our village was attacked, but in a matter of a few hours, this wench somehow managed to bring our women back. Not only that, she has managed to bewitch these bandits onto their knees before us. Does that not seem strange?” He questioned.

“He’s right! It is strange!”

“How did she do it? She’s just a girl!”

“Is she a demon?”

Satouru’s stare fell onto Yuuta, and he raised his ax in his direction. “And you protect her. Before you intended to have your way with her and the other girls, but now you’ve all completely changed. It’s clear this wench has bewitched you, and it wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest how she
managed it.”

More murmurings spread amongst the throng of people, and Kagome felt all their eyes upon her, eying her suspiciously from head to toe. There was distrust in their gazes and perhaps even fear. No, she didn’t bewitch anyone. It wasn’t like that at all.

“In fact,” Satouru went on, his eyes traveling from Yuuta and the girl equally. “it wouldn’t surprise me if she’s been spreading her legs to all the bandits. Let us not forget how she first arrived upon our village, scantily clad in revealing clothes, displaying herself in a tempting and disgusting manner, especially in front of the children and the married men!”

“How disgusting!” Someone in the crowd shouted.

“Burn the whore! Burn her!”

“What did our High Priestess see in that girl?! She’s nothing but trouble!”

What? What?! Kagome’s jaw literally fell. Was he serious? He was still spouting such nonsense about her being a whore? And not only that, but now Satouru had completely turned everyone against her as well, and she couldn’t help but become shaken by this. When would it end?

Before Satouru could say any more, he was suddenly knocked off his feet and onto his back, and before Kagome could even discern the situation quick enough, Yuuta was upon him quickly. The strong bandit, who exceeded Satouru by a good four inches, grasped him by the throat tightly with both hands, his strength cutting off the oxygen to Satouru’s lungs.

“You’ll hold your tongue or I’ll rip it from your disgusting mouth!” Yuuta barked, squeezing the man’s neck tighter.

“Yuuta, stop!” Kagome cried, trying her best to pull him off Satouru, but Yuuta only shoved her away. “What are you doing?!”

Those who were knelt on the ground suddenly lifted their heads, their dark eyes widening in surprise at the situation unveiling before them. At first, they’d been quiet, awaiting their impending death, but when they heard the words the farmer shouted towards the woman, they felt their blood suddenly boil. However, it was to their relief when they saw Yuuta jump him for his vulgarity towards them. His words had been insulting, and though they were used to such words, they were also directed at the woman whom they thought of as their Boss.

“Yuuta! Please!”

The eight bandits turned their eyes to the woman, and noticing her distress, not wanting to invoke the situation any more than it was, they jumped to their feet. In seconds, they were blocking the entrance from the other villagers who had dispersed to put a stop to Yuuta and Satouru’s fight.

“These barbarians have learned nothing!” Someone in the crowd shouted.

Having heard enough, Aiko, who’d been standing amongst the other village women, clenched her hands and moved closer to the scene before standing beside Kagome confidently. “Kagome wasn’t wrong!” She shouted, her voice loud enough to silence the entire crowd. “Yes, we were kidnapped and for hours we were gone, but it’s not something that involves indecency! Kagome saved us, all of us, including these men here!” She replied, pointing at the bandits, who looked back curiously at her. “If you would just give Kagome and all of us a chance to explain the situation, then there wouldn’t be any reason to continue fighting!”
“Yuuta, please, get off him. The situation is bad enough…” Kagome exclaimed, bending down to pull Yuuta off him. “At this rate, he’ll die,” She warned, noticing how Satouru’s face began turning purple from the tight grip of Yuuta’s hands around his neck. As much as she wanted him to suffer, it was still wrong.

Yet, even though he wanted to ignore Kagome’s words, glaring heatedly at the man beneath him who squirmed for breath, Yuuta snarled. It could be over in an instant if he wanted, but Yuuta realized the situation at hand was bad enough. Before he could remove his hands from Satouru’s neck, he heard surprised gasps in the crowd in front of him leading into the village.

The sudden stir caught everyone’s attention, including Kagome’s, and as they looked on curiously, they watched as the villagers separated, their heads suddenly lowered in a manner of respect. The familiar sight of High Priestess Kaede surprised them, and she walked towards them in a manner of displeasure, her bow acting as her cane with every step and her arm bound in bandages. One thing was noted however and that was her unending scowl.

A familiar face belonging to that of Kosuke, walked alongside the old woman, helping her walk before turning his startled eyes towards the scene before them. He noticed the bandits first and secondly, he noticed a familiar blue eyed and raven-haired girl. “K-Kagome!!”

“That will be enough of this!” Her aged voice exclaimed, her old eyes falling upon the bandits distrustfully, and they suddenly shrank back at her stare. Shifting her gaze, she caught sight of Yuuta bent over one of her village men, choking the breath from his lungs, and she scrunched her face irritably. “Ye would do best to remove yeself from there at once, bandit, or ye will be meeting the tip of my arrow,” She warned.

Nervousness settled itself in the pit of Kagome’s stomach, and hastily, she grabbed Yuuta’s arm and pulled him away from Satouru. She was thankful he moved when she reached for him, but seeing the hardened stare from High Priestess Kaede worried her. The atmosphere felt a lot tenser than before, and she couldn’t stop her hands and legs from trembling. This was the first time she’d seen the old priestess so angry.

Once Yuuta had removed himself from his being entirely, Satouru struggled to catch his breath, his face reddened and his throat painful to touch. Coughs escaped his mouth, and he struggled to push himself into a seated position, almost hunched over as he fought to catch his breath.

Noticing the village girls were returned and unharmed standing behind Kagome and Aiko in a huddle, Kaede ushered them back into the village with a wave of her hand. As the young girls quickly scrambled past the old woman, Kaede turned her glare back to the eight bandits. “Though I know not the reason as to why ye have returned, ye were foolish.”

“Lady Kaede,” Kagome voiced suddenly, but when she caught the old woman’s glare, she couldn’t help but shrink back, her face paling at her stare.

“Child, come with me. I think it best we talked privately,” High Priestess Kaede replied before turning her back to Kagome entirely. The old woman looked at the village men and women, their heads still lowered respectively to her. “Tie up these bandits and don’t ye dare let them escape. They will not leave this village unpunished.”

At her order, Kagome watched stupefied as the village men roughly grabbed at the bandits before forcing them down onto their knees. However, this did not sit well for the bandits who retaliated with indignation and snarls.

“Get your hands off me!”
“Where you think you’re touching?!"

Seeing this, Kagome quickly approached the bandits, and at her approach, they stilled, their eyes looking upon her in surprise. “It’s alright. I’ll talk to her and I’ll explain the situation. For now, just do as you’re told, and don’t start any fights. Okay?”

Hearing her kind words, and realizing she truly did care about their well-being, they nodded. “Yes boss! Whatever you say!” They replied in unison.

Thankful that was settled, Kagome looked around her, noticing Aiko at her side worryingly. She shared a look with the young girl before turning her eyes in the direction the old priestess disappeared. Why was she so nervous all of a sudden? This entire situation could have been avoided if she hadn’t suggested the bandits return to apologize, but even so, it was inexcusable.

“Stupid bitch. Watch your back,” Satouru suddenly remarked several feet away from her, and Kagome caught his glare, watching him as he rubbed his neck painfully before walking into the village, his three friends following after him.

“Kagome…” Aiko muttered softly, her hand placed upon the young woman’s shoulders. “Don’t listen to anything he said. Since you’ve been gone, our High Priestess has put him under punishment. He won’t get away with his actions before nor today. So please, don’t worry…”

Kagome nodded at this before sending the girl beside her a friendly smile. “Thank you, Aiko.” Turning her attention back to the situation at hand, Kagome made her way towards the entrance of the village, but noticing Kosuke standing before her, she paused in her steps. “Kosuke. I’m glad you’re alright.”

For a moment, he was quiet, his soft brown eyes looking upon the woman before him. His emotions betrayed him, showing he was deeply regretful in his inabilities to save Kagome earlier that morning. The ruffians had gotten away with their actions, and yet, she was safe and standing before him, and for that, he was very much relieved. “Kagome … did they hurt you?”

She shook her head, offering a small smile to the taller man. “I’m fine. Before we talk, I need to talk with High Priestess Kaede…”

Realizing this and not wanting the older woman to wait any longer, Kosuke quickly stepped aside, his head bent apologetically towards the woman. “Yes. You should hurry. Let’s talk after…”

As she walked past him, she placed a small hand onto his arm, her blue eyes looking at him for a brief moment, and when he caught her stare, she stepped away. Although it was something small, she knew it had to mean something to the guy at least. After all, he did his best to save her and it was obvious he was regretting the situation, but Kagome was just thankful he was alright.

As she stepped inside the entrance of the village, Kagome found her eyes looking upon the destruction before her. It was worse than before. The huts, or what was left, were practically burnt to a crisp, collapsed and in shambles. Pottery was lain broken upon the dirt ground before her, and bags of rice scattered across the ground at her feet. Shifting her gaze around, she saw curious stares of the other villagers peering at her from behind the few huts which hadn’t been touched by the smoldering flames early that morning; they were afraid of her.

Closing her eyes, Kagome took a deep breath before releasing it. Opening her eyes, she continued on her way in the direction of the High Priestess’s hut, and when she neared it, she saw it was still intact before stepping inside.
The old woman was standing with her body facing the flap of the door, her eyes no longer cold, much to Kagome’s relief. “Seat yersel’ child. There is much to discuss.”

Doing as she was told, Kagome took a seat in front of the small fire, her eyes looking upon the old woman worryingly. As she sat there, her legs bent under her, Kagome couldn’t help but notice something familiar of hers leaning against the far wall of the hut. It was her brother’s hiking bag she had brought with her into this world, and she realized the old lady had brought it safely inside.

Kaede took her seat across from the young girl, her eyes staring intensely upon her. Not much had changed within the course of one month, however, her clothing certainly had. “I had my suspicions ye weren’t an ordinary girl,” She began, and at this, Kagome couldn’t help but widen her eyes. “On the day ye vanished, it was through the old tree in the Forest of Inuyasha. How it happened, I am not sure.”

Nervously swallowing, Kagome’s mouth fell open in surprise. How had she known about that? Was she there the entire time when Mistress Centipede attacked her? “How…”

“When ye turned up missing, one of my watchmen informed me it was because of Satouru. Ye were dragged deep into the forest, and I had the village men search for ye,” Kaede admitted.

This surprised Kagome. The High Priestess of this village had actually gone out of her way to search the entire woods for her? So, she was concerned about her well-being. “That’s right…” As much as Kagome hated remembering what happened that night, she realized there was no escaping the subject.

Kaede continued. “My men found Kosuke wounded and Satouru unconscious, but there were no signs of ye within the area, Kagome. It wasn’t long after that I realized a menacing demon had resurfaced after so many years, and its sights had turned on ye. I never imagined something of such magnitude to transpire once more into this world,” She explained.

“What do you mean? What exactly was that demon?”

“Mistress Centipede was the most feared demon within our era fifty years ago. The demon harbored terrifying powers, even capable of reviving herself countless times. A group of well-known Demon Slayers had vanquished the demon, and for many years, it never returned, until just recently,” The old woman replied. “Why it returned and after ye, I am not sure. However, there’s no mistaking what my eyes witnessed that night…”

The sudden thought of the creature brought a shudder down her spine. Just remembering its demonic face and hundreds of thousands of legs moving on their own accord made her slightly sick to her stomach. “Um…”

Kaede went on. “When faced with the demon, I was sure ye would be consumed, however, ye managed to stun and even blind it with a mystifying means,” She explained before reaching behind her and revealing a familiar staff.

“That’s my grandfather’s staff,” Kagome replied, her eyes meeting once more with the old woman’s.

If the old woman remembered correctly, a gust of wind had propelled itself out of the staff and towards Mistress Centipede, but Kaede had a feeling Kagome was not aware of the action. She noted Kagome’s curious stare on the staff, her eyes looking between it and herself. “Not only that, but there was a bright light which engulfed ye form, Kagome. Do ye remember such?”
Kagome nodded. “I do…”

“I was caught off guard when faced with such a scene, and yet, I was left almost speechless again when I heard voices emanating from the old tree, and ye seemed to recognize such voices. No sooner after, I clearly remember seeing a human hand extend itself from the bark, and in an instant, ye vanished into the tree itself and disappeared from the forest…”

The young girl’s eyes widened at this. So, Lady Kaede really saw everything? Judging by the way she was calmly discussing the situations which transpired a month ago, Kagome realized she wasn’t angry at her, simply curious. Before, Kagome was hesitant to reveal the truth about where she came from, knowing that if she did, she’d probably end up in a worse situation. Right now, the old woman was quietly awaiting a response from her, and Kagome realized there was no more hiding the truth.

“Child, tell me now what ye have been hiding since the day ye were brought into this village, and that is an order.”

Taking a deep breath, Kagome slowly nodded her head and exhaled. “Well … as unbelievable as this might sound, I’m not originally from this era,” She began, staring at the old woman to gauge her reaction, but it remained passive. “My name is Kagome Higurashi, and I came from the future in the year 1990…”

“It is an absurd thought, but from what I have witnessed, I believe ye story. If ye had told me long before, I wouldn’t have believed ye, however, I’ll admit, I was very suspicious and curious of ye place of origin from the start. Ye were unlike the others, and ye carried ye self with a higher sense of purpose.”

Relieved her story was believed, Kagome slumped her shoulders and relaxed. It seemed like a weight had lifted itself from her shoulders and she could finally breathe. “To be honest, this is all really confusing. The day I arrived into this world, I had just finished graduating high school. I was playing soccer with my brother and the next thing I knew, I heard a strange voice whispering to me on the wind…”

“A voice ye say?” Kaede asked. While the elderly woman did not understand most of the things in her explanation, he did understand parts of it.

Kagome nodded. “Return to us priestess thus is your fate.” Kagome replied before shaking her head. “That’s what it said. I don’t understand or know whose voice it was, but a few moments after hearing that, I was pulled through the Goshinboku Tree on my family’s shrine. The next thing I knew, I was here.”

Again, Kaede nodded. The old woman assumed the very tree within the Forest of Inuyasha was likely the very same tree within the girl’s time period, living so far into the future. “I see, so that is what happened. Although the voice is something which confuses even myself, it referred to ye as a priestess. Tell me, child. Are ye a priestess?”

“Actually, no. I never took on the ceremonial duties like my grandfather. I focused all my attention on my studies in school. Honestly, I never had an interest in that type of stuff,” Kagome admitted.

Pleased with all of her answers, Kaede relaxed her shoulders, and placed a hand to her injured arm, feeling a slight pain shoot up her arm. After a few seconds, she refocused on the girl. “Although my village was decimated by the attack, ye brought the girls back safely and unharmed. For that, I thank ye.”
“No. I didn’t do anything. Really.”

High Priestess Kaede held up a hand to silence her. “Regardless if ye do not believe so, ye have saved the village,” She replied. “Whether it was by the work of Kami himself or fate, I thank ye for your endeavors.”

Kagome flushed at this, and scratched her cheek awkwardly. Honestly, she didn’t do anything besides wound up kidnapped as well. But, in the end, things kind of turned out alright, besides the wreckage and misunderstandings. “I couldn’t just turn a blind eye…”

“That reminds me. Why did ye return?” Kaede asked, her brow arched as she watched the girl closely. The thought had bothered her the very morning the child arrived in the chaotic situation within the village. Kaede never thought she’d return, especially after all the hell she’d been through.

“Well…” Good question. “Well, I kept having nightmares the past month about the village, as strange as that might sound. I dreamt it was being attacked by the bandits…”

The old woman’s eyes widened at this. “A prophetic dream?”

Kagome nodded. “To be honest, I wasn’t going to return to this world, not after everything that has happened to me. Don’t get me wrong, but I felt entirely shamed during my time here. The situation got out of control and you practically kept me here against my will,” Kagome found herself replying. It had to be said. There was no reason for her to keep it to herself, and she wasn’t about to have the whole thing replay itself once again now that she was back. “Not to mention the fact that I was frequently attacked by Satouru and his friends and nothing was done about it.”

“Ye have my sincerest apologies, Kagome. Although I understand the situation clearly, before, none of us knew anything. We thought at first ye were perhaps a spy or someone with sinister means, but I later realized ye were not a threat. I do apologize for keeping ye here against ye will, but it was more towards ye safety than anything else, child.”

“My safety?”

Kaede nodded, her thoughts trailing back to her discussion with Daisuke a month ago. “Before ye disappeared, I felt there was something strange about ye. And after witnessing the events take place that very night with Mistress Centipede, I realized my suspicions were real. Kagome, I believe ye may possess great powers, though their origin leaves me baffled. However, I believe ye may hold powers as that of a priestess, even though ye explained ye have never been trained.”

“But I can’t have powers. That’s … no one besides my grandfather studies such practices. Besides that, my mother and father were ordinary people,” Kagome explained, her brow furrowed as she tried to understand this. “There’s no way I could be. I’m just Kagome.” Besides that, there was no way she could have some sort of hidden powers; the thought in itself sounded ridiculous. If anything, it sounded like it came from a manga or anime, but then again, Kagome had time traveled into the Sengoku Jidai Era. Nothing made sense to her.

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“Even so, I believe ye presence here will only pose to attract demons similar to Mistress Centipede. As long as ye are within the barrier, no demon can lay their hands upon ye.”

A sudden thought came to mind, and Kagome looked at the old woman in surprise. “That reminds me. When we were brought to the bandits’ hideout, Yuuta explained to us that the reason they attacked the village was because of a jewel,” She explained before musing suddenly. What was it called again? “The … Sacred Jewel. I think that’s what he said.”
In an instant, Kaede’s entire form shook as if with fright and she leaned over the small fire before her, her eyes looking at Kagome in great surprise. The Sacred Jewel?! “What do ye mean child?”

Judging by the old woman’s countenance, it seemed the mere mentioning of the jewel shook her. What exactly was the Sacred Jewel? “Well … if I’m being perfectly honest, Mistress Centipede said the exact same thing. Both that thing and the leader of the bandits were after the jewel and me for that matter.”

Kaede studied the child seated in front of her, her expression wavering between surprise and suspicion. If what she said was true, then Kagome was indeed no ordinary girl, but what was this of the jewel? Did this child have it? If so, how could that be possible? “Tell me Kagome. Do ye have the Sacred Jewel?”

At this, Kagome shook her head, her eyes narrowed confusedly at her question. “I don’t have any jewel on me. I really don’t know anything about this jewel or what it really is.”

Having heard the sincerity in her words, Kaede mused. So, she knew nothing of the jewel at all. Although the child claimed to arrive from the future, she emitted a strong aura of immense powers, that even she seemed confused about. Not only that, but even demons were beginning to target her, and not only demons, but humans as well. Who was this child and what was her connection with the Sacred Jewel? “Even so, there would be no possible way the jewel could manifest once more,” She began and at Kagome’s confused stare, she continued. “After all, the jewel was destroyed fifty years ago…”

Flashback

It was an ordinary day like any other, the leaves were falling in their vibrant shades of oranges, yellows and reds and the wind was cooler to the touch. Kaede was out helping her sister gather medicinal herbs over the hillside from their village, and from a distance, the child smiled. The village was doing well, despite the circumstances which had befallen their mother and father a few years prior. Without their father to lead the village, Kikyou, her older sister, took over the task and led the village properly.

Like many prosperous villages, they were doing just as well, and were always sharing their harvests with others faring poorly. Kikyou led the people justly, and because of her kindness, and willingness to help others, the people adored her, even those from distant villages. Kikyou’s kindness and virtue spread for miles within Japan, especially that of her abilities to purify demons with a single touch.

It wasn’t long after her name spread across the lands that a missive was delivered. Kaede remembered that day on the hillside gathering herbs with her sister when one of the village men ran toward them. The missive was sent by a clan of Demon Slayers, asking for her older sister’s help with purifying a particular object, and never one to turn down a request or help, her sister accepted the task.

“Kikyou, will you take me with you?”

Looking away from the parchment in her hands, the long raven-haired woman looked down at her younger sister beside her and smiled. “I see no reason why not, Kaede. You’ve never been to such a village before, have you?”

Kaede shook her head, smiling with anticipation to join her sister on her travel. “How far is it?”

Kikyou mused before looking back at the parchment. “It says the village lies North. It would take
us five days on foot to reach, but if we took a horse, we would reach it within two days. Are you certain you wish to travel along?”

Kaede nodded. “Yes. I’m sure.”

When we reached the Demon Slayer Village, I remember standing in shock beside my older sister. The village was an abundance of many large huts, training grounds and many villagers, some dressed in their training and battling attires. The village itself was surrounded by a large wooden wall, it’s height so high you couldn’t even see the village without stepping inside. There were slots in the wood where archers could shoot out and many towers along each of the four corners with men standing watch.

The sight was amazing to see, and it was then I realized just unprotected our village seemed compared to the Demon Slayers. When my sister and I first stepped inside, we were greeted by the chief of the clan, a rather tall man with dark black hair pulled back in a high short ponytail and a jagged scar over his left eyebrow. Atop his shoulder, Kaede remembered seeing a cute and soft cream-colored feline with large red eyes and two tails.

“Greetings Kikyou. We welcome you to our village,” Shako replied.

“Greetings. We received your missive for assistance with a particular object,” Kikyou replied, noticing the feline atop his shoulder before smiling softly back at the chief.

He nodded before noticing the little girl dressed in orange colored kimono with tiny black patterned flower petals across its stitching’s. With a wide smile, he also greeted her. “And who might this cute child be?”

Flushing under his gaze, Kaede couldn’t help but lean closer to her older sister timidly. He seemed rather young in his age, probably a few years older than her sister, but he displayed himself very masculine and strongly to others.

Smiling at this, Kikyou pressed her hands atop Kaede’s shoulders. “This is my younger sister, Kaede. She was very interested in coming along to see your village.”

“Is that so?” Chief Shako asked before laughing whole heartedly. “Well, feel free to look all you like.” Looking back at Kikyou, his face took on a more serious look. “Kikyou, if you would please follow me.”

As the leader of the Demon Slayer village turned his back and made his way towards his large house, Kaede remembered her sister turning to her with a smile. “Sister Kikyou. Can I come with you inside? I want to see the object they want you to purify.”

“I’m afraid it’s best to wait here, Kaede. I’m not sure what object it might be or what darkness it possesses. Should something happen, I’d rather you be away from it. Alright?”

With a sigh, Kaede nodded. She understood, and as she watched her sister disappear into the hut a moment later, Kaede couldn’t help her curiosity. She followed after, trying her best not to look suspicious and opened up the door to peek within.

Within the large hut, she saw her sister seated before a large rectangular table and the chief of the village seated across from her on a soft velvety looking pillow. Lying on the table between them, cushioned on a small pillow similar to his chair, was a round crystalline black jewel. Although Kaede was a little far away, she saw from where she was leaning against the hut the darkness swirling within the object.
“Such a strange jewel…” Kikyou commented, eying it suspiciously as she recognized the darkness within it. Even as she stood there, she noticed a swirling dark vortex of energy swirling within the entire jewel and the power it emanated made the hairs on her neck stand on end. “Such greed. I’ve never encountered this object before.”

Shako nodded, his eyebrows furrowed as he also took in the sight of the jewel. “After uncovering much information about it, my people managed to find its origins easily enough. This jewel has lived through the Heian Era, Lady Kikyou.”

This surprised her. “For so many years? Tell me, Lord Shako. What is this jewel and where did you find it?”

“We found it within the body of a large centipede demon,” He explained.

As Kaede listened on, she learned Mistress Centipede had attacked the Demon Slayer village not long ago. Unfortunately, after defeating the beast, it had somehow magically regenerated its body and attacked them once more. A few lives were lost, but after severing its stomach, a mysterious jewel fell out and the demon’s body immediately after turned to bones.

“We call it the Sacred Jewel,” Shako replied after explaining the depths of what happened with Mistress Centipede. “I believe it’s because of this jewel, the beast kept reviving. As you can see, the jewel has survived for 580 years and is completely tarnished with darkness and malice. We have heard of your endeavors across the lands, and with your superior powers, we would like to ask you to purify the jewel’s wickedness.”

The priestess nodded, her eyes falling onto the jewel once more. Purifying it wouldn’t pose a problem for her, but she couldn’t help but frown upon the evil emanating off it. “Very well. After which, we should properly dispose of the bones of Mistress Centipede so it’s soul will not seek vengeance.”

“Thank you, Lady Kikyou.”

With a small smile, Kikyou reached for the jewel and grasped it with her fingers before holding it into the palm of her hands. Immediately after doing this, the darkness within the jewel began swirling faster and faster before it suddenly began diminishing. In an instant, there was no longer any darkness and a vibrant pink color surfaced upon the jewel, glinting with a newly returned innocence.

Seeing this, Kaede’s mouth fell open in surprise, and so too did Lord Shako’s. With just a single touch, her sister easily purified the jewel. It was amazing, especially since Kaede wasn’t always one to see her sister’s extraordinary powers.

“Lord Shako. I would like to hold on to this Sacred Jewel, if that’s alright? Many humans and demons with greed in their hearts will likely continue chasing after this jewel. I can protect it and keep it from darkening,” Kikyou insisted.

Kaede held a hand to her mouth in surprise. What? Her sister was going to take possession of the jewel? But what if demons begin attacking their village? Something like the jewel would bring nothing but trouble to their lives and others. This was the first time she felt nervous of her sister’s decision.

End Flashback

After remembering the events that took place fifty years ago, Kaede returned her attention to the
young girl seated in front of her. Kagome had heard every word of Kaede’s story regarding the
Demon Slayers and the Sacred Jewel. “However, my sister Kikyou was turned down. The chief at
that time explained he would destroy the jewel himself, and he did just that.”

Kagome nodded. So, if the jewel was gone, then why were demons still after it? “It was born into
existence so many years ago, way back into the Heian Era.” If her grandfather was here, he would
practically have a field day and would no doubt talk High Priestess Kaede’s head off about his
ancient heirlooms and such.

“It’s an object which was once desired by both humans and demons. The Sacred Jewel was said to
grant any desired wish, whether evil or pure,” Kaede explained.

Again, Kagome nodded. How interesting. If Kagome remembered her history, this was definitely
never mentioned in the books. In fact, something like this Sacred Jewel would likely be mentioned
in old folk lore and myths. A sudden thought came to her mind, and she found her gaze traveling
around the small hut.

“Is something wrong?” Kaede found herself asking, noticing how the child suddenly sweat
dropped.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what is the year now, Lady Kaede?” Kagome understood she was
now dwelling in the Sengoku Jidai, but the approximate time period was somewhat difficult to
discern, especially considering the lack of calendars within the village.

“The year is 1490,” Kaede replied.
As the villagers begin picking up the remnants of their village after the bandit attack, something terrifying descends upon them, eliciting shrieks of terror. Kagome's vision is soon filled with blood, and the visage of a creature more terrifying than the centipede demon.

Porcelain fingers glided upon the roughness of the Goshinboku, sliding down the length of the bark, as her crystalline blue eyes swept from the green leaves and large branches above her. To put it simply, the magic surrounding the tree had vanished, and she realized that returning home would prove just as difficult as before. Of course, Kagome expected this much, after all, that was the main reason she packed such a large hiking bag full of necessities.

Earlier that morning, the bandits had returned the women back to the village, where they were confronted by the angry civilians. Fortunately, High Priestess Kaede had heard the noise and cries of the villagers, especially that of Satouru’s interrogations, and ended the argument within a matter of seconds. After which, Kaede had asked to speak with her privately, and for half an hour or so, Kagome revealed the truth about herself and the year she came from.

To put it bluntly, the old woman had believed her, as surprising as it was for Kagome, and she was thankful. The topic of a mysterious jewel known as The Sacred Jewel came into their discussion, and when Kagome revealed the fact that Mistress Centipede and the leader of the bandits were after her because of such a jewel, High Priestess Kaede’s complexion paled and took on a more serious nature. It was then that Kagome was told about the jewel and how it originated as far back as the Heian Era and how it was her sister Kikyou who had purified the jewel fifty years ago before it was ultimately destroyed by an interesting clan called The Demon Slayers. Unfortunately, Kaede didn’t know much else about the jewel besides the fact that it held a great power which could grant any wish whether from a human or demon.

Fortunately, Kagome managed to explain the mishap which had decimated Kaede’s village earlier that day, explaining that it was in fact the orders given by a bird demon. Kagome explained the bird had made a nest out of the leader of the bandit’s body and for well over a month, had used the corpse in hopes of searching out the supposed Sacred Jewel which was thought to be in her village; Kaede was nonetheless startled by this, believing the jewel could not have resurfaced after so many years, but there was something on her face that spoke of dread.

Could something which had been destroyed fifty years ago resurface? It wouldn’t be possible if she was thinking realistically, but then again, when was it actually possible to time travel through a tree?

Despite all this, and the dangers which were suddenly beginning to fall upon the young woman, Kagome was more worried about more pressing matters. The tree was no longer working, and it wasn’t giving off the light from before, meaning she was stuck there in the year 1490, a world plagued by demons, samurai, not to mention priestesses and angry villagers.

A sigh escaped her, and she turned her curious stare to the young woman standing beside her. Aiko was the woman she befriended since she first arrived in this world; her hair was a beautiful brown
in color, cascading all the way down her back where it laid against the middle of her waist, held back by a plain hair tie. Soft brown eyes watched Kagome quietly beneath her fringe framing her face nicely.

In all honesty, Kaede had warned her not to reveal her time traveling capabilities through the tree in the Forest of Inuyasha. The old priestess feared if all was revealed, certain difficulties would befall Kagome and the villagers would likely not believe her. Of course, she’d been warned before not to reveal the fact that she knew a little bit about Western Medicine, and even that was a death sentence. However, Kaede had allowed Aiko to join in on their discussion earlier, and besides the fact that she knew everything there was to know about Kagome, it was clear she was someone Kaede put her absolute trust into.

“So, this tree holds powers that allows you to slip through time?” Aiko found herself asking, fiddling with the sleeves of her brown kimono curiously. “Interesting, though I know not how it’s possible…”

Kagome nodded. “In my time, the tree exists in my family’s yard. This exact spot will someday be my home…”

Hearing this, Aiko blinked. If that was so, then it was like Kagome never really left home at all. Besides the fact it was a different era, it held some familiarity to Kagome, she was sure. “So, what will you do now? Will you return home?”

If possible, then yes. As of right now, however, it seemed entirely impossible. Before, when she had been chased by Mistress Centipede, Kagome had all but released her emotions onto the tree, hitting it relentlessly during the time with her eyes entirely welled up in tears. If it was possible the tree sensed her distressed, maybe that was why it allowed her to return home? “I’m not sure. For whatever reason, the tree refuses to take me back…”

A few hours had gone by since that morning, and for an hour, she and Aiko stood before the tree, waiting for something mystifying to happen. Unfortunately, despite circling the tree, touching the bark in various places, and asking for it to send her back home to her family, the tree refused. For now, it seemed she was stuck there, but she was sure soon it would allow her to return home someday, at least she hoped.

“We can always come back tomorrow and try again, Kagome,” Aiko replied before turning her gaze back in the direction of the village. “Even though Kaede warned you not to step out of the barrier, I don’t think we should stay out here too long.”

Realizing she was right, Kagome accepted this and followed Aiko through the woods and back to the village in the distance. Their walk was mostly quiet, mainly because Kagome’s thoughts were a complete disarray of confusion and what ifs. The thought that she might actually have some type of hidden powers as that of a priestess left her confused and also anxious. There was also the fact that demons were suddenly seeking her out because they believed she possessed the Sacred Jewel.

When she finally turned her head up, her eyes falling upon the sight of the huts just below the hill, Kagome blinked twice. They arrived a lot faster than she first thought, but she supposed she was too caught up in her musings to notice they’d already covered that distance by ten or more minutes.

Walking past the rice paddies on the path towards the entrance of the village, Kagome couldn’t help but look upon the wreckage. Some huts were partially standing while others were still intact after the fire, pottery and grains of rice littered the entire ground, there were logs and many dozens of rocks and hay scattered around everyone’s feet and so much more. It was truly a terrible sight to look upon, and as she shifted her gaze around the village, she watched as many of the men and
women tirelessly bent down to clean the rubble.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t only the village itself which had suffered but so had the fields and the harvests. There were obvious signs of horses which had trampled in the fields, destroying the tall stalks of vegetables with many foods squashed and no longer fit for human consumption. Fortunately, not all the fields were destroyed, and somehow, only one survived the attack, but regrettably for everyone else, the seeds had yet to grow during the sweltering heat.

The entire issue was clearly directed at the bandits, whom Kagome had previously asked for pardon to Lady Kaede, explaining that it was in fact the demon’s doing, manipulating the men into believing they were receiving orders from their boss. However, no matter the misunderstanding, Kaede explained that it was still an attack regardless, however, since they showed signs of sincere regret, Kagome managed to talk Kaede into lightly punishing them. Kagome never expected Kaede to show such leniency toward the bandits, but she was grateful.

“For scary bandits, I never imagined them to actually help us in the end,” Aiko suddenly voiced.

Kagome stopped, her eyes following Aiko’s gaze a short distance to her right, and as her crystalline eyes followed suit, she saw the bandits, their very distinguishable armor and rough exterior, among the villagers, picking up the rubble through the wreckage. Like they were instructed, they were very nimbly picking up all broken remains of the settlement, separating the good and still useable from the bad before tossing them into a cart as they went from each section of the village. Their punishment was obviously to clean up the village and also to rebuild the huts which had been destroyed, but doing so would possibly take a matter of days, maybe even weeks to complete.

One thing was certain, after all this was discussed with the village after her and High Priestess Kaede’s discussion, the villagers were not pleased with her or the bandits. It was like things had suddenly took a turn for the worst. The fault was partially placed upon Satouru, wherever he was now; if he hadn’t goaded the villagers into turning their aggression towards her with lies about manipulating the men with vulgar indecency, none of this would have happened. Kagome was sure she could have explained the entire situation to everyone if he hadn’t intervened and started interrogating them.

Noticing High Priestess Kaede exit one of the huts ahead, and in her possession a large basket filled with medicinal herbs, Kagome couldn’t help but saunter in her direction, with Aiko following closely behind. When she arrived before the flap, Kaede noticed her curiosity and only shook her head. The injury she’d sustained earlier was minimal, thankfully and was currently bound by bandages over her shoulder, her arm secured at her chest carefully.

“What’s wrong?”

“He’s injured his leg during the fight this morning. It is unlikely he will be able to walk and provide for him and his daughter for some time,” The old woman replied with a shake of her head.

Although it was something she didn’t want to know, Kagome realized that not sustaining any injuries after all that’s transpired wouldn’t seem unlikely. In fact, it was almost guaranteed, but fortunately, no one lost a life. “I see…”

The flap to the hut was pushed back and a familiar face greeted Kagome. It was Ume, the child whom Kagome had friended before and saved from being trampled to death. Her large brown eyes were staring up at the High Priestess worryingly before taking notice of Kagome and Aiko beside her. “Miss Kagome! You’ve returned!”

Kagome hadn’t expected the child to throw her arms around her legs, her face wet from her tears.
Bending down, she hugged the child close, patting her head softly. “How have you been Ume? Is everything alright?”

The child nodded, pulling away before looking between Kagome and Kaede. “Papa got hurt during the fire this morning. Lady Kaede says he won’t be able to walk for a while…”

Her expression fell at the child’s words. That wasn’t good. “His leg isn’t infected, is it?” She couldn’t help but ask the High Priestess. To her relief, the old woman only smiled.

“Ye may relax. I have applied some medicinal herbs to treat his burns. He will need frequent changes until the burns have scarred. After which, he should be free to walk without the risk of sustaining infection.”

Ume frowned at this, but she couldn’t help but ball her hands into fists in front of her. Her downcast expression suddenly becoming fierce and determined. “I’ll help papa recover, Lady Kaede. I’ll help out in the fields too and I’ll gather firewood as well!”

Kaede laughed at the child. “Will ye now? And how will ye manage to lift your father’s tools? Ye lack the strength for it, my child. Ye would do good to stay with ye father and help tend to his and ye meals.”

“But Lady Kaede…” Ume frowned, her once determined expression falling with every word.

Having heard their conversation, Kagome shared a look with Aiko beside her. The look they shared, although silent, was enough to bring understanding between them. “If you don’t mind, I’ll help Ume and her father out, Lady Kaede.”

“I will also help,” Aiko volunteered.

Pleased with this scenario, the High Priestess flashed them a small smile. “In that case, ye can both work in the fields cleaning up the mess and gathering what ye can salvage for food,” She replied before pointing to a large cart sitting beside her hut a short distance away. “I have already spoken with everyone else. Whatever ye salvage, place gently into the cart there. From there, we will hand out to each and every person equally.”

Kagome and Aiko nodded at this.

“Likely, we will spend the rest of the day cleaning up this mess,” Kaede replied with a drawn out and tired sigh. “Tomorrow, however, the real work begins.”

Understanding her words, Lady Kaede left the two girls to attend to other villagers who had gotten hurt, leaving the girls to stand before Ume’s hut silently. Judging by what she said, it seemed tomorrow the construction of the village would commence and possibly replanting all that was lost within their fields. Something of that magnitude would possibly take them weeks to accomplish.

“Thank you for your help, Miss Kagome and Miss Aiko.”

Kagome smiled at the child before her, patting her head softly. “Sure thing, Ume. Is your father hungry? Does he need anything while we are here?”

Ume shook her head. “Papa is asleep right now. I fed him some pears I picked earlier with Kosuke.”

“Aiko,” Kagome called, earning the young girl’s attention beside her. “We should hurry to the fields. When we have salvaged what we can, we can tend to her father after.”
She nodded. “Alright. How does that sound, Ume? When we get back, we’ll prepare some food for you and your father?”

Hearing this, Ume smiled brightly, nodding her head vigorously up and down with excitement. “Yes please! Thank you, Miss Kagome! Thank you, Miss Aiko!”

ψ

Kagome wiped the sweat from her brow, stretching her back achingly as she looked out across the fields. What a mess. It was fortunate that many of the village men had decided to help the women out, especially since the fields stretched long distances, many corning each side of the village. With a crack of her neck and one final stretch, Kagome resumed her work, picking up squashed vegetables from the dry soil. For hours, she and Aiko helped the other villagers tend to the wreckage, collecting the good and the bad crops into their baskets.

During this, Kagome found herself reacquainted with Mayoko, a middle-aged woman who’d taken her in previously before. Although it was clear she was befuddled as to her disappearance a month ago, she was overall delighted to have Kagome back in the village, even if the other villagers didn’t seem too pleased with the prospect. She and Aiko spoke with Mayoko, catching up on what had transpired as of late, and it wasn’t much despite everyone’s routine jobs farming the land.

However, Mayoko did question the events which had happened that morning, especially concerning the bandits and her conflict with Satouru. To put it bluntly, Kagome honestly didn’t want to discuss the situation, but Mayoko was insistent, as was the other villagers who were silently listening in on their conversation, many sending baffled stares or those who pointed respectfully.

“When I saw those roguish men make off with our girls, I didn’t know what to think. I thought for sure this was it for our village!” Mayoko exclaimed, her countenance entirely troubled. “But you managed to bring everyone back unharmed. How did you do it?”

Aiko couldn’t help but titter quietly to herself, noticing Kagome’s uncomfortable expression knelt beside her and the older woman. “We were all frightened when they brought us to their hideout, but Kagome wasn’t the least bit scared, Mayoko.”

Mayoko’s eyes widened. “Indeed? Well, judging by the skirmish between you and Satouru, I definitely saw a fire in your eyes, Kagome. Never thought I’d see the day where a woman stood up to a man.”

Kagome bit her tongue. Of course, that’s how things were in this time. A woman wasn’t one to talk back or become aggressive towards men, whether they were poor or rich. Just by raising your voice or fist, a woman was promised severe punishments and ultimately death. Somehow, Kagome managed to escape those punishments unscathed, for now at least. She made a mental note to watch herself, especially since this wasn’t her time period.

Noticing her silent behavior, Mayoko leaned in, her dark brown eyes scrutinizing Kagome curiously. “You seem troubled. Are you alright?”

Kagome nodded. “I’m fine. I guess there is a lot on my mind.”

“That there should be,” The older woman replied with a shake of head. “Don’t let what Satouru said to you upset you, dear. The boy is nothing but trouble, and I’ll see to it he stays clear from you.”
“Speaking of Satouru,” Aiko began. “High Priestess Kaede released him from his punishment. Though I know not why…”

Mayoko blinked at this, her expression souring suddenly. “Why would she do a thing like that?”

“It’s because I pardoned him for what he did,” Kagome replied suddenly, surprising the two girls. “When Lady Kaede spoke with me, we also discussed matters concerning Satouru. Although what he did was wrong, and Kosuke and I got hurt, I decided to pardon him this one time.”

Aiko almost dropped her basket in disbelief. “But why, Kagome? After what he did … you could have been…”

“It’s better to forgive than to resent. Satouru and I do not get along, that much everyone has clearly seen. However, I don’t want any of this to drag on. So, I’m willing to forgive and forget what’s happened, as long as he steers clear from me.”

“Forge and forget, huh?” Aiko mused. “You certainly are an interesting woman, Kagome.”

“One with a fiery temper as well,” Mayoko chortled.

Ψ

Dusk set in, the darkened sky overhead alerting Kagome and Aiko it was time to end their chores within the fields. Rising to their feet, rubbing their aching shoulders, they hefted their heavy baskets within their arms, and set out toward the village down the slope. The village women followed suit, followed after just as their husbands and fellow brothers. Each retiring to their huts for the night to rest their aching muscles, Kagome and Aiko on the other hand made their way towards Ume and her father’s hut down the path.

Both exhausted from their scavenging and cleaning within the fields, they were nonetheless pleased with their performance; they managed to cover an entire field within one day, though there were three more to go. Roughly, they figured at least three more days of cleanup would finish their task, however, by then, Aiko estimated what remained of most of the crops would become rotten within that time frame.

During their brisk walk, they noticed few traces of hay and broken pottery upon the ground at their feet. It seemed the bandits and the other villagers had done a decent job cleaning up around the huts. All that remained now was cleaning up the rest of the fields and fixing up the few huts which had burned down. However long that would take, Kagome wasn’t sure.

During their trek, Kagome couldn’t help but recognize the sounds of footsteps following close behind them, and bewildered, she stopped and turned. To her surprise, she noticed the bandits standing behind her and Aiko, bowing their heads at her surprised halt. What were they doing?

Aiko only blinked, her eyes shifting from the bandits to Kagome curiously.

“What is it?” Kagome asked, arching a brow at their strange behavior.

They lifted their heads, smiling somewhat dorkily towards her, which in turned caused the raven-haired girl to shift uneasily on her feet, the weight of the basket in her arms somewhat uncomfortable in her hold. Noticing the weight of the basket affecting Kagome, a couple of the bandits rushed forward, somewhat startling Aiko who stepped away in slight fear.

“Boss, let us hold it for you.”
“Yeah, boss. You’ve been working real hard in the fields.”

Although they were adamant on taking the basket from her, Kagome turned her body away, her basket out of reach of their grasping hands. “It’s alright. I can carry it. It’s not that heavy.”

“Are you sure boss?”

“Yeah, it looks a little uncomfortable for you…”

Kagome smiled at them, sweat dropping at their attempts to assist her. Under that rough exterior, they really were nice and sweet guys, but Kagome was beginning to think they were taking this entire ‘boss’ thing too literally. While she wanted to correct them about this matter, she realized she was too tired to begin an argument. Instead, she continued smiling. “I’m good, but thank you,” When they failed to disperse, Kagome blinked, her head tilting to the side questionably at their awkward stances in front of her and Aiko. “Was there something you needed?”

“Well, we’ve finished up for the day but is there anything else you want us to do?”

“Yeah. Everyone else has returned to their huts for the night, but if you want us to keep working, we will.”

“Just give us the word, boss.”

Surprised by their determination to help out, considering it was after dark, Kagome only shook her head, shifting her eyes to Aiko beside her for a brief moment. “There’s really nothing else to be done tonight, especially with it being so late. How would you see?” At their quietness, she continued. “Besides, you all look tired. Rest up for the night. Okay?” When she saw their nods, rubbing their backs and shoulders achingly, Kagome and Aiko turned and resumed their trek to Ume’s hut just ahead.

The sound of footsteps continued once more, and glancing over her shoulder, Kagome caught sight of the bandits following after them once more. What were they doing? Didn’t she tell them to rest up? Confused, she stopped and turned to them, Aiko turning as well just as bemused. “What is it?”

“Uh … well … where are we supposed to sleep?”

This caught her by surprise. That was actually a good question. Where were they supposed to sleep? Surely not outside, right? Then again, Kagome recalled a time when she slept outside Mayoko and Daisuke’s hut, a bundle of hay which kept her warm through the cold night.

“You can all sleep in the barn,” Aiko’s voice sounded suddenly. Unfortunately, we don’t have any spare huts at this time. You wouldn’t be by yourselves in the barn, of course. Since we lost a few huts this morning, you’ll be sleeping with some of the other villagers until we can begin rebuilding.”

At her words, the bandits’ shoulders dropped and their expressions soured. It wasn’t that they weren’t grateful to have somewhere to sleep, but it was the fact that they had to share the small building with some of the other villagers, the ones who had yelled discriminately towards them earlier that day.

“I don’t know boss. Not after what happened earlier…”

“Yeah, I don’t like that…”

While she understood the reason for their refusal and the displeased expressions upon their faces,
she otherwise couldn’t help but sigh. These guys were absolutely hopeless. Before she could tell them to sleep outside for the night, she and Aiko suddenly heard a familiar sound, one which caused a few of the bandits to blush and cover their stomachs in embarrassment.

“Have you guys not eaten yet?” Kagome asked.

To her surprise, they nodded, and she couldn’t help but sigh once more. They really were hopeless. Before she could offer them to follow her and Aiko back to Ume’s, a pair of footsteps caught their attention.

The figure of a tall individual, his stature lean and robust, emerged from the shadows of the huts, two small deer perched over his shoulders, his large hands holding the animals by their calves. When his dark eyes fell upon his men and that of Kagome and her friend, he arched a brow.

“Oh my!” Aiko exclaimed, a hand to her mouth as she stared at the two deer over his shoulders. Had he caught those animals himself?

“Yuuta?” Kagome blinked, staring at the deer just as well. “Have you been out hunting this entire time?”

He shook his head. “I laid a few traps this morning and managed to catch these two. Still haven’t seen a sign of their mother, but the men and I will be eating good tonight. We will be resting in the barn, I presume?”

Kagome nodded. “For a while, I’m afraid. There’s still much needed done around the village. Tomorrow they will begin rebuilding.”

Although the thought of sleeping in a barn displeased him, Yuuta otherwise showed no signs of it. “I see,” He replied before looking upon the bandits before him, their eyes entirely wide and glued upon the fouls, a dribble of drool spilling from the sides of their mouths. “Well men, let’s be off.”

At his retreat, they quickly followed, but not before bowing their heads to Kagome respectively. As soon as they disappeared into the barn with the other villagers, Kagome couldn’t help but pray a fight wouldn’t escalate during the night.

Aiko smiled at her sigh during their trek. “They seem to really like you, Kagome. Even though it’s only been one day.”

“They might look rough around the edges, but they don’t seem all that bad. I’m still surprised they were willing to accept this punishment for what they’ve done…”

Aiko nodded. “It is a bit weird, but you’re probably right. They seem like they can be trusted, but depending on how long they stay here, it will take a while for the entire village to appreciate them.”

Kagome glanced over her shoulder, her eyes falling onto the barn in the distance warily. “I just hope they behave themselves.”

Ψ

July 11th

The two eventually arrived upon a small hut, alit with a small fire within. Pushing back the flap and entering inside with their baskets, Kagome and Aiko greeted the little girl, who was immediately at their side with a large smile gracing her face. Her father was awake, still bed
ridden, but he smiled at their arrival, apologizing for his rudeness and unable to stand.

Setting the baskets aside, Kagome offered a respectful bow, bending at her knees to Ume’s father, and likewise with Aiko. After explaining they came to fix their supper, he was more than happy and yet still apologetic he couldn’t serve them for their offer.

While Ume sat beside her father, her little straw doll held securely in her grasp, Kagome and Aiko busily began tending to the small fire in the middle of the hut. Once it was started, Kagome secured the blackened pot over the flames, while Aiko poured a bucket of cold water into the pot. From their baskets, they managed to gather food that day which was still edible for consumption, although it wasn’t very much, even for the four of them. Then again, this was primarily for Ume and her father.

A handful of rice, radishes, and peas were poured into the bubbling pot and a couple freshly sliced fish were also dropped in. As Aiko tended to the soup, Kagome rummaged through the basket some more. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much else within but some stalks of wheat and rice. As soon as the soup reached a thickened consistency, Kagome ladled the rice stew into two small wooden bowls, the boiled fish cut up nicely and stacked atop the rice. It wasn’t much, but it was something to fill Ume and her father’s belly. Aiko and Kagome allowed themselves a small portion of what was left of the porridge, and it was enough to sustain them for the night. It wasn’t exactly tasty and was a bit plain in taste, but it otherwise served its job.

After spending a little time with the family, Aiko and Kagome said their goodbyes, despite Ume wanting them to stay longer. Eventually the two girls returned to Aiko’s hut and greeted by darkness, Aiko quickly pushed open the flap near the small window by the door. The moonlight drifted in through the small opening, and it brightened up the darkness within the hut.

Kagome took in the familiar surroundings, and while Aiko fumbled, pulling out two large futons for the night, Kagome suddenly recognized a familiar chest in the corner of the hut. Approaching it, she bent down and pushed open the lid, and she was surprised to see a familiar navy-blue blazer, white button up shirt and a pleated blue and gray skirt; it was her high school uniform which she had left behind that fateful day, and seeing that Aiko still kept it, bemused her.

“You still have my clothes?” Kagome voiced.

Laying out the futons and soothing out the wrinkles on the sides, Aiko’s eyes shifted to her friend and she softly smiled. “Of course. I knew these clothes were important to you and I wasn’t sure if you would return or not, so I held onto them.”

She appreciated this, closing the chest before returning to Aiko’s side. “I wasn’t sure if I would really come back, not after what happened…”

Laying their heads down upon the futon, Aiko curiously stared at the raven-haired girl beside her. There was a particular question which burned her curiosity; in fact, she’d been wondering about it since her return. “Kagome. If you don’t mind me asking, why did you come back?”

“Huh?” Kagome turned on her side, facing the young girl, her face illuminated by the moonlight from the window.

“It’s just … the village treated you so terribly, and not to mention Satouru attacked you. And yet, you came back when our village was attacked,” Aiko voiced. “Why?”

Although it was something she often wondered about, she realized she already knew the answer to that. “I came back … because there were still people who treated me kindly. When I saw the fire, I
couldn’t just not return and help.”

Aiko seemed to accept this. “Did you see the fire from your time?”

Kagome nodded. “I did.”

During the course of the night, Aiko had asked about Kagome’s world and how different it was compared to now. While Kagome wasn’t able to give her everything in regards to such information, she was able to tell her the advancements mankind made in the course of history. The discussion of some technologies and the usage of horses were no longer a mandatory way of transportation truly astounded her, but she didn’t question it; in fact, Aiko seemed to accept it, probably a lot easier than anyone else in the village would, and yet, Kagome was thankful for that.

“Your world seems so much safer than ours,” She replied, a somewhat sorrowful smile gracing her face. “The people there must be so happy and free. Like you said before, they have opportunities to pursue their dreams, more so than any of us here. I’m a bit envious of you, Kagome,” She laughed.

“It’s not as great as it might seem though…”

“Oh?”

Kagome nodded. “While we do get the freedom and right to pursue our educations and dreams, we do still face discrimination by others and we must still abide by certain laws,” She explained. “Society … well, let’s just say society has a certain image it tries to stigmatized on us and if many of us don’t fit that image, well … I’m sure you get the idea. And there’s still war in the world, but in regards to this time period, it’s become a lot worse, especially with the advance in technologies governing over that of swords…”

“I see…” Aiko mused silently. “Even 500 years in the future, things still haven’t changed much. “But still, it seems a lot easier to live in your time than it is ours, right?”

At this, Kagome pondered. “Well to be honest, yes. At least, that’s what I think now. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t hate your time period, but it’s just that I was never born in it and I’m still getting used to everything here. I’ve never experienced any of this before, so it’s still fairly new. I still can’t believe demons actually existed…”

Aiko’s eyes widened at this. “What do you mean?”

“Well, all our lives, as children and growing up, we’ve been taught that demons only reside in fairytales and myths. There’s no evidence in the future that tells of any demons ever existing this far back or ever. When I arrived here, I was really surprised to learn this,” Kagome explained, recalling Mistress Centipede and the demon crow from before.

This almost blew Aiko’s mind. How could it be possible to not know of this in the future? “How strange. Maybe…maybe we’ve progressed so far in life that we were actually able to eliminate all the demons…”

Kagome nodded. “Maybe. You might be right.”

Although Kagome watched Aiko’s expressions beside her, she couldn’t help but feel Aiko had more questions to ask, but she remained silent, appearing somewhat content with what she learned. Eventually sleep consumed the two girls.
There was a certain irritation in Kagome’s posture that afternoon, her feet firmly planted to the ground just outside High Priestess Kaede’s hut, her foot tapping ever so impatiently and her hands firmly placed on either side of her hips. The expression upon her face spoke nothing but frustration, her left eye twitching while she looked upon the nine bandits standing awkwardly before her. All this morning they’d been following her around, jumping at the chance to make her workload a lot easier, carrying the hefty baskets of spoiled crops and trash to drop off near the wagon. While she was grateful for their assistance, she didn’t expect their behavior to last hours since dawn, their heads seemingly always turning sharply the moment she bent down to pick something up and the next thing she knew, they were there.

Even the villagers, who were busy cleaning the remnants of what was left scattered upon the ground and fields noticed their unwanted display of obvious obsession with her. Kagome wasn’t oblivious to their stares, their pointed fingers and not to mention their foul-mouthed whispers not even ten feet away from her. “Alright. What gives? You’ve been following me around all morning,” Kagome all but remarked, keeping her irritation to a minimum, as best as she could control. From her peripheral vision, she noticed Aiko and Kosuke watching from the sidelines a distance away, most likely noticing a small crowd of villagers looking her way.

The bandits’ expressions altered, some looking hurt and confused, while the others submissively lowered themselves to the ground, possibly expecting a slap or some kind of abuse. Simultaneously, they apologized, and it only served to irk the raven-haired girl further.

At this point, Kagome crossed her arms. “Well?”

One of the bandits, their head clean of any hair and dressed in the usual armor as the rest of them, clasped his palms together before her, hesitation gracing his features. “We just wanted to make sure you were alright, boss.”

Another agreed beside him. “Yeah. After everything we did to this village, we wanted to help out more. We didn’t like seeing you struggling to pick up all this stuff.”

“You guys follow?”

One of the bandits on the ground, his upper lip somewhat covered by his mustache, an eye patch over his eye, only nodded. “We didn’t like the way the villagers turned against you and not to mention that one guy who insulted you near the entrance. Boss, we don’t like that you’re still remaining in this village. You don’t deserve that kind of treatment.”

“We’ll protect you, boss. Even if you don’t tell us to, we want to protect you.”

Hearing this, Kagome only sighed. So that’s what this was all about? Well, she supposed she should have expected that answer. “You don’t have to protect me from anyone. I am more than capable of handling my own matters,” She replied. Kagome wasn’t the type of girl to let others look after her or protect her; all her life, she handled it on her own and quite well, to an extent. “As for you guys following, would you stop?”

Their eyes widened at her words and their heads dropped solemnly and confusedly. They didn’t understand why she was against their assistance, but it only proved she wasn’t like the rest of the village women they’d met.

“But bos-”
She wagged her finger, interrupting one of the bandits suddenly. “Listen. I know that yesterday we weren’t exactly on good terms, but calling me your boss after is another thing…”

“But you saved us!” One of them exclaimed worryingly. “You are more than worthy of being our leader.”

More than worthy? But Kagome wasn’t a leader, she wasn’t part of their band of rogue bandits, and she certainly wasn’t comfortable with this entire situation. Yet before she could retaliate back with her disapproval, someone else joined the conversation, and she recognized it was Yuuta.

Since this morning, he’d noticed his men following the young girl from one end of the village to the next, almost fighting one another to attend to her needs, which he knew were unnecessary, but still the sight was a bit humorous in his opinion. Judging by their words of exchange this very moment, Kagome was not pleased, and he understood why.

“Yuuta?” Kagome blinked.

“They’re right, Kagome,” He replied, much to her dissatisfaction. He went on despite her frown. “It’s customary for bandits. Should another rival their leader’s abilities or fighting spirit and win, then they are seen as more than worthy of the title.”

“But I’m not—”

He interrupted her. “You proved your worth against the demon controlling our leader. You showed loyalty and honor to your people, and you protected even them until the end, despite being a hostage at the time,” Yuuta replied.

At his words, the other bandits nodded vigorously, and Kagome’s shoulders dropped at this, understanding shining in her eyes.

“They only wish to protect you as you have protected them.”

For a moment, she was silent, her eyes looking from Yuuta to the bandits before her, some standing and some lowered onto their knees waiting for a reply. As annoying as their behavior was, she realized now this was probably a normal thing for the bandits. Should someone much stronger come along, they might end up following that person instead. “I see. But there’s more to life than just being a bandit. Do you all wish to continue living like that? Stealing and hurting people?”

Now this took them all by surprise, even Yuuta’s whose eyes widened at her words. They exchanged looks, murmuring their whispers to each other before looking back at Kagome who silently looked between them.

“If it displeases you, then we promise not to hurt other people. We can do our best to change that, boss.”

“Yeah, whatever you want boss. You say it and we’ll do it.”

“But only if it’s not a threat. If someone threatens you or even us, then we have no choice but to fight.”

A sigh escaped her. “No. that’s not what I meant…” When she saw their confusion, she waved her hands before her, motioning for the other bandits to stand up rather than remain seated on their knees. “I don’t want to give you orders and have you follow those orders. I want you guys to make your own decisions and do what you want to do,” She clarified. “Listen … do you really like being bandits? Do you like hurting and stealing from other people?”
“It’s all we’ve ever known…” One commented.

“Yeah, in order to get by in life, we have to do what we need to do to survive, boss.”

“To be honest boss, I don’t like all this farming. I used to be a farmer’s son long ago,” One of them replied, recalling terrible events long ago with a displeased expression. “I took up the sword but not for a noble cause. It’s something I’ve known since I was a child, boss.”

“I didn’t know you were a farmer, Kei,” Another bandit replied, staring at his companion beside him who only nodded.

“Yeah, well. That old life isn’t worth remembering,” Kei replied. “But my point is. It’s easier to kill and steal than it is to work long hours in a field sowing crops.”

That was interesting to learn, but she somewhat understood their reasoning, even if it wasn’t very good. Working in the fields took a lot of energy and focus, and tending to crops normally took an entire day, but even half the work wouldn’t come close to being done, depending on how big your fields were. Not to mention all the taxes they had to pay, and from what she learned while staying in Kaede’s village, even they weren’t privy to their entire harvest since much of it was taken by to their Lord in Edo. For these bandits, it was easy for them to steal, harness a lot of money from their victims and carry on through life a lot more easily than the rest of them, but still, it was wrong. Maybe not to them, but still.

“Are you interested in changing that at all?” Kagome asked, hoping maybe she could deter them from their path and turn their lives around for the good. Judging by how they hadn’t killed anyone in the village during their raid, maybe there was still some good in them. “Are you interested in being a normal villager instead of a bandit?”

Again, the bandits exchanged looks with each other, and Yuuta remained ever so silent watching. For a long moment, they were caught up in their murmured whisperings, waving their hands around every once in a while, as they discussed the topic. When they finally came to a conclusion, they turned to Kagome.

“We could try, boss.”

Her eyes lit up at those words and a wide smile graced her face. This was great. Maybe she could actually change their lives for the better. Kagome could imagine many lives being saved and these bandits living a much easier life within the village, learning to adapt and friend the people.

“But we can’t guarantee this, boss.”

Her smile dropped. What?

They somewhat awkwardly rubbed the back of their necks, some smiling a bit forcibly towards her and at each other.

“Yeah. For now, we want to stay by your side and protect you. We promise not to hurt the villagers and we’ll do our best to please you, boss.”

Even if it wasn’t an entire change, it was something at least. They were willing to do what it took to change, even if it wasn’t a guarantee. They had listened to her words, understood how uncomfortable it made her to be treated like so, and they seemed to catch on, a little bit. Still, it was a start, something which would take time to get used to.

“Well in that case, the first thing you can all do right now is help the villagers,” She replied. At
their uneasy looks, their gazes shifting to the villagers scornfully looking in their direction, they stiffened. “There’s a lot to do around the village, a little more cleaning here and there and—”

An unexpected and feminine shriek rang in the air, everyone’s eyes turning towards the source of the noise, only to spot a distressed woman in the throng of villagers pointing towards the cloudy skies overhead. As Kagome and everyone else turned their gazes upwards, they saw a horrendous sight of a massive black feathered bird flying above their village, circling the skies, its multiple red eyes looking down hungrily at the people.

All at once, a chorus of screams vociferated around her, men and women running to the safety of their huts, their children gathered in their arms tightly. As Kagome found herself being shoved around by multiple bodies running past her, the bandits did their best to shield her from the beast flying overhead.

At that moment, High Priestess Kaede quickly exited her hut, her old eyes widened at the sight of the villagers fleeing in panic, some remaining grounded to their spot in fear. “What is happening?!” To answer her question, she saw the monstrous bird circling the village, its large talons opening and closing with anticipation.

“It’s a demon!” Someone cried.

Although High Priestess Kaede was helpless in this matter to fight off the bird and protect her village, a few village men stepped up to the task, gathering their pitch forks and spears while a few other picked up their bows and quivers of arrows to shoot down the beast if it got any closer.

“It’s the bird from yesterday!” Kagome exclaimed, her legs trembling at the sight of its ginormous stature. How had it become so much larger than before? And here she thought it was crushed beneath the rubble after the old shrine collapsed.

In one fell swoop, it descended upon them, its speed quickening as it prepared its talons to catch its prey. Fortunately, as it passed through, it barely managed to grab onto one of the villagers and ascended into the sky once more.

“Impossible. The barrier should’ve kept it at bay!” High Priestess Kaede remarked, her eyes widened fearfully.

At her words, Kagome blinked. Even the barrier had failed to hold back this demon? Just yesterday, it wasn’t nearly this size, but seeing it now, soaring the skies overhead, made her scarily uneasy. How on earth would they escape its wrath now?

“What are you fools doing?!” A familiar masculine voice rang out. “Take cover in the huts!”

Kagome turned at the voice, recognizing the face of Satouru in the crowd, who was now equipped with a bow and a quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder. His three friends followed behind him, making their way to High Priestess Kaede’s side, before urging her into her hut for safety from the demon, but the old woman refused haughtily.

“Kagome!” Kosuke cried out, and as she turned her head the other direction, she practically reached out for him, her eyes darting back to the skies worryingly. “It’s not safe! Take refuge inside! We’ll handle this!”

“What do you mean you’ll handle this?! Kosuke look how huge that bird is!” She replied back, knowing full well there was no possible way the men of this village could defeat such a demon.

While it wasn’t surprising Kagome was almost in hysterics seeing this, her legs trembling before
him, he grasped her arms and pulled her towards the safety of Kaede’s hut, despite her refusal. “Kagome please. Take shelter.”

“Kosuke…”

“It’s coming!” A village man cried out.

As everyone turned their sights to the skies, they watched horrifyingly as it swooped down once more, its entire body crashed through a few huts, the structures collapsing almost instantly from impact. The few villagers who were within the huts were covered by the rubble, whether or not they were alive, remained uncertain.

“Run!”

Someone slammed into Kagome, the multiple bodies around her pushing and colliding against one another in hopes of escaping the terror. Kagome all but fell onto her side, wincing as a stone dug into her hip. In an instant, Yuuta and the other bandits were at her side, Yuuta helping her to her feet before pushing her towards the hut where High Priestess Kaede and Aiko stood.

“What do we do?!” Aiko cried.

A shrill scream rang out suddenly, so loud and ear piercing, that it turned all heads, and to everyone’s horror, they witnessed a sight too gruesome for words. A young woman, no older than fifteen, had been caught by the demon, her entire body clenched tightly between its blackened beak, its sharp fangs tearing deeply into her midsection. She cried out, almost animalistic, her arms flailing and her legs kicking wildly, and the demon took to the skies once more, biting down hard onto its prey until her screams abruptly ceased.

Positive she was dead, Kagome turned her eyes away, her hands clenched tightly upon Yuuta’s shirt as he held her close. She couldn’t bear to witness her death, not like that, but there was an effective gasp in the crowd, and she turned her head.

To her terror, half her body dropped from the skies, the lower half remaining firmly within its mouth, her entrails falling like bloody snakes in the vicinity. There was a loud thud after, her upper body lying motionless upon the ground a short distance away, blood oozing consistently around her.

Aiko gasped at the sight and covered her face with her hands.

Silence filled the air, the people shrinking back, many crowding the hut beside Priestess Kaede, praying for some form of aid from their leader, but even she could not do anything against this demon, not with her injury. There was really no where they could run without getting caught, their backs pressed hard against the wooden walls of the huts.

Feasting upon her innards, the bird paused in the sky overhead, its black talons pulling its prey’s leg, ripping parts of her body apart as it devoured her more easily. Buckets of rain fell from overhead where it lingered, and lightning lit the clouds in the distance. Soon enough, its beak was coated with blood and raw flesh, the sight of her lower half still twitching ever so slightly in its mouth.

“Suki! Suki!” A middle-aged man called out. His hands shook, fear ensnaring him entirely as his slow strides carried him towards his daughter, lying in a puddle of her own blood. Although the villagers cried out to him, urging him to ignore the girl, he disregarded them. His daughter. His own daughter had been killed by a demon.
“She’s dead! Leave her!” Satouru shouted, turning his gaze to the bird overhead worryingly.
“Damn it! She’s already dead!”

Holding tightly to Yuuta’s shirt, Kagome felt tears prickle her eyes. The girl must have been his daughter. She watched, helplessly as his strides quickened before collapsing before her corpse, or what was left of it. “How awful…” There was no denying she was scared. While Mistress Centipede was a terrifying ordeal, this crow was also just as terrifying. The bird could have decided to keep its prey alive and carry it off to its nest but instead, it decided to feast upon her ligaments before them.

“Don’t look…” Yuuta voiced, but it was already too late; she’d seen it all, everything from her frantic screams to the sound of her body snapping in half.

Tearfully looking across the path, she couldn’t help but notice the victim’s arms move, almost twitching beside the father. Kagome gasped. “She’s still alive!”

“What?!” Yuuta exclaimed almost unbelievably. “But how?”

While his bow remained positioned in his hold tightly, an arrow notched and ready to strike, Satouru made his way carefully towards the father and the fallen girl, taking his place beside the two. Yet, when he got there, he almost fell back in disbelief, the girl’s eyes frantic, shifting from side to side as blood oozed from her midsection. How was it possible she was still living?

“Suki. Suki…” The father called, taking hold of his daughter carefully and cradling her head against his chest. “I’m sorry … I’m so sorry…”

“Pa … pa…”

The father broke down, unable to hold back the onslaught of anguish wracking his body. He cried out loudly, his cry filled with the sorrow of losing a loved one. Yet as he mourned, he was unaware of the man standing behind him, a sickle drawn menacingly.

“It’s too late for her. Let her go and hurry to safety,” Satouru urged, kneeling beside him, a hand placed upon his trembling shoulders. Better judgment told him it was best to leave the girl, as she was already food by this point, and she would die within moments. Looking over his shoulder, he caught sight of his three friends, two of them holding tightly to a large fishnet and awaiting orders. ‘Once it's finished feasting upon her, it'll swoop down to devour what's left of her.’ By that time, they would throw the net over the bird, effectively trapping it and from there, they would end its pitiful life.

“Suki…” The sight of his daughter convulsing within his hold tore him apart, her eyes frantically staring toward the skies where the bird circled. “Suki, don’t look. You mustn’t look…”

“H-hu … rts … papa…”

Tenderly brushing back her raven locks and turning her face towards his chest and away from the direction of the demon, the father felt another tug on his shoulder by the man beside him. Looking over, he saw it was Satouru, his face contorted disgustedly towards the girl in his arms and the sickle in his grasp, held tightly and prepared to strike. “What are you doing?!” He almost fell back from the sight, realizing the young man intended to kill his daughter.

“It’s already too late. Do you not see how much pain she is in? I’ll end her life now. There’s nothing else that can be done. She’s a goner either way, but this is for the best,” Satouru explained.

“No! She’s my daughter! I won’t let you touch her!” He cried out, his eyes large and almost
unfocused. “Stay away!”

From the sidelines, Kagome gasped. While she couldn’t hear every word between the two, she realized Satouru intended to put the girl out of her misery, as mortifying as it was for everyone. If the situation wasn’t so dire, she would have disagreed as well, but considering what she suffered, it was for the best, as much as she wanted to deny it. “There’s no saving her…”

“Damn it,” Yuuta cursed. “It’s moving!” He cried, pointing at the demon.

Swallowing her entire leg in one gulp, blood spilling from its beak, the bird descended upon the three, its scarlet eyes hungrily locking onto the remnants of what remained of its prey below. As it neared, an arrow unexpectedly flew past its field of vision, but it didn’t deter it from its target.

“Run!” Kosuke cried out, another arrow notched.

Realizing the middle-aged man wouldn’t budge, most likely accepting the oncoming death just as his daughter, Satouru took matters into his own hands. With all his strength, he pulled the girl from his grasp, her body falling several feet away, and while it mortified the father, Satouru otherwise didn’t care. “It’s too late for her! Accept it!” His body slammed into him, the two falling onto the ground mere seconds before it landed.

The sound of bones crunching under the weight of the demon sickeningly resonated within the village, and the girl gave one final breath. The father cried out hysterically, watching in absolute horror as the demon tore through her neck, its talons ripping at her arm, dislocating it from its socket before tearing hungrily into it entirely.

“Suki! Suki!”

Despite his calls to his daughter, Satouru glanced behind him, signaling his friends to hurry. “Now! Throw the net!” Picking himself up, and forcing the father to stand, he signaled Kosuke over and after getting the father away and back to safety, he turned back with his sickle ready.

His three friends ran forward, mustering as much courage as they could and tossed the net over the demon. The bird didn’t react instantly, too engrossed in its meal to notice, and as his friends held tightly to the ends of the net, Satouru signaled the other men of the village, to attack.

“Now men! Eliminate the beast!”

All at once, the men of the village moved, leaving behind their wives and children who remained huddled together fearfully near the huts. Kosuke and Yuuta, followed after by a few other archers who took their positions a few feet away and notched their arrows, the pointed shafts soaring and hitting the bird instantly. Those who were equipped with farming tools followed after and drove their tools into the demon’s body, piercing its wings, back and stomach simultaneously.

When it seemed they were almost victorious, the bird gave a loud shriek, its large wings suddenly tearing through parts of the fishnets. Grasping onto the netting with its mouth, it pulled, practically dragging Satouru’s friends towards it without mercy, but they held tightly, trying their best to remain grounded in their spot.

“Don’t let up men! Kill it! Hold onto the net!” Satouru bellowed, driving his sickle into back, tearing at it flesh.

“We can’t hold on much longer, Satouru!” One of his friend cried out panicked.

“Spears and arrows, nothing is working against it!”
Satouru cursed, watching almost helplessly as the hole in the netting grew larger. “Shit! Pull back! Pull back!”

Within mere seconds, the netting broke and the bird lunged free, the expansion of its wings throwing the men off their feet. It shrieked at them, and at that moment, the villagers ran around the huts in fear, hiding behind the structures while others took cover within. A few of the men guided Priestess Kaede away from the area, as well as Kagome and the others.

“I said pull back!” Satouru shouted.

As two of his friend released the net and backed off, following Satouru’s orders, one of them wasn’t so lucky. Mitsuki, who was still holding tightly to one end of the netting, was paralyzed in fear, and the crow demon took that moment of shock and dragged the young man towards it.

It happened instantaneously. One minute, Mitsuki was being pulled and the next, the demon reached out with its talons and bit hard into his arm, blood pouring from the open wound. Mitsuki cried out, his free arm reaching towards Satouru and his friends, but they remained frozen in their spot, watching helplessly as the bird bit into him.

Before anything could be done to stop it, the bird flew off with its captive. Mitsuki’s arm was held tightly in its beak, the rest of his body hanging limply as it covered a great distance over the village. Not long after the bird’s ascent, Mitsuki’s body dropped, falling into one of the rice paddies away.

“Damn it!” Satouru cursed, ignoring his friends who were frozen in fear and fled towards the area Mitsuki fell. While the bird remained distracted above them, he arrived at the rice paddies shortly after and saw his friend half submerged in the water. Bending down, he reached out and pulled his friend above the surface, dragging his body onto the grass to inspect his wounds. Upon seeing the severity of his injuries, Satouru paled.

Still alive and thankful for his friend’s help, Mitsuki smiled somewhat pathetically. When the bird flew off with him, his entire arm had been ripped from its socket, and though he was losing a lot of blood, he was still alive.

“Mitsuki…”

“I’m alright. It’s not as painful as it looks,” He replied before a ripple of pain overcame him seconds after, but he only relaxed in Satouru’s arms, his breathing a bit erratic. “I think I’ll live…”

“Mitsuki!”

“Satouru, is he alright?!”

The sounds of his two friends running towards them a distance away didn’t reach his ears. Something flashed in Satouru’s gaze, his eyes lingering on the extent of the injury before looking up toward the bird circling overhead. There was no saving Mitsuki, that much he knew, and even if he said he was alright, there was no way of escaping such a fate.

With that thought in mind, Satouru laid his friend in the grass, a somewhat passive look overtaking him. The sorrow he felt moments ago for Mitsuki faded from his face and instead was replaced with nothing, not even remorse. “I’m afraid this is the end of the road for you Mitsuki…”

“What? What are you … talking about?” While Mitsuki confusedly looked up at his friend, he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of fear when he saw Satouru raise his sickle over his face. “S-Satouru! No wait! Don’t kill me!”
The sounds of his two friends behind him were nearing, and as time was ticking, Satouru knew it had to be done. “Even if we manage to save your life, you’d only slow everyone down as you are now. What use would a man be without an arm?”

“Satouru no! Please, spare me!” Mitsuki cried out, trying in vain to scoot away, kicking his legs in hopes of putting some distance between them, but it was useless.

Grasping his leg, Satouru leaned over him and raising his sickle, he plunged the sharp blade through his skull. Within seconds it was over, and the fear which had clouded Mitsuki disappeared. “Sorry friend. But it was for the best…” With one last look at his corpse, he stood up and turned, but he paused at the sight of his two friends staring horrifically at him.

Their eyes shifted from Mitsuki and to Satouru’s sickle frightenedly. Whatever had possessed Satouru to attack his friend left them entirely speechless and wary. This was not the Satouru they once knew, this was a monster.

“Y-you killed…”

“W-we could … have saved him…”

Regardless if they could or couldn’t, what was done was done. Sooner or later they would come to understand why Satouru chose what he did, but for now, they had more pressing matters to attain to. Without even answering his two friends, he ran past them and towards the huts where the other villagers were hiding and cowering in fear, and soon after, they followed as well.

As the demon flew overhead, half the villagers who’d been hiding quietly behind the hut with Kagome and High Priestess Kaede suddenly fled. Their incessant screams captured the demon’s attention, and it dove after them. Fortunately, the crowd separated just as it descended, diverging in different directions, some seeking the sanction of the shrine up the steps.

“Papa! Papa!” A child cried.

Recognizing the familiar and soft voice, Kagome turned away from Kaede, Kosuke and Yuuta, her cerulean eyes falling onto the little girl a great distance away. During the escapade, she’d fallen, struggling to pick herself off the ground, and when Kagome saw the demon flying over her, Kagome’s legs moved instinctively. “Ume!”

“Kagome no!” Kosuke reached out.

“Come back!” Yuuta hollered.

“Kagome!” Aiko cried.

Ignoring their calls, Kagome’s legs carried her towards the child, her steps quickening with each passing moment. Her heart drummed loudly in her ears, the sight of the bird flying over her and towards the little girl frightened Kagome, and just as she neared, several feet away from her, she’d lost her footing, her straw sandals effectively tripping her.

Struggling to lift herself up, knowing she’d scuffed up her knees from the fall, she watched helplessly as the child was caught by the demon, its black and large talons wrapping around her small body before ascending into the sky once more. “No! Ume!”

“It’s making off with her!” Someone shouted.

“Kagome! Come back!” Aiko cried.
But she didn’t listen. Although she knew there was probably no saving Ume, Kagome didn’t want to believe it. There had to be a way to stop the demon and save her life. Without really thinking, she regained her standing, tossing her sandals and chased after the demon. All the while, she was weaponless, and she realized too late she had no way of fighting the bird.

Someone else was following after her, the sound of their footsteps nearing hers, but she didn’t turn to see who it was. Her gaze was primarily focused above her, watching Ume struggle within the demon’s grasp calling desperately for her papa.

‘What do I do? If nothing is done soon, it’ll likely carry her off and eat her! I have to think of something, anything!’

Ahead of her, Kagome noticed she was nearing the river which separated the village from the fields. Along the way, she noticed one of the village men standing there, cowering in fear at the sight of the crow passing over him. Before she passed the man, she paused, noticing his quiver of arrows and a bow at his side. Without so much as a thought, she grabbed the weapons and continued her trek towards the river.

“Woman! What the hell are you doing?!” Satouru’s voice shouted from behind.

Ignoring him, Kagome crossed the wooden bridge, pausing on it as she notched an arrow, her aim pointed directly at the bird demon. It wasn’t very far from her, and if she aimed just a little higher, she could hit her target. With shaking arms, she let loose the arrow, watching dismally as it missed its target.

“Not good,” She muttered, notching another arrow.

Fortunately, the demon noticed the attack from behind, pausing briefly in the air above to inspect the woman standing on the bridge. For whatever reason it paused, Kagome was thankful. Taking aim once more, she released the arrow, only barely missing its target. It was close, but not close enough. If only she took up archery like her grandfather wanted years ago.

Ume, who’d been crying out for her papa to save her, knowing he was at home resting in bed from his burn injuries, suddenly noticed the demon’s stall. Looking down toward the bridge, she caught sight of a familiar raven-haired woman. “Miss. Kagome! Kagome help!”

Before she could reach for another arrow, she was unexpectedly pushed to the ground, her bow slipping from her hands. Looking up, she realized Satouru was now standing beside her, his arrow notched and aimed. Without even a word, he let loose and the arrow effectively hit the demon in the stomach.

Seeing this, Kagome stood up quickly, her hands grasping tightly to the wooden railings of the bridge. The bird reacted violently from the attack, flapping its wings erratically in pain. “You did it!” Kagome cried out, hoping the bird would fly over to the ground and let Ume go, but unfortunately, it didn’t go as planned.

Satouru released another arrow, this one hitting the demon between its multiple eyes. Pleased with the hit, he and Kagome watched as it dropped the child, the two falling into the currents of the river submerged. Because of this outcome, he turned to Kagome beside him with a scowl. “What do you think you’re recklessly doing? Go back! You’re in the way!”

At his words, Kagome cast him an irritated look before running past him toward the shore. When
she neared, her gaze looking toward the currents frighteningly, the other villagers who’d seen the bird shot down came running over. When many crossed the bridge, celebrating elatedly that the bird had been shot down and killed, they suddenly heard a splash.

“She jumped in!” Someone cried, pointing towards the river.

“Do you suppose she’s a water imp?”

Satouru looked as well, followed after by the others. “What the hell? The bitch is crazy!” Why was she jumping in there when the kid was probably already dead? “She’s really asking for it!”

“Kagome!” Aiko cried out, running towards the lake with Kosuke and Yuuta beside her. “What happened? Did she jump in?”

Crossing the bridge, High Priestess Kaede peered down at the water, her old eyes trying to pinpoint the young girl’s whereabouts, but there were no movements. So, the girl jumped in at the cost of her own life to save the little girl?

Silence fell over them and after a long minute waiting with anticipation, now knowing what would surface, if anything or anyone, there was another splash. Immediately everyone jumped at the sound, surprised when they noticed it was Kagome, trying desperately to swim back to shore, cradling the child in her other arm.

“Kagome! Ume!” Aiko cried out, running towards the shore with her arms outstretched to her friend. Helping the raven-haired girl to her feet, entirely drenched from head to toe, they placed Ume onto her back. “Is she alright?”

“Has she stopped breathing?” Someone asked.

Eventually a crowd gathered around the small child, who was lying motionless in the grass, her head turned to the side and her eyes closed. Seeing this, they realized she’d drown and could only lower their heads remorsefully.

Checking her pulse, Kagome’s fingers sliding upon her neck and wrist, Kagome realized her heartrate was faint, and she had no choice but to perform resuscitation on the child. As odd as it might appear to the other villagers, it was the only way, otherwise the child would continue choking on the water in her lungs.

Without a moment’s pause, Kagome tilted the child’s head back, pinching her nose before placing her mouth upon her own. From there, she breathed into her mouth, hoping to fill her lungs with oxygen. Fortunately, no one said a word around her, and for that, she was entirely grateful. Once breathing into her, she gently placed her hands onto her chest, creating rhythmic pumps, which would in turn force the water from her lungs. She did this for a few moments, switching back and forth between the two until eventually the child coughed up the water.

“She’s alive!”

“The girl revived her with magic!”

“Boss you did it!” One of the bandits cheered.

“Way to go boss!”

Astonishment and whispers spread amongst the people, and High Priestess Kaede found herself at a loss for words. How extraordinary. It was definitely clear Kagome was not a normal girl, despite
being from a different time period. ‘Even in the face of danger, ye was willing to go above and beyond, despite ye inabilities to fight the demon. Kagome, ye managed to save the life of one child…’

Cradling the child against her chest, Kagome smoothed her fingers through Ume’s hair, the child leaning into her warmth shivering. It was fortunate she was alright, free of any injuries besides a few scratches on her arms and feet.

A sudden splash shifted everyone’s attention off Kagome and Ume, a sudden fear rising within them when they saw the crow demon had resurfaced from the water’s currents. Fearfully, they fell back in fear, the village men standing protectively in front of them with whatever weapon they held in their possession.

“It’s alive!” Someone screamed.

It flew from the water’s edge, the arrows still lodged into its bodies, its injuries still great, and yet, it still had the energy for more. As it flew up from the river, ascending high into the sky, it flew overhead, its target, the raven-haired girl with blue eyes.

“Damn it! Why won’t it die?!” Yuuta cursed.

“Shit, I only have one arrow left!” Satouru growled.

It lunged, descending rapidly upon them. The villagers immediately scattered, crossing the bridge in hopes of getting out of its path. The bandits quickly scooped up the little girl, a few of them trying to pull Kagome out of its intended reach, but Kagome remained grounded to her spot, her eyes heatedly staring transfixed upon the demon.

“Boss look out!”

“Boss run!”

“Miss. Kagome!”

Prepared to strike the girl, its elongated, razor fanged beak opening with anticipation, it was a few feet away before a blinding blue light enveloped itself around the girl. Kagome’s eyes glistened in a surreal and mystifying glow, and those who saw this, paused in their escape, distracted by the light emanating off her body.

“How could it be? That light! How was it possible that light resurfaced? ‘It can’t be. It’s impossible…”

With her arms outstretched in front of her, a power surged from her palms and the light which entrapped itself around her body propelled itself at the demon. So bright and so intense, even the proximity of the forest behind her and the village became shrouded by its glow.

**Author Notice:**

Happy Thanksgiving everyone! I hope you all enjoy this chapter!
Ominous Beginning

Chapter Summary

Someone evil senses the jewel's return, and has his minions set out to find it. Meanwhile, Kaede has a plan to protect Kagome, but after yesterday's attack, it seems the villagers have changed their outlook upon Kagome.

Ivory fingers reached out for the steaming cup handed to him by a servant knelt before his velvet plush seating, gold and silver trimming the edges of his chair. Grasping the delicate china, he breathed in the pleasant aroma, his eyes closing briefly while inhaling the sweet scent. The tea was a relaxer, grounded down by the finest and rarest of herbs not easily found within the territory.

As he brought the steaming liquid to his lips, the contents dancing across his tongue divinely, slipping down his throat easily, he leaned back with a pleased sigh. It was a rich flavor of mint and licorice and dealt wonderfully against most ailments of the outside world. Content with his refreshment, he ushered the servant away with a wave of his hand, his crimson eyes shifting towards the entry way of his chamber.

“You’ve been standing a while, why not come in and make yourself comfortable?” He asked, his eyes tracing the outline of the beautiful woman half concealed by the shadows of the room.

Gracing his eminence with a curt nod, her expression speaking irritation, she obliged. Stepping further into the room, he noted she was dressed in a fine pink and white kimono, the sleeves long enough to cover her porcelain skin and slender figure, her bare feet hidden beneath the garment’s length. Raven black hair was held up into a high ponytail, the remainder of her long wavy strands braided around the base of her head, securing her interesting hairstyle.

Her slender body swayed, a decorative fan held in one hand, covering her face partially before standing before him. Two jaded earrings dangled from her small pointed ears, and although he couldn’t see it, he knew her lips were painted red behind her fan.

“You’re always greeting me with such a scowl,” He remarked, finding her arrogance charming.

“You may relax. I won’t harm you, unless you give me a reason to, Kagura.”

Crimson eyes narrowed. “Indeed…” She replied not trusting his sarcasm, and lowered her fan. Without another word, she gracefully sauntered closer to him, seating herself to his left while he continued sipping his tea.

An air of awkward silence fell between them, and while her gaze lingered on her lordship, his eyes closed and his expression unreadable, the woman took in his refined appearance. Dressed in a form fitted black and white Kimono, the length exceeding no further than his ankles and his sleeves rolled up at his elbows, she noted his long wavy raven locks laid messily over his shoulders and lower back.

“I trust you handled the affairs I entrusted to you?” He inquired.

“Rest assured. They’ve been handled accordingly, and without dispute, Naraku,” She replied,
somewhat irritated.

After making herself comfortable, Naraku’s maid offered her a cup of freshly brewed tea, and accepting it, she breathed in the lovely scent. Unlike Naraku’s, this tea was made from the leaves of a Sencha plant, and it held a milder sweetness, a taste she tolerated better than most.

The maid returned shortly after with a small tray in hand filled with an abundant of foods, most of which were more to Naraku’s taste. This time, rather than accepting, she waved the maid and her tray away, content with the tea.

“Where is Kanna?”

“She is continuing the task you assigned to her since. As of late, the number of people she has brought in has greatly increased. At this rate, we’ll reach more than the quota you originally planned.”

A delightful hum fell from his lips, and pleased with the news, he leaned back within his chair. Things were going accordingly, and with that, less worries filled his thoughts. Sadly, his few moments of peacefulness were abruptly interrupted when the doors to his chamber flew open.

Kagura barely looked away from her steaming cup, hearing familiar sounds of feminine laughter resounding within the room and then the hurried steps of their slippered feet crossing the room.

Three beautiful women, dressed in silken and colorful kimonos, practically threw themselves upon him, their hands gliding upon his arms and legs in a fashion which made his skin crawl.

Containing a smirk behind her cup, Kagura watched the color drain from his face. If there was ever a day she could witness his disturbed expression, then this was it. It was delightful because Naraku certainly couldn’t do away with their bothersome selves; in a way, it was more of a curse than a blessing.

“Come play with us, My Lord!”

“Yes, come play with us!”

Kagura squinted her gaze, watching with somewhat mild disgust, as their fingers glided upon his legs and arms, one straying from the others and in a downward fashion. To think such humans held an absurd affection for him disappointed her, but at the moment, his utter disbelief and embarrassment satisfied her.

Though he attempted to control his composure, he felt his body respond in ways he hadn’t felt in years, and the very notion irritated him. These foolish women, unabashed of their ignorance to simply waltz right into his chamber and without permission certainly crossed a fine line, and yet, it was a line he couldn’t end.

“I will join you later tonight. For now, I am with company,” He replied, easing one of the ladies off his lap. With a wave of his hand, he sent them away, and they left somewhat despondently. A breath of relief fell from his lips upon their exit. “The things I must tolerate when it comes to that fool…”

Setting her tea down, Kagura mused. “Speaking of such a fool, I haven’t seen him for the past few days. Is he being punished again?”

“I locked him away for a short time. During my absence, he made quite the mess. The fool thought it would be a wonderful idea to open the gates and invite all the common folk for a celebratory
gathering of sorts,” He replied, scowling in remembrance. “Last I checked, you were supposed to watch him, Kagura…”

She feigned ignorance, her eyes looking elsewhere within the dark chamber. “I am not that fool’s babysitter. I had my own affairs to attend. Or did you forget? You did send me out on a mission the previous night.” She recalled.

He scoffed, placing his teacup down rather loudly upon the counter. “If only he could be out of my life entirely. I regret having helped him long ago…”

‘That’s your problem, not mine,’ Kagura thought bitterly.

Silence fell between them, each wrapped within their own musings. Though there was a sense of irritation between the two, they otherwise put up with each other.

A thought came to his lordship, and he shifted his crimson gaze to the wind witch beside him. “That reminds me. Kagura, I have another—” He suddenly paused, the air within the room stagnant and strange. The hairs upon his arms and neck alerted him something had arisen, something which contained a dark aura. “Do you feel that?”

Noticing his disturbing trancelike state, the Wind Sorcerous watched his expression curiously. What had gotten into him so suddenly? “What is it?” She asked, using her instincts to trace the source of his perplexing behavior. While concentrating, her eyes immediately widened, and she felt a sudden chill crawl up her back. What was this feeling? It felt almost ominous.

No sooner had she felt it, Naraku moved from his placement and towards the balcony near them, with Kagura following after. Once outside, the gray clouds overhead signifying an oncoming storm, they noticed a distant light South of them, its intensity so bright and chilling, it shot up through the skies in a pillar of dark energy.

Almost speechless, her crimson eyes wide with wonder, she watched the curious spectacle until it faded from sight. A few seconds after, she looked beside her, Naraku’s visage purely reeking of excitement. “What … was that?”

“A power I have not felt in many years. To think it’s returned to this world once more,” He darkly replied, a sudden smirk gracing his countenance. “Kagura…”

“What is it?”

“I want you and Kanna to investigate the source of that power. Find out where it’s located and return here quickly,” He ordered. Without another word, he returned to his room, leaving her standing with piqued curiosity.

Find the source of that power? If she didn’t know any better, it would seem Naraku was up to something. Whatever that energy was, it certainly wasn’t human or demon. Whatever the case, if it meant she could leave this place for even a few days, she was grateful for the distraction.

Ψ

Silence befell her entire village, or what was left after its desecration. The roaring flames of the fire did not settle, and her large brown eyes looked upon the wreckage in mortification, the petrified stares of the villagers distancing themselves from her. Blood stained the alabaster snow, the color draining from her face as she fell back, her eyes misting at the sight of the corpses littered around her.
What had she done?

Her eyes fell onto her hands frighteningly, the warmth she’d felt moments ago suddenly gone. She was only trying to help everyone, but something happened to her, something she couldn’t explain, and it scared her. What did she do? “I … I … I’m sorry…”

At her apologetic state, huddled in the frost-bitten snow, her face and clothing splattered by fresh blood, they stepped away, their fingers pointed accusingly towards the child.

“Monster!”

“Abomination!”

Monster? Abomination? Why? She wasn’t either of those things, but they were afraid of her. Struggling to overcome the circumstances of her situation, the child regained her standing, but she was suddenly assaulted by stones and branches, the screaming of women and children following after.

“Demon! You’ve destroyed everything!”

“Don’t go near her or she’ll kill you as well!”

No. Why? How could something of this magnitude come to pass? How had things gone astray? How could she be a demon? A monster? Wasn’t she like the rest of them, human?

Ψ

The sun’s rays drifted through an opened window, and stirring from an ominous and baffling dream, Kagome’s cerulean eyes fluttered open. A terrifying image of a bird demon appeared within her thoughts, and with a sudden chill crawling up her back, Kagome sat up with a start. Clasping her chest fearfully, it took her a few moments to steady her quickened heartbeat before realizing her whereabouts.

A familiar hut presented itself before her, and recognizing the furnishings and familiar baskets of medicinal herbs lying in the corner of the small room, she breathed a sigh of relief. A throbbing pain lingered at the back of her head, the beginnings of a headache surfacing.

“My head is killing me…”

Footsteps entered the small hut, and without looking, Kagome knew it was the aged priestess. “Ye have awakened?” Her voice called from the doorway, a basket of herbs collected within her arms.

Watching as Kaede made herself comfortable across her futon, carefully setting the basket aside, Kagome turned toward her. “How long was I asleep?”

“An entire day. It is well past the afternoon, as we speak,” Kaede replied.

An entire day? Kagome’s eyes widened somewhat fearfully. “No one else was hurt, were they? What about Ume? Is she alright?”

“Ye may relax,” she soothed, stoking the fire to her right with a stick. “The rest of the villagers are fine. We lost a couple lives yesterday, less than I imagined we would,” Noticing her words somewhat comforted the young woman, she went on. “Tell me, Kagome. Do ye remember what happened yesterday?”
Silence befell them, and musing briefly, Kagome thought back to the horrifying events regarding the bird demon. It fell upon them shortly after she and the other bandits returned to the village. A young woman, perhaps the same age as herself, was preyed upon by the disgusting creature, and though she wanted to rid her thoughts of the images presently replaying, she nodded. “I remember everything. Tsuki was attacked, and there was also a young man who was carried off by the demon. After that …” What happened after? Kagome couldn’t recall.

Noticing her confused expression, Kaede went on. “Ye may not believe it, but ye managed to destroy the demon. Ye saved our village from the attack, and many lives were saved.”

With widened eyes, Kagome stared incredulously at the old woman. She saved everyone? How on earth did she manage to destroy the demon? “To be perfectly honest, I can’t seem to remember how…”

“It doesn’t surprise me; after all, Kagome, ye fainted shortly after. Like I witnessed before ye disappearance in the Forest of Inuyasha, the same power within ye arose. The bird became nothing more than ash afterwards.”

After her mentioning of this, Kagome faintly recalled the demon fly off with Ume, where it was shot down by Satouru. Ume recovered, thankfully, but the bird wasn’t finished; it shot up from the currents of the river and towards Kagome, and after that, she remembered feeling something hot within her surface and then darkness.

“But how is that possible? How can I have powers?”

Despite Kagome’s confusion, Kaede realized her assumptions regarding the girl fell true. The child did indeed possess powers similar to a priestess, however, although she admitted she’d never taken interest in such practices, her powers were beyond the extent any priestess could handle. Recalling a conversation, they shared previously, Kagome also admitted something rather interesting and questionable. Not only did Mistress Centipede arise from the dead and target the child, but so did the entire situation with the bandits and the bird demon; these two separate dilemmas surrounded one thing, the return of the Sacred Jewel.

“If my assumptions are correct, I believe ye may very well possess the Sacred Jewel, Kagome, despite ye beliefs,” Kaede replied.

The Sacred Jewel, capable of granting any desired wish, whether pure or evil, existed as far back as the Heian Era, and was desired by both humans and demons. Kaede told her about the jewel, but it was supposedly destroyed fifty years ago by a tribe called Demon Slayers. Could it be possible it returned?

The old woman raised her hand, her finger pointed directly at her chest, and Kagome followed her eyes. “When ye powers surfaced yesterday, I faintly remember seeing something burning brightly from ye chest. An outline of a small round object. I believe the Sacred Jewel has manifested itself within ye.”

It was inside her? If true, it certainly explained everything terrible which befell her and those around her. Still, how had it survived fifty years ago? “It was destroyed, right?”

Kaede nodded. “Indeed, it was. Perhaps we underestimated its powers long ago. Something which can grant any wish, any heartfelt desire, is truly terrifying. Although it should not exist, it has returned. Believe it or not, Kagome, I believe ye may very well be the vessel of this terrifying power. And yet … as worrisome as this is, from what I’ve witnessed, it may also be … a blessing in disguise…”
“What do you mean?” Kagome asked. A vessel? How could something so terrible be a blessing?

The High Priestess nodded her head approvingly, as if agreeing with her own thoughts. “Although the Sacred Jewel houses incredible powers, it has not shown any maliciousness. Quite the contrary, it has instead protected you and those around you, Kagome.”

Her words weren’t false. Nothing terrible had befallen Kagome, except the situation surrounding Satoru, but when confronted by demons, the power manifested and protected her. “So, as long as its inside my body, it can be used for good?”

“Well yes and no,” She replied. “Because ye possess such kindness and protectiveness, the jewel, I believe, acts according to ye desires. Should any ill befall ye, perhaps a change in ye heart, the jewel will likely become tainted with greed and will show itself with frightening means. However, … something unsettles me…”

“What is it?”

The old woman’s eyes shifted to her wrist. “Do ye see that?”

Bemused by her words, the young girl glanced down, examining her wrist. To her surprise, she saw a beaded bracelet of blue and white rounded stones wrapped around her. “What’s this?”

“Those are Subjugation Beads, which will serve to protect ye. Because the Sacred Jewel exists within ye, many demons will sense its return, and the result of what transpired yesterday will undoubtedly reoccur. I placed these beads upon you, and ye must never take it off. Do ye understand?”

Kagome nodded. “So long as I continue wearing this, demons will not sense the jewel or attack, right?”

Kaede nodded. “Correct. However, it is quite a dilemma. Born with the Sacred Jewel within ye, ye will no doubt face many burdens in ye life. But…” Although there was certainly more the High Priestess wished to discuss with the child, she decided to end their conversation there. “It’s nothing. Since ye are awake, the villagers are outside awaiting ye presence. Perhaps ye should listen to their words.”

Bemused by this, Kagome lifted herself from the futon and carried herself across the room towards the exit. Yet before pushing aside the flap, Kaede called out to her.

“Keep everything we’ve discussed between us, child, lest ye bring great fear to the world…”

Understanding, Kagome nodded and exited the hut, the sun almost blinding upon her exit. To her astonishment, and quite unexpectedly, Kagome found herself staring at the villagers, each knelt upon the ground, their heads lowered in a fashion which greatly confused her. In all honesty, Kagome expected some sort of verbal attack and accusing fingers, but not this.

Why were they bowing? What on earth had gotten into them?

A young man, seemingly in his twenties, noticed Kagome’s sudden presence before them, and lifted his face from the dirt, his hands planted firmly upon his knees. “Forgive us!” He called out, raising the heads of everyone else knelt beside him. “For what we have done and said, we ask for your forgiveness!”

“Forgive us, priestess!” They cried.
Kagome blinked. Forgive?

Among the crowd, Kagome recognized a few familiar faces. Mayoko and her husband Daisuke were knelt near the front of the crowd, Kosuke and Aiko near the rear, and then there was Naomi near the middle; their faces were all downturned. There were no signs of Satouru and his friends, not that she really cared, but the majority of the people were all gathered before her, asking for forgiveness. Far in the rear, Kagome made out the familiar faces of the bandits, including Yuuta; they were curiously looking over at her with obvious wonder, but they were too afraid to say anything. Lastly, there was Ume, a bright young child whose father was bed-ridden due to severe burns from the fire not too long ago, her large brown eyes staring wondrously at her near the front.

To her surprise, Daisuke lifted his face, his sorrowful eyes staring back at her. “When you were first brought to the village, I treated you terribly!” He recalled how he firmly grasped the back of her kimono collar long ago and forced her face into the soil at his feet, aggravated she didn’t follow the customs of the village. “For that, I am deeply sorry.”

“I’m sorry too!” A woman called out. “I spoke dishonesty about you to several women in the village! I called you names, such as a witch, a temptress of our men. I don’t deserve your forgiveness! I’m sorry, priestess!”

Naomi’s head perked up as well. “When High Priestess Kaede asked me to trade shifts with you that one day, I instead followed the orders of the others to avoid you. I also did nothing to help you when you were being attacked in the rice fields. I’m not the kind of person to handle such situations easily, and I felt awfully intimidated during those times. I’m very sorry!”

There was a strained expression upon Kosuke’s face, and although he wished to voice his own thoughts, he found it difficult to do so. His face reddened shamefully, and he kept his head lowered, his hands fisted.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Kagome voiced. “Really, I mean, I was a stranger to all of you from the beginning. At first, I might have held some resentment towards all of you, but I realize now you were only trying to protect yourselves. If anything, I should be the one to apologize, after all I was ignorant to all of you. I’m sorry.”

“That’s not true!” Someone voiced.

“We should have treated you better! Despite what we did to you!” Another said.

Kagome shook her head. “That’s not true. High Priestess Kaede told me something. You’ve all been burdened with dilemmas revolving around spies, traitors and also those superior to you, not to mention thievery. How could any of you have known if I was trustworthy in the beginning? I mean, it’s understandable you were wary and cautious. If I were in the same boat, I’m sure I wouldn’t have been so trustworthy of me either…”

Hearing her words and the fact she understood their feelings, they felt an even greater need to apologize. Although they treated her terribly from the beginning, it didn’t mean they weren’t thankful for her endeavors within the village. This young woman also risked her life to save the women who had gotten kidnapped by the bandits, and by an extraordinary means, quelled the frightful demon from its onslaught towards them yesterday.

“Although there were a lot of words exchanged between some of us, some of which I’m not proud of and I’m sure many of you aren’t either, I will forgive it. I hope, now that this has happened, we can all see each other in a different light,” She replied, somewhat thankful she was receiving their confessions and sincere apologies.
“Thank you, priestess!” A chorus of thanks resounded within the village, and Kagome smiled.

“But please, you don’t need to remain on your knees. I’m just an ordinary girl, like all of you,” She explained, but they refused to move.

“From what we have witnessed yesterday, that is surely not the case,” An older man exclaimed, the heads of others nodding. “You protected this village from that demon with your powers. You must surely be a priestess sent to save us!”

Really, that wasn’t the case. At least, that’s what she thought. While she was whisked into the past by a mysterious means and through her tree no less, she thought of herself as a normal girl. Then again, the conversation between her and Kaede and what happened since her time in this world was beginning to change that thought. “Well…”

Aiko’s head popped up, her smile wide and her eyes glistening with compassion. “When we were captured, we surely thought we would meet a terrible fate. But your bravery surpassed that of any person we’d ever known. You held fast to your own beliefs and saved all of us, not just once, but twice. Despite the ridicule and abuse you received, you continued helping us, caring for us. We might not have noticed at first, but we see it now. Thank you for coming into our lives, Kagome.”

Naomi spoke up once more. “When the demon flew off with the child, we were certain she’d meet her imminent end, but you ran off to save her, despite the dangers. Then you jumped into the river and saved her from the currents, and not only that, you breathed life into her!” She replied, her hand held to her chest happily. “How you managed it, we were deeply moved. Your powers are truly amazing Kagome. Thank you!”

Everyone agreed.

“Wherever you came from, we are forever grateful and, in your debt, priestess! Please, continue to protect us!”

Continue to protect them? After receiving their forgiveness and hers in return, they wanted her to stay with them in their village. Although she didn’t have a complete grasp over the Sacred Jewel within her, she really wasn’t sure how she could continue to protect these people. More than anything, Kagome simply wanted to return home, a place she knew she belonged. This wasn’t her time period, and in any case, it didn’t feel right.

Caught within an unpredictable situation, Kagome wasn’t sure what to do. The villagers were still upon their knees, their heads once more lowered into the soil, and their voices calling for her continued protection.

High Priestess Kaede emerged from her hut and took her place beside her. “Kagome has no doubt been a great help to our village. I am also thankful to her as well. However, I do believe she is a bit uncomfortable with the situation…”

Hearing her words, the villagers shared baffled glances.

“Uncomfortable because this is the first her powers have surfaced,” She explained. Though the truth was somewhat stretched a bit, she planned to keep Kagome’s origins secret; it was better this way than having everyone find out and cause an unneeded uproar. “The bloodline of priests and priestesses seems to flow within her from her grandfather’s side. She admitted this earlier to me while we were conversating.”

Understanding grew within the crowd.
“Then this is surely a joyous occasion!” Someone replied. “A priestess has been born and within our village! Does this not seem like fate?”

The others agreed, and there were a few dubious faces within the crowd.

“It is by no means a gift from Kami,” A woman replied. “But, we should not burden her with such. After all that’s happened, we should acknowledge her feelings.”

“I agree!”

Kaede agreed with their words, her old eyes shifting towards the girl beside her whose face was a mixture of confusion and self-doubt. “Ye need not feel so awkward, child. Ye may relax. For now, I think it’s best we move on from this and take care of the village.”
Kagome's Recipe

Chapter Summary

Things have finally quieted down after the attack, but when the bandits bring home something quite terrifying, Kagome decides to put her cooking to the test.

July 18th

The Sacred Jewel, an object capable of granting any desired wish, once existed centuries ago, and because of its wickedness, was ultimately destroyed by the Demon Slayers. Upon realizing the jewel manifested itself within Kagome, a girl whose place of origins resided beyond the Goshinboku, within the Forest of Inuyasha, Kaede took it upon herself to shelter her.

Since her appearance, the flesh of Mistress Centipede revived, and the demon attempted to devour Kagome, but fell to Kaede’s arrow and ultimately Kagome’s dormant powers. Shortly after, their village succumbed to a horrific fire, the destruction of their livestock, their homes and their crops. Many women were kidnapped as a result of a demon who’d sensed the powers of the Sacred Jewel, using the corpse of a rogue bandit to lay out orders to others to fulfill its desires. The demon tore through High Priestess Kaede’s barrier not long after, devouring one innocent and traumatizing all others, and in the end, the powers within Kagome ultimately unleashed.

One week later, after the unfortunate events unveiled, the villagers displayed kindness to the young woman, believing the blood of priests and priestesses had finally surfaced within her. They no longer saw her as a distrustful person who invaded their home since the start, but instead, looked up to her, hopefully believing she would protect them and become their priestess.

This certain hopefulness placed Kagome in an uncomfortable position. Often, the people shadowed her, eager to assist her with any given task, despite their own worries. From their incessant bows and repeated appreciations, Kagome wasn’t sure how much more she could take. In all honesty, she didn’t feel any different and only wanted to be treated like any other person, but she was thankful.

Shortly after the change, gossip spread throughout the village, most of it centered entirely around Satouru. The people were well aware of his arrogance and hatred for the woman, and upon his negligence to appear before her a week ago and atone for his mistreatment of her and others, the villagers were greatly displeased. Satouru didn’t bother discussing the matter with anyone, often raising his fist and dismissing them rather rudely; other than that, he mostly kept to himself.

The rebuilding of the village was a slow process, and because of the shortage of food going around, the men were often out hunting at the earliest hours of the day. While away, the women tended the fields and replanted, tossed the rotten crops to the birds, and cared for their young ones.

Then there was Ume, a wonderful child who struggled each day caring for her injured father. With each visit from High Priestess Kaede, her father’s recovery quickened and his burns scarred. Eventually, the older man finally took his first few steps outside of his small and gloomy hut, his eyes resting upon what was left of the village. It was no surprise disappointment emanated from his expression, but the tenderness of his daughter’s care, and determination to lighten the dismal mood surrounding everyone, softened his anger.
As for Kagome and Aiko, the pair often helped within the fields, counting the small collection of crops which they recovered previously within the storage building and taking note. A few sacks of rice remained, some barley, beans, wheat, and turnips. There wasn’t much left besides that, and the shortage of food was becoming alarmingly terrifying.

Besides the lack of food, there weren’t many livestock within the village either, save for five chickens, a few oxen, two goats and a couple stray dogs. There were also horses within the village but not many.

Early evening slowly descended, and finishing their chores for the day, the fields replanted and spruced up, the men finally returned from their weary hunt, their bows and arrows hanging over their aching shoulders. They carried themselves despondently to Kaede’s hut, displaying the small animals caught during their outing. Two small rabbits, a fox and one fowl were presented and those alone would not suffice everyone within the village.

Despite the circumstances concerning their lack of food, the villagers pitched in and roasted the meat, splitting their shares amongst everyone, the children and elderly coming first before others. From their leftovers alone, even they knew it wouldn’t sustain them for long. Until they reached a better conclusion, the men would continue hunting while the women tended the fields.

Exhausted from working in the fields, Kagome tiredly sauntered into the hut, Aiko following behind. An effective crack of her back resounded within the small and drafty space, and a relieved sigh escaped her. No matter how many times she toiled in those fields, she’d never get use to it. “I’m beat…”

“Me too,” Aiko sighed, dropping to her knees and rubbing her sore calves.

Untying the obi around her waist, Kagome removed the brown kimono from her body, tossing it aside. Stepping across the room, she knelt beside a wooden bucket, filled halfway with cold water and dipped a rag within. From there, she proceeded to wipe the sweat from her face, torso, her arms and her legs, a delightful hum resounding from her lips.

While Kagome cleaned up, Aiko pulled out their sleeping ware, two plain cotton white kimonos and laid them upon their futons. Afterwards, she reached for the offered rag from Kagome.

A muffled noise resounded within the room, followed after by a few more, and Kagome and Aiko both achingingly held their stomachs. Both had refused their food, and as a result, sat within the hut dismally. Perhaps tomorrow’s hunt would bring better results, they hoped.

Crawling over to the futon, Kagome was about to snuggle underneath the warm blanket, but at the sound of something loud outside, she gasped, stilling within the darkness. Her blue eyes shifted to Aiko, still crouched over the bucket across the hut, and her eyes met Kagome’s worryingly.

Someone was outside.

Yet before either could get up and investigate, someone entered the hut, and the result left Kagome and Aiko shrieking in fear. A light from a candle eventually brightened the room, and upon realizing the intruders were anything but threatening, they sighed in relief.

Aiko quickly concealed herself, and dressed in only her night attire, she felt her face redden shamefully. Not only was this entire situation improper, but having a man barge into a girl’s only hut would likely cause a stir within the village.
“Sorry about that,” Yuuta’s voice exclaimed, his eyes immediately drawn to the curvature of their bodies within the thin kimonos. “We … were a little late getting back to the village, but we caught something rather interesting. You might want to look for yourself,” He replied, his eyes quickly turned away. “Get dressed and meet us outside.”

At his exit, Aiko and Kagome shared a glance. What a way to startle them right before bed. Believing he and the other bandits must have caught an animal, the two girls quickly threw on the last of their clean kimonos, tying the obis tightly before exiting the hut.

The evening’s air chilled them as they stepped out, and looking amongst the men gathered outside the hut, Aiko and Kagome’s eyes fell upon a large canine. The creature, larger than any dog they’d seen, laid before them dead with two arrows shot through its body.

“Boss!” Someone cried out, followed after by several more.

“We’ve returned from hunting boss! Sorry we’re late!”

“Boss look what we caught!”

Used to the title, Kagome strode closer to them, her eyes lingering on the canine’s corpse at their feet. “What is it?”

“A wolf,” Yuuta replied, bending down before retrieving the arrows from its neck and back leg. “We were out scavenging with the other men when we noticed several tracks within the forest. If we had to guess, a pack of wolves have been hanging around. Since food has been scarce as of late, I’m fairly certain this is the reason.”

“It’s huge!” Aiko exclaimed, her hands grasping Kagome’s arm frightfully.

Yuuta nodded. “It’s a wonder they haven’t wandered into the village. Still, it would be best if you girls didn’t wander into the woods for a time, until they’ve been taken care of.”

“So, what are you going to do with it?” Kagome couldn’t help but ask.

Yuuta stood up and grinned an expectant grin. “Well we’re going to eat it, that’s what.”

What? They weren’t serious, were they? It was a wolf, a predator that fed off the flesh of animals and humans. Unlike other animals, which fed off plants and vegetables, these creatures were cannibals, and Kagome was pretty certain their meat would taste gamey and rotten. “You’re joking…”

“Nonsense. Wolf meat is a delicacy, if you know how to make it properly!” Yuuta exclaimed, the other bandits nodding their heads fervently, their derpy smiles bemusing Kagome.

Aiko wasn’t the only one surprised by this. “I’ve been lucky enough to eat deer, and bear meat before, but never a wolf. Surely you aren’t going to eat the entire body?”

“We’ll cook it up and give some to High Priestess Kaede to distribute,” Yuuta replied. Pulling out a blade from his pocket, he bent down near the wolf and pulled it over his shoulder. “We’ll get started skinning the beast, and set up a camp fire to roast it.”

Before he could turn and leave with the bandits, Kagome called out. “Wait a minute. You’re going to gut the animal first, right?”

Yuuta and the other bandits blinked confusedly at her. “Gut? Why would we do that? The guts are
a delicacy and it serves to give us strength during our hunts.”

Kagome almost sweat dropped. They weren’t serious, were they? “I’ll cook it.” She replied, counting all the times she and her mother often spent slaving away in the kitchen. If anything, she thought of herself as a pretty decent cook, not as great as her mother, but not far from it. “If you guys can just skin the animal and remove its head, I’ll take charge and cook us up a meal. I’m pretty sure we’ll have lots of leftovers to share with the villagers after.”

Despite their intention to roast it over the fire, they were quite eager for their boss to cook them a meal, wondering how it would taste compared to their own meals. As they watched the young woman retreat back into the hut, Aiko following after, they made themselves comfortable outside, seated upon the ground with their knives pulled out.

Following Kagome back into the hut, Aiko watched the raven-haired woman sort through her backpack of belongings, which she brought with her from her own world. Kneeling beside her, she noticed a large blackened pot, beside it a thin round and flat pan, one she’d never seen before, alongside other various assortments and utensils.

“Kagome, what are these here?” Aiko asked, picking up a few containers with strange labels stuck around their circumference. The letters, painted intricately across the white labels baffled her, but she only assumed it was from her own world.

Glancing over while pulling out a small box of matches and her lighter, she set the items down. “Those are seasoning broths,” She explained, taking one of the containers from her friend’s hands. Twisting the lid off and removing the cardboard covering overtop with her nails, Kagome revealed a brownish looking powder within, followed after with second container which held a yellowish powder. “This one is beef flavored and the other chicken flavored. So, if ever we have a dish that doesn’t have enough flavor in it, we simply add one of these,” She answered, earning a slight nod from Aiko.

“I see. Then what about this container?”

Noticing her pointing at medium sized container with a yellow label around its circumference, Kagome picked it up and opened it, exposing the white powder within. “This is cornstarch. It helps thicken soups and stews, and it can be used to make gravy and sauces. It doesn’t have a flavor, but it’s pretty useful.”

Upon its interesting usefulness, Aiko was amazed. How amazing. She wondered what other ingredients Kagome’s world held. “So, Kagome, how are you going to cook this wolf? Yuuta mentioned he would roast it over a fire for us.”

“Well, I was thinking of making something homemade for all of us, including the village. I’m thinking maybe creating a stew from the meat, and using only a few of its insides to boil or fry.”

Aiko nodded again. “I think we might have some rice stored away. Hold on a minute.”

While Aiko walked off to sort through the belongings, Kagome pondered for a moment. How on earth would she create a meal using wolf meat? It certainly wasn’t chicken or beef, or even steak. Surely the taste of wolf meat, like deer meat would taste gamey, and she was positive the taste would linger within her mouth for hours after. ‘I should have brought mom’s cooking book with me. If mom was here, what dish would she prepare?’

“I found it,” Aiko’s voice announced across the room, a small sack held in her hands as she crossed over to Kagome. “This is our share we have left from the harvest. Perhaps we can use a little in the
Kagome mused. Opening the sack, she peered inside, her eyes counting the small grains of rice carefully. According to her history, rice was the main staple of their diet, something they normally ate day by day. Although it was never the healthiest of diets and if eaten alone for long periods of time, malnutrition could certainly occur and ultimately, *beriberi* would afflict the people, something she hoped she would never witness during her time spent in this era.

“Actually, that would be a good idea. I’ll just use a small handful of rice. It will serve as a side dish. Judging by all the meat we have, I’m pretty sure we aren’t able to store the rest of the meat that’s left over, right? I don’t think the entire wolf will fit in my mom’s cooking pot…”

Judging by the size of the wolf the bandits were skillfully prepping for them outside and the size of Kagome’s cooking pot, Aiko agreed. “If that’s the case, can’t we use the rest and roast it up?”

Kagome nodded. “I guess so. I hope it will taste alright…” As far as she knew, salt wasn’t something peasants used in their cooking, and normally, everything tasted dull to her.

Aiko giggled at her expression. “I’m sure it will taste fine. But before that, we should get a couple buckets of water before we begin.”

“You’re right. We will need to first clean the meat well, maybe even soak it in water for a few minutes before actually cooking it. I’m pretty sure we’re going to need to make several trips back and forth to the river,” Kagome replied.

Skinning and beheading the wolf took no longer than a few short minutes for the bandits, and upon Kagome instructions to remove the innards, setting them aside in a bucket washed and cleaned, the bandits found themselves waiting patiently outside. Genuinely, they were very curious as to what the woman planned to create and with such a huge wolf.

Inside the hut, Kagome pulled her hair out of her face and into a high ponytail, her sleeves pushed up at her elbows, and Aiko followed suit as well, borrowing one of Kagome’s hair ties.

The skinned and gutted headless wolf was laid upon an old blanket, and with Aiko’s only cutting knife beside them, Kagome cut out large portions of the meat before placing them into the buckets of water beside them. Soaking the meat like so for several minutes would help remove the gamey taste and smell for sure. Currently, the meat smelled foul and if she didn’t know any better, almost smelled of animal piss, if not worse. It was a wonder the peasants were able to tolerate it.

While the meat soaked, the remainder of the wolf’s carcass lying on the blanket, Kagome noticed flies beginning to fly around its body. Disturbed by the sight, she folded the blanket over its bones and tossed it outside, the bandits looking up from their musings curiously at the blanket.

“Should I get started with the porridge and vegetables?” Aiko asked.

Kagome nodded. “Yes, but first we should wash our hands after touching the meat and then wash the vegetables.”

Understanding, they did just that. Aiko busied herself with chopping up the carrots, the skin still intact along its length, while Kagome cut up the dried herbs in the basket beside her. After tossing two teaspooms of parsley and sage in the boiling kettle over the fire, Aiko threw in the carrots, the vegetable which would need to boil the longest until it reached a softer texture, along with some radishes.
Although it was customary to soak the rice before cooking it, Kagome knew at the moment, there weren’t enough buckets within the hut to even do that. One bucket was for cleaning their hands, and the other two held the soaked wolf meat.

Since there wasn’t much rice at all, Kagome pondered what to do. First, she would create a porridge which would only take a few handfuls of rice. Rather than leave the porridge bland, she would definitely add chicken seasoning to it, as well as some sage to give it better flavor.

“If only there was a way to fry this,” Kagome commented, sighing. If she had brought cooking oil to the past, then this would be a lot easier. Actually, Kagome wished she had brought a lot more with her than just the essentials, but even if she did, the ingredients would run out.

“Fry?” Aiko asked. “You want to fry the rice?”

“I would like to fry the liver and stomach, rather than steam it. But to do that, I would need cooking oil, which we don’t have. If we fry it as it is, it would stick and burn the pan…”

Aiko pondered at this. “If it’s cooking oil then I can be of help for that,” She replied before standing up. She crossed the room, bending down before the basket of herbs before producing a few ovate green leaves, the ends pointed and serrated with long leafstalks. “This is called Shiso,” Aiko began, displaying the leaves to Kagome. “It’s more commonly known as Aojiso, the blue shiso plant. Normally, we use them with fish and nothing more, but if you boil the leaves it will produce an oil.”

Accepting the leaves into her palm, Kagome held them up to her nose and was immediately greeted by a familiar scent. “It smells like cinnamon!”

Aiko nodded. “Yes. The scent is rather medicinal and I often pick these for High Priestess Kaede’s tea.”

“Is it easy to find the shiso?”

Again, Aiko nodded. “Yes. There are a few large patches in the woods that grows the shiso every year. If you’re interested, I can show you where I forage for most of the herbs for High Priestess Kaede.”

“Yes, I would like that. I had no idea you could produce cooking oil from this…” This was great. “So, do you use this a lot? To fry food?”

At her question, she shook her head. “No. To be honest, we have never used it for frying at all. I learned about this from Kosuke who visited Edo some time back. The food there is often fried, steamed, and there are so many dishes we have never had the privilege to try. Of course, going to Edo requires a lot of money, which we don’t have. Sometimes, we will wrap up the fish in the Shiso and eat it like that, or we would use the red shiso known as akajiso for pickled plums and also fish.”

How interesting. Perhaps, during her stay in this world, she might take an interest in plants. If she could produce oil from this shiso, then perhaps there were more plants she could use in cooking. “This is great. Thank you, Aiko.”

Pleased with this, looked around the room. “Forget making porridge, Aiko. I have a better idea.”

“Are we not going to make porridge?” Aiko inquired.

“Since we don’t have much rice to begin with, we can save the rest for later,” Kagome replied,
reaching for the deep-dish frying pan.

Within the deep-dish frying pan, Kagome added a couple cups of water, two handfuls of rice, two teaspoons of parsley and sage, and a couple small scoops of chicken flavoring. Removing the large pot from the fire boiling the carrots and radishes, Kagome held the frying pan up until she was able to position it over the fire, held in place by their own conventional means. As the rice simmered within, she kept watch over it, stirring it every so often.

“Aiko, if you can, will you take the buckets of meat to the bandits outside to roast over the fire? Leave the liver and stomachs here though.”

“Sure.”

Over half an hour went by since the girls disappeared into the hut, the smell of food drifting from the door and open window. The meat over the fairly decent sized fire was roasting well, and as instructed by their boss, they made sure to turn the meat every so often so one side didn’t burn.

Although they planned to eat the meat as soon as it came off the fire, Aiko made it known that only half of the meat would be taken back to kaede and the other villagers, while the other half would be cooked into a hearty stew within.

A familiar brunette popped her head out of the flap, her gesturing hand waving them inside. “It’s almost done,” Aiko exclaimed with a smile.

While the boys ran into the small hut, Yuuta checked the meat. Content it was done enough and fit for consumption, he took it off the fire, pulling the sticks aside before placing them into a large wooden bowl, complements of Aiko. With the meat gathered within, he entered into the small hut.

Upon entering the hut, he noticed the two girls working contentedly with the food. They were gathered around a large blackened pot, one he’d never seen before, tossing in a few crushed leaves into the mixture. The brothy soup was dark, almost brown in color and peering closely, like the others, he saw subtle signs of carrots, potatoes, radishes, peeled onion within bubbling over the fire. An interesting and mouth watering scent emanated from the entire hut, and he sat the bowl down beside Kagome.

Looking up, Kagome flashed him a smile. “It’s done?”

Yuuta nodded. “Yes. Do with it as you like. What are you making?”

Pleased with this, she offered the meat to Aiko, who began cutting the meat into small strips before dropping them into the pot carefully. “We’re making beef stew. It’s almost done.”

Once the meat was within, Aiko took a small cup, filled with a couple tablespoons of water before pouring in a small amount of the cornstarch as directed by Kagome. As she quickly stirred the contents of the mixture, she poured the milky white substance into the pot. After which, Kagome continued stirring, and a few moments later, the broth thickened, much to everyone’s surprise.

“How’d it do that?” One of the guys asked.

“It’s not runny anymore!”
Kagome suppressed a giggle at their confusion. “I added a thickener to it, that way it would taste better,” she replied before grasping the handles of the pot carefully and pulling it off the fire and onto an old rag beside her. “It’s a bit too hot to eat yet, so now we can work on the second part of the meal. I’m actually curious as to how it will turn out.”

Everyone’s eyes turned in the direction of the medium-sized wooden bowl, sitting to the side filled to the brim with yellow grains of rice, the color strange to them and the smell difficult to discern from a distance. Next to that, they saw another pan, this one flat, filled with water halfway with two stomachs and one liver, sprinkled with small herbs and spices.

While Kagome affixed the smaller pan over the fire, Aiko reached for the rice, scooping it from the bowl and inserting it into an opened cut within the bottom of the stomach. She did the same to the other stomach, but she left the liver alone and placed all three back into the pan to boil. Since there was no means of frying them, Kagome and Aiko decided boiling them would be their best option.

“Still, I’m sure it would have tasted better fried…” Kagome pouted.

Aiko giggled in response.

“Frying?” One of the men asked. “What’s frying?”

Yuuta almost rolled his eyes. “It’s a method only the rich can afford, such as wealthier peasants, lords and samurai.” He replied before eying the raven-haired girl curiously. There was still much she hadn’t told them about herself, besides the fact her grandfather was a priest and she held priestess blood in her veins. Yuuta was curious about her upbringing the most, not to mention the strangeness of the food presented before him. The food reminded him of an old trip to Edo years ago.

“It smells really good, boss!”

“Why is the rice yellow?”

“Can I have a taste?”

Seeing an approaching hand towards the stew, Kagome lightly smacked it away, shaking her finger disapprovingly. “Not yet. Once everything has finished cooking, then we can eat.”

“Kagome, should we call for the villagers to join us? Or are we going to take the pot to High Priestess Kaede’s?”

Kagome mused. “Eating together doesn’t sound like a bad idea. I’m pretty sure everyone else is still awake…”

“Can we eat our share first boss?”

“Yeah, I’m starving,”

At their mouthwatering stares, sitting on their knees knelt by the fire, their eyes peering hungrily at the food, Kagome sweat dropped. “Well, I suppose s—” Her words died in her throat when a strange scent flooded her nostrils. After removing the pot moments before, a foul smell emanated in front of her, her eyes shifting from each of the many bandits before her. “What is that smell?” She almost covered her nose at the stench.

They looked among themselves curiously, one absentmindedly picking his nose, the other smelling his armpit, and the others staring confusedly in her direction.
“You guys reek,” Kagome frowned. “No offense, but you need to wash up before eating dinner.”

“Aw, but boss!”

“We never wash up for dinner, boss,” One replied.

“Do we have to?”

They never wash up before dinner? Were they joking? She certainly hoped they were. Kagome squinted her eyes suspiciously. “When was the last time you had a bath?”

“A month ago?” One questioned himself.

“Two weeks for me, boss.”

“Uh…” One tried counting his fingers.

“I don’t remember…”

Yuuta, on the other hand, remained absolutely quiet during their musings, his eyebrow cocked in the young girl’s direction. He didn’t say anything about his own scheduled bathing, and Kagome had a feeling he wasn’t about to answer.

She was appalled. This was terrible. No, what was the word she was looking for? Disgusting? Yes, that was it. Not only that, but how could they simply walk amongst themselves and others smelling like that? “Well you’re not eating until you wash up first. You’re all taking a bath. Not buts about it either,” She replied, standing up suddenly before pointing towards the exit. “Let’s go.”

“But boss…”

“Can’t we eat first?”

Kagome crossed her arms. “No. Besides, the food isn’t done cooking just yet. So, while Aiko is tending it, you can all take a bath in the lake.”

After explaining she would return in a few moments, Kagome exited the hut, the bandits following after despondently. Yuuta took his place beside the young girl, his observing eyes looking out across the village as dusk settled in.

Despite the silence between them, Kagome spoke up. “Daisuke told me you were doing a great job helping out around the village lately.”

“Really?” Their heads perked up.

She nodded. “Lady Kaede has noticed as well. It seems the villagers are trusting you a bit more, which is a good thing.” Noticing their smiles, she went on. “I’ve been meaning to ask. After we’ve managed to fix the village back up and set up new huts for those who lost them during the attacks, what will you all do?”

“We’ll likely leave,” Yuuta replied. “Don’t forget Kagome, we’re bandits. We haven’t fully been accepted into this village, and I for one don’t expect anything more.”

She frowned at this. “I get what you’re saying, but should things get better, you could certainly stay, if you wanted. I’m not saying you have to. We really do appreciate your help these past days.”

“Boss, do you like having us around?”
“Huh? What kind of question is that?” She asked. “Of course, I do.” In the beginning she almost couldn’t tolerate them following her nor the title they gave to her, but as the days went by, she was used to it and appreciated their hard work.

Yuuta mused. “With the way the village is now, I’m surprised it’s still standing. You’ve got no defense at all except for the barrier which fell shortly after the demon attacked. Despite your powers surfacing, you haven’t been trained to protect anyone.”

Kagome nodded. He wasn’t wrong.

“Aiko mentioned something about your Daimyo in Edo. He takes your taxes in the form of your rice harvests, in return for giving your village protection. Yet, from what I have seen and heard, that isn’t the case. You do realize you’re all being robbed by the fool, correct?”

The young woman’s eyes widened at this. She hadn’t thought of it like that. Yuuta wasn’t wrong. This was true. Not only that, but when Lady Kaede failed to produce an adequate harvest, the men who worked under their Daimyo took the children as payment. “Yes…”

He almost scowled. It was a shame. This was simply one of the reasons he refused to settle down in villages. The people were fools, giving up their freedom to a lord who didn’t care for their well-being. Being a bandit did have its perks, despite hassling and frightening many innocents, he and the boys managed just fine for years.

“Boss, if you want, you could come with us, after we finish out our punishment,”

“Yeah! We would take care of you, boss!” Another exclaimed.

“But our hideout was destroyed, remember?”

“Oh yeah … well we can just find another place!”

Yuuta glanced at the girl beside him, her eyes shifting curiously behind her at the guys. “What will you do, Kagome?”

“Huh?” She shook her head. “I’m sorry but I can’t leave. Besides, I don’t plan to stay in the village for long anyways…” At least she hoped. She wanted to go back home, if the tree would let her. The only reason she returned to the past was because of the prophetic dream which ended up becoming true. “Soon I plan to return home to my own family.”

The path towards the lake took a slight incline downhill, passing a few trees and bushes where a large lake presented itself to everyone. The lake liked downstream of the river, and it was a place the villagers all bathed.

“Here we are. Don’t take too long. Watch out for snakes and remember to wash behind your ears.”

They nodded at her words before walking over towards the bank of the water, suspiciously looking for any snakes that might be slithering around. Realizing her words affected them, she almost laughed. She was pretty sure they were used to seeing snakes, and certainly hoped there weren’t any snakes in the water; after all, she bathed there as well.

“Allright. I’m leaving now. Don’t take too long.” At their silent nods, their backs suddenly turned to her, she turned to leave but paused, her cerulean eyes widening in surprise.

Yuuta stood behind her, his eyes closed as he pulled off his kimono top, his robust chest and lean physique displayed before the raven-haired girl unexpectedly. Despite a few dark curls swept
across his upper chest, a few hairs aligning below his belly button, Kagome quickly averted her eyes, a reddened blush staining her cheeks.

Noticing she had paused in front of him, her face hidden by her layered fringe, he was about to ask if something was wrong when she suddenly stepped past him. Without a word, she ran up the path back towards the village, and he shrugged it off, discarding the rest of his clothing without a care.

Twenty minutes flew by quickly, and delighted everything had finished cooking, Aiko and Kagome rejoiced, stretching their arms above their heads with pleased sighs. A wonderful aroma drifted through the hut, and yet, there was no sign of the guys.

Hefting the large pot by its handles, Aiko and Kagome exited the hut, pulling out large portions of the roasted meat from the fire before setting them into a large wooden bowl. With what was left, they would deliver the food to High Priestess Kaede and from there the food would be dispersed among those of the others who were likely hungry.

“Did we get everything?” Aiko asked, her brown eyes looking towards the hut curiously.

Kagome nodded. “Everything except the stomachs and liver, but those are for the guys.” Speaking of the guys, where were they? “I’m surprised they haven’t returned. They were so eager for a homecooked meal.”

Aiko giggled. “Hopefully they haven’t drowned in the process of bathing,”

Kagome laughed as well. While they were a bit dorky, they did have their moments. Sometimes she often wondered how they made it through life so long, especially wielding swords. “They’re one of a kind, that’s for sure.”

“Good evening you two,” A masculine voice called out, almost startling the girls.

To their relief, it was a familiar dark haired young man with bright brown eyes. Kosuke smiled at them, his eyes scanning the pot of fresh stew curiously. “Sorry if I’m interrupting something, but I thought I might stop by for a visit.”

“Hi Kosuke!” Aiko replied softly, followed after by a hello from Kagome.

“I couldn’t help but notice you were both awake,” His eyes fell upon the large camp fire outside the hut, before shifting towards the food in their grasp. “May I ask what you’ve made?”

Aiko nodded. “Yuuta caught a wolf during the hunt, and it was so big, Kagome decided to cook it up into a stew for the entire village.”

“Oh really?” His eyebrows shot up. “It smells amazing.”

Kagome blushed. “Thanks, but I hope everyone likes it…”

“Akkii!!” He replied softly, followed after by a hello from Kagome.

Noticing the sudden awkwardness between the two, Aiko couldn’t help but hold back a knowing smile. “Kagome, I’ll take the soup and bowl of meat to the village, if you want to head to the lake.”

Looking away from Kosuke, Kagome blinked. “Are you sure? That’s a lot of food…”
Setting down the large pot, Aiko took the bowl from Kagome’s grasp, positioning it upon her head, much to Kagome’s amazement before easily bending down to pick up the large pot. Without another word, she winked at Kagome and trudged down the path to Lady Kaede’s.

“Wow, I don’t know how she makes it look so easy…” Kagome replied, sweat dropping. Turning back to Kosuke, she smiled. “Would you like to go with me?”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

Pleased with this, Kagome and Kosuke walked alongside each other. “By the way, do you like wolf stomach or any kind of animal innards? Sorry if that’s a strange question.”

“To be honest, I’m not particularly fond of it. Are you?”

Kagome shivered at the thought. “No. Not going to lie, but it seems a bit gross. Yuuta and the other guys seem to enjoy it. They call it a delicacy, I suppose.”

At the name Yuuta, Kosuke paused in thought, his eyes looking the young woman over curiously. If he remembered correctly, Yuuta was the one responsible for bringing his men into the village, burning it to the ground, which they still hadn’t managed to recover from. And also, he attacked Kagome and himself that night as well. The name burned his thoughts heavily, and not in a good way. “Yuuta?”

Kagome nodded. “Yeah. The tall robust one with shoulder length hair. He was the one who carried me off on the horse that night, remember?”

How could he forget? His brow twitched in remembrance. The fight between him and Yuuta left him a few days with bruises, not to mention a hurt pride. He couldn’t protect Kagome that night, and yet, the young woman had befriended her captors easily. All in all, it was baffling. “I remember. He attack the village and captured you.”

She sweat dropped. “Yep.”

“Kagome, you’re quite relaxed about this…” He sweat dropped at her brief reply, as if it wasn’t a problem.

“Well, they are very sorry for what they’ve done. In all honesty, it was a big misunderstanding. If it wasn’t for the crow demon coming after me, then they would have never thought of coming after the village,” She replied.

Ah yes, the crow demon. She was correct. But, something troubled him. “Why was the demon after you? Even after your powers emerged a few days after, Lady Kaede never said anything else.”

“Well…” She couldn’t tell him about the Sacred Jewel, after all, Kaede told her to keep quiet about it for fear of scaring the villagers and spreading rumors.

Despite her uneasiness to reply, he went on. “Perhaps … the demon sensed your powers, similar to Mistress Centipede. I suspect, if that’s the case, both wanted to devour you for such powers.”

The concept reminded Kagome of her history books back in school. In the medieval times, in other countries, nobles thought to partake in disgusting customs such as devouring the flesh of their enemies to become more powerful, not to mention devouring certain species such as birds to attain the power of flight, though they never truly worked out the way they’d hoped. Then again, this was certainly different, but the concept was still somewhat the same. “Maybe.”
“I have heard of such stories of demons devouring other demons in hopes of attaining more power than what they already possess. The greed to become stronger is never truly fulfilled, even among those of the human race,” Kosuke replied. “Demons will even go so far as to devour priestesses and monks, but these days, there aren’t many with spiritual powers left,” He looked away. “Real ones that is…”

“What do you mean?”

A nervousness overcame him, and he couldn’t help but cough into his hand. “Erm … well,” he began, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck, his eyes looking anywhere but at the woman beside him. “Well, unlike yourself, you were born into a family of priestesses and priests. At least, that’s what our High Priestess told us. Others aren’t … and choose to take up such practices. I’m not really sure how to describe it to you, honestly, I’m a bit uncomfortable talking about it.” He laughed somewhat awkwardly.

Kagome slowly nodded at this. “I think I understand. I suppose there aren’t many with spiritual powers then. But even so, you feel you don’t want to be disrespectful to them by calling them out or something, even if they partake in such practices, correct?”

Again, Kosuke sweat dropped. “Yes, that’s correct.” He almost breathed a sigh of relief. Thankfully she wasn’t pressing her questions about it.

Pleased with this, Kagome nodded, carefully making her way down the incline. “Maybe that’s why the villagers were surprised about what happened, my powers emerging. If I’m being perfectly honest, I see myself as a normal person. It feels too real to be a dream, but I sort of wish it was.”

“Does it frighten you? Having these powers?” He asked.

Kagome shrugged. “I’m not sure how I feel about it. It’s different. If anyone told me before all this took place, that I possessed such powers, I wouldn’t have believed them, but after what’s happened, I suppose I’m confused, if anything.”

That was a natural response. As they continued trudging along down the path, he couldn’t help but look around their surroundings curiously, realizing they were nearing the woods up ahead.

“Kagome, where are we going?”

“I’m on my way to the lake to check up on the guys.”

He nodded. “Are they still working this late into the day?”

She shook her head. “They finished around the same time as everyone else. While Aiko and I were busy preparing the village’s meal, they looked about starved to death, drooling over the food, but I told them if they wanted to eat, they had to wash up first.”

This brought a chuckle from him. “I see.”

“What’s so funny?” She arched a brow in his direction.

He covered his mouth, his shoulders trembling in mirth. “You give off this trait like that of a natural mother. Not only I, but the other villagers have noticed. Not only are you good with children, you treat the bandits as children as well.”

Hearing this, she planted her hands firmly onto her hips, her expression stern, her lips pouted. “No, I do not.”
Again, he laughed. “Are you sure? I haven’t seen a look like that since my mother scolded me as a child.”

Realizing her posture was tense, and the placement of her hands, Kagome relaxed, and crossed her arms over her chest, a faint blush staining her cheeks. Maybe she did give off motherly vibes from time to time.

“Kagome, I’m merely teasing you,” He replied, trying to catch up to her quickened steps. Noticing she was obviously ignoring him, he wanted to laugh again. “I didn’t mean it. Kagome?”

Stopping in front of him, she glanced over her shoulder, noticing the worry gracing his expression before sticking out her tongue. After which, she continued on her way.

“No, you’re just being childish,” He replied, continuing after her. “But I did not lie. You truly scold the bandits like children. If anything, it’s rather amusing.”

“I only scold them because they won’t stop following me and calling me their boss. But, I’ll admit, I’m getting used to it. Besides, I kind of feel like a mother of nine, minus Yuuta. He is the responsible son that a mother can rely on to keep the other brothers in line.”

The two exchanged another laugh, walking together in comfortable silence. The lake was just up ahead, hidden away by the foliage of the trees and bushes.

“I wanted to apologize…”

Kagome stopped, her eyes turned to Kosuke once more. Although a few moments ago he held a wide smile across his face, this time, however, a frown marred his expression. “Huh? What are you sorry about?”

He was a bit hesitant at first, but on account of her curiosity, he continued. “Even though you have forgiven Satouru for his misconduct, as well as the bandits for their kidnapping, I feel I should be the one apologizing to you. I was by your side when both events took place, and I failed protecting you,” He replied awkwardly. He recalled news of Satouru dragging Kagome into the woods weeks ago, how he almost arrived late when he found him manhandling her on the ground. Then he recalled the way Yuuta made off with Kagome, how his pride became wounded during a failed attempt to rescue her, not to mention his injuries preventing him from chasing after. “Though you are compassionate, I wouldn’t be surprised if you saw me as weak and pathetic…”

“Is this why you’ve been so distant from me lately?” She questioned, astonishment showing in her gaze. “You saved me from Satouru when I thought my life was over, and you did your best to protect me against Yuuta, even if you suffered a lot of bruises. I don’t think any less of you, Kosuke. You’ve done more for me than anyone else in the village. Both you and Aiko. You were willing to risk your life to save me twice, even if we’d only just met. And that’s saying something!” She smiled.

While he expected a slap to the face he was otherwise surprised she wasn’t upset. Instead, his frown disappeared and in place, a blush fell across his cheeks. “Thank you, Kagome. I’ll do my best to protect you next time!”

She almost sweat dropped. “Let’s hope there isn’t a next time.”

As the two finally arrived near the lake, Kagome ran up ahead, hoping the guys hadn’t lingered too long in the water. Despite the sounds of splashing and manly grunts and celebratory cheers ahead, Kagome pushed through the bushes. “Are you guys done washing up yet?”
Unexpectedly, she paused, her eyes taking in the sight of Yuuta beside her in all his glory, the water glistening off his skin, his eyes focused upon her in mild surprise, and her face reddened. The bandits, who’d been wrestling in the lake, paused in their cheerful games, their heads whipping in surprise at her unpredicted appearance. Kagome’s virgin eyes took in the size of their ample buttocks glistening in the moonlight and their terrified expressions.

“Boss!?”

“Oh no it’s boss!”

“Boss don’t look!”

“No boss, you can’t see!”

Discomforted by what she saw, she found herself unable to turn away. Her eyes widening with their every movement.

An estrangement of slurs and cries resounded after that, accompanied by the constant sounds of splashing near her. The bandits covered their chests in mortification, others falling over themselves in hopes of hiding their modesty. Still, she kept watching.

Suddenly, Kosuke pushed through the bushes, his eyes widening at the sight of the bandits frantically splashing around in the water, their cries loud and incessant, right in front of Kagome. Reacting fast, he grasped Kagome’s arm and pulled her towards him, and with a startled cry, her head bumped against his chest.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Her words finally squeaked out.

Kosuke averted his eyes away from the bandits, his gaze settling upon Yuuta, who was still standing right beside Kagome, in all his glory, seeming unfazed by the predicament. “Have you any modesty? Put on some pants! And return back to the village!” He couldn’t stop his own face from flushing, especially concerning Yuuta’s girthy member. After saying this, he slowly backed away with Kagome, who was still pressed against his chest.

As the bandits ran towards the shore, satisfied the young woman’s eyes were concealed by their savior, they quickly dressed themselves.

For some reason, the entire scene reminded her of something straight out of a manga, where a girl or guy would accidentally walk in on someone half dressed or nude, and then, sheer panic would follow immediately after. Kagome wasn’t sure why, but she couldn’t help but imagine the bandits as school girls in this situation, and it brought a sudden smile to her face. If anything, it was rather comical.

After pulling up his trousers, Yuuta motioned for the guys to follow him away from the lake, and within moments, they dispersed from the area, throwing apologies right and left to their boss.

Once they were gone, Kosuke couldn’t help but notice the young girl’s shoulders tremble in his hold, and he frowned. “Oh Kagome, I’m so sorry you had to see that…” He pulled away a bit, her face downcast, and believing the entire situation upset her, he stroked her hair. “There, there … everything is ok.” To his surprise, she flung her head back with laughter, her hands slapping Kosuke’s chest repeatedly, a snort here and there.

“Did you see their faces? I’ve never heard a man scream like that before!” She held her side, trying to breathe, but it hurt too much. “They were so terrified!”
Kosuke couldn’t help but sweat drop. “Kagome? Were you not upset by what you saw? I mean … they were …”

“It was hilarious! I never knew Akira could scream so femininely!”

Kosuke looked around before bending down to whisper in her ear. “Kagome, could it be, you’re secretly a pervert?”

Her head whipped in his direction. “What? No!”

Kosuke chuckled at her reaction. “From the contrary, Kagome, you didn’t look away…”

At his response, she gasped. “You saw?” At his knowing stare, her face flushed with embarrassment. “Oh no.” And yet, as she covered her face, a sudden giggle escaped her. “I’m going to have to apologize to Yuuta … I didn’t mean to stare, but he was standing right there…”

“You saw?” He teased.

Kagome nodded. “Well duh! I saw it all…” Removing her hands from her face, she leaned in closer to Kosuke, cupping her hands to the sides of her mouth whispering, “everything…”

With his smile fading, he couldn’t help but widen his eyes at her remark, before she took off running back to the village, giggling to herself. “How am I supposed to compete with that?”
There is a demon within the Forest of Inuyasha, one so close that it leaves the villagers panicking. Another demon attack would surely be the end of their village, and they turn to Kaede for help. When strange noises fill the nights, Kagome finds it difficult to fall asleep and decides to find out the reason.

August 9th

Despite being confronted by Demons in the Era, mistaken for a priestess who would surely bring prosperity to the impoverished village, not to mention harboring a mysterious jewel within her body wanted by both humans and Demons, The Goshinboku still refused to send her back home. Although she returned once before, many weeks ago, it would not, at all, work. With little hope she’d ever return to her family, Kagome felt she would certainly be stuck in the past for years to come.

The wolves, which had been prowling the woods as of late, sinking their fangs into the animals, leaving behind remnants of carcasses here and there, Yuuta, along with the other men of the village, managed to chase them away. Though the village was very pleased by this, despite losing a great deal of animals to the beasts, High Priestess Kaede appointed Yuuta as head of the hunting party. It was an honor, appraised by many, though Satouru scornfully rebelled, inciting further rivalry between himself and Yuuta.

It was during this time, three weeks later, of early August, while the men were out hunting and the women tended the fields, which were finally showing signs of growth, that Kagome noticed the village undergo the first signs of starvation. The people were becoming sickeningly thin, the children often crying of stomach pains, the elderly barely leaving their huts in favor of sleeping, and what’s more, Kagome couldn’t help but notice the change that’d taken place over her own body; even she had lost a considerable amount of weight, the clothes given to her by Aiko quite loose fitting, but it was not at a dangerous stage for the young girl yet.

With the construction of the village delayed, the people too weak to cut down the trees in the forest which would provide them lumber for their huts, they focused their endeavors entirely on finding food. Whether it was fishing, hunting or foraging in the woods, anything would suffice to give them enough energy to complete their arduous tasks in life.

Though their strength was slowly depleting, Kaede was thankful the young men and women still had enough energy within them to sustain themselves a little longer, enough strength to continue hunting, looking after the fields, and also looking after one another. With the barrier still in place, protecting them from any further Demon attacks, Kaede did her best to strengthen it, just as her deceased sister had years ago.

During this time, Kaede met with Kagome on more than a few occasions, the two getting along much better than they had in the past. Since the beads of subjugation was entwined around the child’s wrist, continuing to suppress her spiritual powers not yet fully controlled, Kaede decided to release Kagome from confinement within the village, allowing the young girl to freely walk in and
out at any time; with the beads in place, it would also be impossible to sense her powers, therefore, giving her better protection, unless removed.

Ψ

Bending down, her hands reaching into the thorny bush, Kagome plucked a few black berries, the red dye staining her fingers, dropping them gently into her basket. After spending a few hours in the sweltering heat gathering what she could, she and Aiko filled two baskets to the brim with delicious and sweet berries, the remainder of the baskets laid out beside them, filled with a collection of herbs, some for medicinal purposes and some edible.

Wiping the sweat from her forehead, her cheeks and her neck, Kagome stood up, wiping the dirt from her brown kimono, a couple baskets positioned atop each other against her hip. “I think this should be enough, what do you think?”

Aiko nodded, grabbing her own baskets and wiping the sweat from her face with the sleeve of her kimono. “We’re lucky we got them so early. The heat has been terrible,” she sighed. “Let’s go this way. We still have a little more time.”

Nodding, Kagome followed Aiko deeper into the woods, the path easy to follow. Eventually, they arrived before a small collection of Fig trees, the likes of which surprised Kagome. Not only were there Fig trees, there were also some trees here and there filled with a large yellow fruit, the likes of which Kagome found familiar.

“Pears!” She cried out with delight. How lucky were they to have stumbled upon such a fruit? She had no idea they had pear trees so close to the village, even if it was a short walking distance.

Upon hearing the word pear, Aiko blinked. “You mean this Nashi?” She asked, reaching up to gather the large round yellowed fruit before presenting it to her friend. “Do your people call it a pear?”

As she brought it closer, Kagome leaned further, taking the fruit into her hands. Examining it, she realized it seemed a lot different than the usual pears back home, this kind rounder and the skin harder. Deciding to bite into it, Aiko looking on curiously, Kagome reveled in the light taste dancing across her tongue. It tasted like a pear, but the taste was somewhat different, but not in a bad way. “Yes, but it’s a bit different than what we have back home. Not going to lie, but these are much sweeter.”

Aiko smiled. “Yes. We’ve had Nashi trees for many years, but pretty soon they will be gone. Autumn is just around the corner and soon we’ll be hit by the storms of Winter. We should collect what we can from here before then.”

Kagome nodded. Near the end of September, Autumn would certainly come, and with it, the weather could become colder. “Have you thought about replanting the Fig and Nashi seeds in the village? That way you wouldn’t have to make the long walk to the woods to find them.” Kagome asked.

“No, we haven’t thought to do so. Actually, that’s a great idea. When we return to the village, we should bring that up to High Priestess Kaede.”

The two spent a couple more hours in the woods, often spotting a few of the men out hunting, their countenance somewhat energetic while others were quite exhausted. After managing to collect what they could find, the two girls eventually made their way back to the village. Fortunately, there haven’t been any sightings of Demons in the area, and for that, they were glad.
The arrival back took little time, their sandaled feet crunching atop the dry brownish grass as they sauntered past the fields. The soil was very light in color, dry and in need of water. The last it had rained was weeks ago, and more than a few times a day, the women fetched water from the lake, tossing it upon the fields so the soil would suck in the much-needed moisture; it was a tiring process, with little to no results, but fortunately enough, small saplings sprouted forth.

Finally arriving before High Priestess Kaede’s hut, Kagome and Aiko stepped inside, the tired priestess within greeting them from her seated position in front of the fire. Setting down the basket, Aiko and Kagome displayed their findings to the older woman, Kaede nodding approvingly at the results.

“Ye did very good. This alone will be enough to last for two days,” Kaede replied, shifting her hands through the medicinal herbs curiously. “Was this all ye could find?”

Aiko nodded dismally. “I’m afraid so. Without rain, much of the plants have been withering away to nothing…”

“There’s not much else we can do,” Kaede replied with a shake of her head. “I’m afraid there isn’t much left besides tending to the fields, but I’ve got Mayoko and the other girls handling that…”

“Is there anything else you want us to do, Lady Kaede?” Kagome asked.

Hours passed, and as evening fell upon them, the hunting party finally returned from the forest, arriving once more nearly empty handed. Yuuta managed to capture one adult deer, Satouru acquiring two rabbits, and the remainder nothing but a basket filled with small fish. Judging by the bruises marring Satouru and Yuuta’s complexion, it was obvious the two were involved in a scuffle during their hunt, Satouru looking displeased while Yuuta feigned ignorance. Nonetheless, Kaede was grateful for the food found, and soon enough, the food was cooked and distributed equally.

While many retired to their huts for the night, exhausted and still not satisfied entirely with their small morsels of food, it was enough to sustain them another day. Kagome and Aiko retired to their hut as well, but before they could change into their sleeping attire, an abrupt loud and shrieking wail resounded in the night.

Bemused and startled by the noise, the two girls shared a look, feeling the hairs on their arms stand on end. What was that noise? Shortly after, there was a commotion outside, and curious of the situation, the girls noticed the entire village gathered together; Kaede was among them, looking on curiously as a crowd gathered around a single young man.

“There’s something in the woods! I think it’s a Demon, High Priestess!” The younger man replied, his expression terrified.

“What are you talking about Takashi?” Satouru replied, his arms crossed ignorantly. “It’s either a Demon or it’s not.”

“What happened? Tell us slowly.” Kaede asked, hoping it was nothing more than a wild animal.

As Kagome and Aiko ventured closer, the incessant wail continuing from somewhere close by, they saw the expression of the man in the crowd, his raven hair pulled back in a messy top knot, his cheek marred with dirt and his entire body trembling.

“One of the goats from this morning got loose, and I’ve been trying to find it all day. It seems it
gnawed on its rope and disappeared into The Forest of Inuyasha,” He replied, fidgeting with his fingers nervously. “I looked all over, but I couldn’t find it, High Priestess. However,”

“However?” Kosuke asked, his expression becoming worrying. To lose one of their precious goats was certainly not a good thing. “What did you see?”

“A Demon!” He replied, almost frantically. “I saw it with my own eyes, surrounded by blue fire!”

“Blue fire?” Kagome questioned, her head canted to the side bemusedly. “What kind of Demon was it?”

Takashi didn’t know. “Whatever it was, it was underneath The Great Tree, High Priestess. I have a bad feeling…”

As startling as this was, Kaede wasn’t sure how to really proceed. There was a Demon in the woods, a Demon Takashi wasn’t able to discern before fleeing back to the village. And yet, it was near the tree, the very same tree which brought Kagome to this Era. “If that is the case, we should be fine. The barrier has been strengthened. For now, I suggest ye all retire to ye huts. Tomorrow, if the Demon still presides in the forest, we shall take matters into our own hands.”

“But High Priestess…” Takashi stammered, entirely paranoid of the thought of the creature somehow finding a way past the barrier.

Despite his uneasiness, as well as the other villagers fearfully looking off towards the wood’s direction, Kaede shook her head. “It will be fine. For now, stay away from the forest and retire for the night.”

While everyone returned to their huts, the remainder without homes yet retiring to the barn, Kagome and Aiko ventured back to the hut. After donning their night kimonos, the two laid themselves in their futons, wide awake and listening to the wails.

It was incessant. The cry like that of a woman, and yet, it was supposedly a Demon. If anything, the people believed the wail signified a distressed call to lure the villagers into the woods, fooling them to believe someone was in danger.

“Aiko,” Kagome voiced. “Do you really think it was a Demon?”

Turning onto her side, Aiko’s brown eyes looked upon the girl beside her, her eyes staring at the roof above them. “I think so. Takashi said the Demon was surrounded by blue flames.”

“Then why didn’t it attack him? Demons can easily pick up on scents,” Kagome questioned.

Aiko mused. “I’m not sure. Maybe he was downwind of it? Or it could be a case where it didn’t notice him.”

“It’s been crying like that for over an hour now.”

Aiko nodded.

Looking away from the ceiling, Kagome turned towards her female friend. No matter how much she tried to drown out the noise with her own thoughts, she couldn’t rid herself of it. “Why does it sound so pained? It sounds like it’s in distress…”

Realizing Kagome was feeling empathy, Aiko’s felt somewhat alarmed. Pushing herself up from her futon, Aiko’s gaze narrowed disapprovingly. “No Kagome. You mustn’t feel upset. It’s
certainly a ploy to lure us into the forest.”

Lifting herself up as well, Kagome couldn’t help but scrunch her face in confusion. Was it truly a trick to lure them to the forest? But what if it was really a distressed cry for help? For some reason, she couldn’t help but feel something else was wrong. “I’m not sure … but I have this feeling something is wrong…”

“Kagome?” Aiko voiced. Noticing her friend lift herself out of her futon, rummaging through one of the chests for her kimono, Aiko quickly lit the candle beside her, the small flame lighting the room. “What are you doing? Where are you going?”

Pushing her arms into the sleeves of the kimono before wrapping and tying the obi around her waist, Kagome ambled to the door, looking back suddenly at her friend. “Sorry, but I can’t sleep. I want to find out why it’s making that noise.”

Aiko quickly stepped out the hut, grasping Kagome’s arm in hopes of pulling her back. “No. Lady Kaede said she would figure out what to do in the morning. She said we mustn’t venture into the woods until its safe,” She panicked. This was entirely too dangerous, and she feared Kagome was under a spell. “Let’s go back inside, okay?”

Regardless of her worry, Kagome pulled away, smiling. “Don’t worry. I just want to take a quick look. Besides, the Demon didn’t harm Takashi, right? I just want to take a peek and see if something is wrong. I’ll only be a few minutes. Besides,” She held up her wrist, displaying the white and blue subjugation beads to Aiko. “With these on, it won’t sense anything.”

“Kagome!” Aiko cried, but despite wanting her friend to ignore the Demon’s cries, Kagome ran off towards the forest. Unsure of what to do, Aiko chased after, but as soon as she reached the outskirts of the village, the looming trees of the forest staring back at her, she stopped. Kagome’s form disappeared past the line of trees, and Aiko looked on worryingly. “Kagome…”

Venturing further into the woods, the cries became much louder and clearer than before. It was definitely the sounds of a woman for sure, but was it truly a Demon like Takashi said? The more she continued on, the more she was beginning to regret her decision. Aiko expressed her concerns not to go into the woods, fearing it was a trap, but normally when Kagome set her mind on something, there was no turning back.

“Maybe I was a bit too stubborn…”

The darkness settled itself around her, an eerie fog arising at her ankles, and while she rubbed the warmth back into her arms, shivering as the cold set in, she saw a light up ahead.

“That light…”

Believing she was closing in on the spectacle, Kagome continued on the path, stepping through bushes here and there on her trek. Eventually, she arrived near the clearing, the sight of the Goshinboku directly ahead, but realizing she wasn’t alone in the vicinity, she concealed herself behind the trees, faintly glimpsing an awe-inspiring sight.

Blue flames danced before her eyes, their rounded embers lighting the clearing in an ethereal glow. As Kagome’s gaze looked on in fascination, it drifted towards the base of the tree. Seated against the bark, a woman with alabaster skin and long flowing crimson hair was dressed in a red, white and green kimono with many layers, her obi untied and her shoulder bared and swollen. A pained expression graced her face, her eyes shut tightly, and her hands held gently against her stomach. Her cries were indeed incessant, and judging by the scenario, it seemed she was indeed in pain.
‘Something’s wrong…’

“It hurts…” The woman cried out, tears falling as she writhed against the tree, her grip upon her obi clenching and unclenching.

Trying to discern the situation, Kagome squinted her gaze, looking past the multiple layers of her attire. Although her arms covered her stomach, there was no denying the blood which seeped through her clothing. She was injured.

Kagome gasped. Not good. If she was out here this long and crying out in pain, then something was certainly wrong. While it was probably best to remain concealed, Kagome couldn’t help but move away from the tree, revealing herself. Ever so slowly, she approached the woman, avoiding the flames floating around the vicinity.

“E-excuse me…” Kagome called out, somewhat softly.

Although her voice was barely above a whisper, the woman’s amethyst eyes opened. Looking upon Kagome curiously, her expression strained, she regarded her hesitantly, but she didn’t move away. “You … are a priestess?”

Kagome paused, her eyes widening in surprise. How had she known? Even though she wasn’t a trained one, it was certain she had sensed the spiritual powers within her. But how? Were the subjugation beads defective?

“It’s … subtle, but I can sense it…” She replied softly, her eyes straining to remain open. Noticing the young human’s hesitance, she released a sigh. “I won’t harm you…”

Relieved by this, and yet worried all the same, Kagome approached further and knelt before her. From far away, she didn’t seem any bigger than herself, but up close, it was obvious the woman’s height measured at least 6 feet tall. Everything about her, except for her eyes and hair were indeed humanlike in appearance. And yet, as Kagome scrutinized her further, she realized she had a long crimson tail flowing around the base of the tree, and tall sharp fuzzy ears perched atop her head. Was she a Kitsune?

Blood coated her lower abdomen, and a pool of blood fell trickled down her ankles, most of which shocked the young girl. The Kitsune’s layered kimono was ripped in many places, revealing a struggle recently took place.

“You’re wounded…” Kagome replied, covering her mouth from the sight. The injury to her abdomen seemed severe, but she couldn’t be sure since she wore so many layers.

“Yes … my clan was attacked. I managed to escape, but my injuries, I fear are great…” She replied achingly.

Worried she was losing too much blood, Kagome suddenly panicked. Remembering she had a first aid kid back at Aiko’s hut, Kagome quickly stood up, hoping to retrieve it. “Let me go get help. If we can clean and stitch your wounds, you should be fine.”

Yet, before she could run off, the Demon caught her wrist, shaking her head slowly. “There’s not much time. I’m not … long for this world…”

Her eyes widened at this. If she couldn’t run back to get the first aid kid, then what could she do? She was injured, and was dying right before her eyes, and yet, she couldn’t do anything. “There must be something I can do…”
Those words surprised the Kitsune, her strained eyes sparkling with amusement. “Hearing such words from a priestess … I’m surprised…”

“Oh, but I’m not a priestess. Actually, I’m just an ordinary girl…” Kagome replied, her eyes lingering on the blood worryingly.

“Ordinary?” She asked. “I see…” As her amethyst eyes closed, her breathing became somewhat calmer. After a few minutes, she opened her eyes, looking upon the girl intently. “If you can … would you do me a favor?”

Kagome nodded, a hand held to her chest. “Of course. What is it?”

Removing her arms from her stomach, her gaze shifting there suddenly, Kagome looked down as well. To her surprise, she saw a large bump protruding through her kimono, revealing without a doubt, the Kitsune was pregnant. She was in labor.

A gasp escaped her. “I didn’t know you were pregnant…” This was bad, so very bad. While she watched the woman struggle to remove her layered attire, Kagome assisted, and managing to slip the remainder off her shoulders, the Kitsune was finally free of her clothing.

“I cannot feel my baby moving,” She replied, caressing her bump achingly.

Her hands flew to her mouth, the blood accumulating between the woman’s legs was surely heartbreaking. Most likely, she must have miscarried, but Kagome didn’t know the first thing about how to handle such a situation.

“Won’t you help me … bring my child into this world?” She pleaded, her eyes glistening. “I cannot lose this child…”

Tears threatened to fall. Deliver her child? But how? If she could not feel her child move within her womb, and judging by the loss of blood pooling between her legs, it was most likely the case of a miscarriage. But then again, miscarriages normally happened during 20 weeks or so, right? Was it different for Demons? Kagome wasn’t sure. The child was probably… No. She didn’t want to think negatively. Maybe the child was still alive. “I’ve never done this before…”

“It’s … alright. It's a first for me as well…”

Swallowing nervously, she released a breath and nodded. “Alright. What should I do?”

Bringing a clawed finger up, her nail sliding against her stomach, she prodded the bump softly. “Pull the child from my womb…” She replied softly, noticing the girl’s face consort into a fearful one. “I cannot deliver … my child normally, priestess. This is the only way…”

“But, if you do that…” Kagome trailed off.

She smiled. “I … wish to hold my child before I pass on… Will you do me this favor?”

Despite wanting to refuse and find some way to save her, Kagome nodded. “Of course. I’ll do what I can.” Rolling up her sleeves of her kimono, kagome positioned herself directly in front of the Kitsune, her eyes locking with her amethyst ones. “Alright.”

Pleased by her comply, she eased herself onto the ground, allowing herself to lie directly upon her back. With the priestess beside her prepared to pull the child from her womb, the mother dug her sharp nail directly under the belly button, dragging her hand further down until it was big enough to ease the child through. Blood seeped from the open wound, and though it was not deep enough
to cause any harm to the infant, it was enough to urge a pained cry from her.

While the smell of blood and the sight of it almost overwhelmed her, Kagome held herself together. Leaning forward, she reached her hands inside the open wound, immediately urging a wale of pain from the woman. “I’m sorry…”

A pinkish layer of skin greeted Kagome, and realizing it would probably need cut, especially considering she could not see any baby within, she reached into her pocket. Once retrieving the small dagger, which she brought back with her from home weeks before, she looked dismally to the Kitsune lying down. “I need to cut through so I can get your baby out…”

“Do what you must. I will … endure…” She replied almost breathlessly, her vision darkening slightly.

Nodding. Kagome pulled her blade up, the point sharpened and never used. Taking a deep breath, she pushed aside the outer layer of her stomach, thankful for the flames dancing around the vicinity and providing her light. As she made a small incision against the skin, slicing it enough to where she could pull it apart, she saw the pinkish sack within. She was almost there, she was sure of it.

Perspiration fell from brow, and she very carefully made a cut, followed after by a couple more, and she realized the sack held layers. Kagome only hoped she wouldn’t somehow injure the baby within. To her relief, the final skin tore away easily, and this time, she saw the outline of the baby’s cranium within, its small auburn hair sticking out.

“We’re almost there!” Kagome replied. The only thing left was to pull, but she was reminded of the umbilical cord. What if the cord had somehow wrapped itself around the baby’s neck?

“Do … you see my baby?”

Kagome nodded. “Yes … but I just hope I can pull it out without causing harm…”

Understanding the urgency, the Kitsune slowly attempted to upright herself, and with the help of Kagome beside her, she leaned back against the tree, out of breath. The pain was indeed great, but she still had energy to spare. “I … shall assist. If you can pull the child, I’ll … take care of the rest…”

As the mother reached down, pulling back the layers of skin for Kagome, she leaned forward once more, her dagger lying on the ground beside her. With both hands, she carefully reached inside, her fingers gently touching the sides of the baby’s head. Not wanting to pull directly on the cranium, she reached a bit further, feeling around for the umbilical cord, and when she felt it, somewhere wrapped around the shoulders of the baby, Kagome moved it away. It was a lot more difficult than she first thought, though, it was a simple process. Once the cord was out of harm’s way, she pulled the lower body forward.

It happened within a few moments time, and shortly after removing the child from her womb, the baby was cradled in her arms, its small form moving on its own accord, and an infant’s cry immediately after. It had survived.

“Thank goodness…” Tears prickled Kagome’s vision. “It’s a boy…”

The Kitsune smiled in relief and reached for the child. As Kagome handed her the baby, the mother touched a spot on the cord attached to its bellybutton, and with a flick of her finger, sliced it.

As the cord fell away, her cerulean eyes took in the sight of the baby. It was beautiful, despite the
blood smeared all over her hands and kimono, it was still a wonderful sight.

“His father would have been proud…” She replied, grasping her plain white kimono before wiping the blood from her child’s body. “He looks so much like his father.”

“What will you name him?” Kagome asked, too hesitant to ask about the husband.

For a moment, the Kitsune pondered the question. What name indeed? As her amethyst eyes took in the sight of her child, noticing his small fuzzy red ears like her own and a peach colored tail like his father’s, she smiled. “Shippo…”

Kagome beamed. “It’s a wonderful name.”

She nodded, but certain weakness overcame her, and feeling her arms become limp, she leaned further back against the bark. Her breath came out short, her vision darkening and becoming blurry. Her time was drawing near, she could feel it. “I’m glad … I could hold my baby…”

Noticing her strength to hold her child against her was weakening, Kagome quickly leaned forward, steadying the Kitsune’s arm so the child wouldn’t fall. “There’s still time. I’m sure I can —”

She shook her head. “My time has come. You brought my child into the world, and for that … I am truly grateful, priestess. I do have one … last favor to ask of you…”

Without even knowing the answer to that, Kagome nodded, her gaze drifting to the child in her arms. Although their meeting was short, it was the only natural thing to do. The mother wanted her child to live on, and it seemed, she trusted Kagome enough to want her to raise her baby. “Are you sure? I’m … a human…”

She nodded, smiling weakly. “Human you are … you showed me a compassion I never once received from your kind.” She replied. “I believe … you will nurture my son just fine. Please … take care of him. Shippo … he doesn’t have anyone else to look after him. Without the love of a mother … how would he survive?”

Understanding, Kagome accepted the kit, and held the child against her chest, its small eyes closed as it slept. “I’ll take care of him,” She replied, tears spilling from her eyes.

Noticing her tears, she frowned, her hand lifting to wipe them away. They were genuine and pure, enough so, she felt satisfied leaving her child with the girl. “Thank you, priestess. I’ll surely watch over the both of you…” In her final moments, her entire body emitted a soft light, the light dissipating into nothing more than a blue flame, lingering with the rest dancing around Kagome.

Ψ

The bell rang throughout the village, signifying great distress among the villagers. The people stirred from their slumber, and prepared for the worst, they quickly fled to Kaede’s hut, the elderly priestess holding up a torch in the night, and immediately surrounded by the entire village.

Aiko fidgeted nervously, her eyes looking towards the forest with uncertainty. Half an hour had gone by since Kagome’s disappearance into the woods, and though she promised not to linger too long, Aiko was beginning to fear something terrible happened.

“Aiko has told me Kagome ran into the woods a short time ago,” Kaede replied, inciting immediate whispers among the people. “Whether or not it’s the Demon’s doing, we shall only take our best men into the forest. Any volunteers?”
While the bandits were gathered around, their fingers in their mouths biting at their nails nervously, Yuuta stepped forward. “I’ll head out. I’m familiar with those woods. Tracking her shouldn’t be difficult.”

“I’ll go as well!” Kosuke exclaimed, his urgency to find Kagome and protect her overflowing the forefront of his mind.

As Mayoko clung to her husband fearfully, she noticed the determined look spread across his face. Though they’d only known Kagome a short time in their household, she was like family to them. “My husband and I shall look as well.”

“There’s no need for that, honey,” Daisuke replied. “I’ll feel better if you were safe here than out there. I’ll bring Kagome back.”

Kaede nodded approvingly. “Very well. Let us be off.”

Gathering a horse for the High Priestess, the men settled on walking the remainder of the way there. During their trek, they were followed by the other villagers, despite Kaede’s warning to stay within the barrier.

Seeing this, from atop her stead, Kaede frowned. ‘They’ve really had a change of heart for the child.’

“Wait!” Aiko called out, running through the throng of people to catch up. When the others turned at her quick approach, she stopped beside Kosuke, catching her breath. “I want to go with you. I’m at fault for letting her go into the forest, especially alone.”

“Are ye certain, child?” Kaede inquired. “Ye may very well come across the Demon within. There is no telling what may arise.”

Aiko was determined. “I want to save Kagome!”

But at her exclamation, a figure appeared within the tree line, the villagers suddenly pointing their fingers towards the woods in surprise. Looking on nervously, hoping it wasn’t the Demon, they were surprised it was Kagome, covered in blood from head to toe, walking towards them.

Aiko gasped, her feet carrying her forward, and immediately threw her arms around Kagome’s shoulders. “Kagome!”

Almost losing her footing, Kagome smiled, easing away from Aiko so the child in her arms wasn’t crushed. “Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to take too long.”

Despite her words, Aiko fumed. “You were gone more than three minutes! Do you know how worried I was?”

While it was obvious Aiko was upset, Kagome otherwise felt apologetic to her, as well as everyone else suddenly gathered around her. It was clear from their stares, they saw the blood, some believing it was her own, but at the sight of something held snug against her bosom, wrapped in a thin one-layer white kimono, she held the child out.

Easing her way off the stead, High Priestess Kaede approached Kagome, her aged eyes taking in the sight of the newborn Kitsune silently asleep in her arms. Immediate silence overtook her, her mouth falling slightly open in surprise.

When Aiko saw the child, she couldn’t hold back a gasp, though she did not seem fearful, in fact,
she seemed quite worried, if not cautious. “Kagome…”

“What the hell is that?” Satouru asked, approaching her as well, his eyes noticing the twitching fox like appendages upon its auburn head. “A Demon!” He exclaimed, his fists tightening at the sight. “What is wrong with you? Why would you bring such a monstrosity to our village!”

To the word monstrosity, Kagome glared. “He isn’t a monstrosity. He’s a baby,” She replied, trying her best to keep her voice lowered so as not to wake the child. While the other villagers looked on silently, their thoughts confused as to why she arrived in a bloody mess, Kagome sighed. “I was curious of the wailing, and so I wanted to find the source of it. I ignored Aiko’s warnings, and for that, I’m deeply sorry. But, what I found wasn’t a Demon hoping to sink their fangs into me, but a mother who was in constant pain. She showed me kindness, and I returned the favor. She couldn’t deliver her child properly. In the end, her child survived, and she entrusted me to look after him.”

Upon her explanation, the villager’s confused expressions became somewhat understanding, though, the sight of the Demon within the young girl’s arms did little to soothe their worry.

“You what?!” Satouru growled. “Not only do you supposedly have the blood of a priestess flowing within you, but you showed mercy to a Demon and plan to raise its child? I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

Despite Satouru’s harsh words, Aiko and the others didn’t deny it. While it was indeed strange for a human to want to protect and raise a Demon, it was simply unthinkable. “I’m not sure that would be possible, Kagome…”

“How come?” Kagome was surprised her friend was also against it. “He’s a baby…”

Aiko nodded, touching her shoulder gently. “I know. If he weren’t a Demon, then we would reconsider, but he isn’t Kagome. Should it be known our village is harboring him, our lives would surely become forfeit.”

Kosuke agreed. “Not to mention the shortage of food. How could we possibly manage to feed another life when we’re barely getting by with what we have?”

They were right. The people were starving, including herself, and with so little going around, bringing up another child in the village was almost unthinkable. And yet, Kagome couldn’t turn away. This child, she would raise as her own; he was now her duty, someone she hoped to protect, and she only hoped to convince the villagers. “I promised her. I can’t break that promise. Regardless of what you say, I will raise this child. If I should leave this village to do so, then so be it.”

“Kagome?!” Aiko replied in surprise.

Yuuta couldn’t help but step forth. “If Kagome should decide to leave the village and raise this child on her own, then I shall accompany her.”

Kosuke blanched at this. The thought of Kagome deciding to leave the village in favor of raising the child, was enough to upset him. While he had nothing against the baby, despite the fears of what their Daimyo in Edo would do to them should he find out, Kosuke didn’t like the thought of Kagome leaving.

“Yeah me too!” One of the bandits called out, raising his fist in his exclamation.

“Me three!”
“Wherever Boss goes, we go!”

“Yeah!” They all shouted in unison.

Kagome smiled at their words, feeling slightly teary eyed at their want to follow her. She used her one clean sleeve, not stained with blood, to wipe at her eye. “Thanks, you guys.”

A chorus of whispers resounded around the young woman, many questioning whether or not they would lose their priestess in favor of raising the Demon baby.

“Good riddance. We don’t need a wench like you to protect us against Demons anyways,” Satouru replied scornfully, despite receiving scowls and dirty looks from the villagers, including the bandits. “She’s been nothing but trouble since she was brought to our village!”

Aiko glared. “That’s enough, Satouru. I would really appreciate it if you didn’t bad mouth my friend like that.”

The bandits cracked their knuckles. “What’d you say about our Boss?!” They replied angrily, their eyes narrowed and their stance predatory.

Satouru didn’t back down. “She’s not even a real priestess, so I don’t understand why you’re all so protective of her. She’s hasn’t done anything but lead Demons into our village, and most of our huts have been destroyed by the catastrophe! Not to mention her rogue bandits, the very cause of our ruined harvests from the start!”

“Boss?” One of the bandits called out.

Kagome blinked, not at all fazed by Satouru’s usual outbursts against her. “Yes Akira?”

“Permission to snap his neck??” He palmed his fist with his knuckles.

Satouru seethed, his arms crossed. “I’d like to see you try!”

Hearing this, Kagome held back a giggle. “No Akira. What did I say against killing?”

His shoulders slumped at this, but then, a thought occurred to him and he leaned in close to whisper in Kagome’s ear. “Then can I at least hit him real hard?”

Unable to hold back her laughter, which did not go unnoticed by others, especially Satouru’s scornful stare, Kagome laughed. “No!”

While it was obvious a fight was sure to arise between the bandits and Satouru, Kaede held up a hand to silence everyone. “So ye truly wish to raise this Demon as ye own?” Kaede finally replied after a moment’s pause.

Kagome nodded. “Of course. If anything, I’ll hold full responsibility.”

Understanding, despite Satouru’s want to rid the child from their village, she nodded. “Very well. Then, for the time being, the child may stay.”

Everyone turned at this, their eyes widened in disbelief, and Kagome’s hopes lifted. Despite the severity of the situation, she was willing to allow Shippo entry into the village, and for that, Kagome was truly grateful.

“Lady Kaede! This is unthinkable!” Satouru growled. “We can’t harbor Demons! If the Daimyo finds ou—”
Kaede narrowed her gaze at the young man beside her. “He won’t find out unless someone in our village reports it.”

Kosuke couldn’t help but voice his thoughts. “But why High Priestess?”

“I have trust in Kagome. While it may be against our customs to care for Demons, we must remember that Kagome was raised differently. She was raised with a gentle kindness within her, and ye have all witnessed it. Despite having the blood of a priestess flowing in her veins, she helped a Demon in distress, despite our fear going out into the woods. Her instincts as a priestess, despite her lack of training, drove her to help that Demon and deliver its child to this world,” Kaede replied. “I have no doubt in my mind, the child, under her care, will grow up just fine. Were my sister still alive, I feel even she would have gone out of her way to do just the same…”

Though they were unsure before as to whether or not accept the child into their village, after hearing their High Priestess’s explanation, she reconsidered. Perhaps raising a Demon baby wouldn’t be too bad, maybe, it would grow up differently?

“That is my reasoning. Should anyone be against it, speak now,” Kaede answered. To her satisfaction, no one said a word, not even Satouru, who was glowering at Kagome. Smiling, she placed a hand upon the newborn’s head, touching its soft hair gently. “We will welcome this child into the village.”

“Thank you!” Kagome cried elatedly.

Although she was still apprehensive, Aiko otherwise smiled for her friend. “If that’s the case, then welcome to the village, little one.”

Kosuke leaned in curiously, smiling at the small bundle cradled against her chest. Even for a baby, the child was quite adorable, despite looking more human than Demon. “What’s the baby’s name?”

“Shippo,” Kagome replied happily.

Yet, before allowing the child access into the village, there was one small problem, and that problem centered entirely around the barrier. The barrier acted as a means to keep Demons out, whether or not they possessed righteous or cruel hearts. Capable of fixing this dilemma, Kaede crafted another set of subjugation beads, similar in appearance to Kagome’s and entwined it around the baby’s wrist. With this, the child could freely come and go from the village without the fear of being purified.

Kagome held up her own bracelet, smiling at the child held in her arms, still asleep and unaware of the happenings around him. “Now we really are connected. Don’t worry, I’ll protect you from now on, my sweet Shippo.”

Droplets of rain suddenly fell upon them, the sight unpredicted, leaving the people staring up into the evening sky bemused. Rain. It was something they hadn’t seen in weeks, something which they’d been deprived of for so long. Delighted by the shift in weather, no longer appreciative of the sweltering heat they’d been experiencing, they joined together in celebratory cheers, raising their hands to the heavens joyously. Perhaps good things were bound to happen from now on.
Satouru's Secret Part One

Chapter Summary

It seems Satouru's disturbing obsession with Kagome has led his life of normalcy in the wrong direction, and he soon becomes unable to withhold from his lustful fantasies.

Author Notice: (Please Read both Author Notices.)

Warning. This chapter contains disturbing Mature Content such as erotic scenes, foul language and violence. This chapter is not intended to offend or upset anyone. Should it upset anyone, we are sorry.

Ψ

Blinded by an inevitable want to escape, Kagome found herself bound and gagged in the blackness of the night, her body thrown onto the hard floor of an unfamiliar hut, the floorboards scraping her feet upon contact. An unknown stranger seized her from behind, turning her roughly, her throat caught in his large calloused hands as he forced her onto her back.

A throaty chuckle escaped him, his hands working to unfasten her obi around her waist, removing the dirtied kimono from her body before tossing it aside. After which, he leaned over her, inhaling her wonderful scent, a mixture of sweat and dirt, his face pressed into her long raven strands. “I’ve waited so long for this moment…” Satouru murmured, smirking as he felt her wildly move beneath him in an effort to escape. “What’s that? I’m afraid I can’t hear you…”

Kagome’s eyes frantically wandered the hut, her legs spared from ropes, kicking as she fought to remove the rope from her wrists. The rope tied around her mouth prevented her from calling out for help, the roughness of the rope cutting the sides of her mouth painfully. No. This wasn’t supposed to happen. How had he gotten ahold of her?

Pleased there were no undergarments beneath the kimono, securing her beautiful mounds from view, Satouru pushed himself to his knees, his hands fondling her breast roughly. Upon his ministrations to her body, she cried out, desperately hoping someone would hear her. His dark eyes marveled upon her slim nude figure, an hourglass shape always concealed behind rough material, and finally, after all this time, he had her right where he wanted. His eyes lingered lower, noticing a small patch of black curls centered above her nether regions, and a haughty smirk followed after. Without so much as a second thought, he reached down, his finger slightly touching her lips between her thighs; it was enough to frighten her.

Fearful, Kagome squirmed, a high-pitched cry muffled against the rope across her mouth. Seconds after, Satouru raised his hand, and she laid there, a swollen cheek and an onslaught of tears following after.

“Be quiet,” He warned, pressing his thumb against her neck in a threatening manner. “If you so much as let out another cry, I won’t hesitate to come after your friend Aiko. Do you understand me?” He questioned, watching her closely as he slowly began removing his trousers with his free hand.
Kagome didn’t say a word, her eyes closed tightly as she prepared for the inevitable. What could she do in this situation? Satouru had gone mad, worse than before, and this time, she feared she wouldn’t make it out alive. Aiko. Kosuke. Yuuta. Would they save her?

Although she didn’t answer, he didn’t press any further. Once his trousers were removed, his member large with anticipation, he wanted to prolong the moment, just a little longer. “Good,” He replied, his breath erratic. Caressing her face, his fingers smoothing back her messy hair, he pressed his lips to her cheek, his tongue gliding across the swollen skin, much to her displeasure. “Kagome…” He whispered, his voice dark and husky.

A shiver passed through her and an uneasiness settled in the pit of her stomach. She didn’t like the way he said her name. She didn’t want him touching her like this.

“I’ve wanted you for so long…” He voiced, his hands roughly fondling her ample mounds. Small pink nipples erected from his touch, the very sight fueling his amusement. “So, you’ve wanted this as well?” His mouth suckled the small pearl shaped bud, his tongue circling the fleshy tip slowly. His hand traveled southward, fingers brushing through her black curls and ultimately pressing against her nether lips, a familiar moistness of juices coating his fingertips.

His member stood at attention, the veins visibly seen, and he felt himself. A sigh escaped him, her juices coating his hand were warm and sticky, and he gripped himself harder, covering his dick with the substance. His mouth fell open, with eyes glazed over, and he watched her incessant struggling beneath him. From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed the darkened sky outside the window. It wouldn’t be long before sunrise, before the other villagers awoke. Before then, he planned to have his way with her, and after which, he’d dump her corpse into the barn where her rogue bandits resided; from there, her death would indefinitely be placed onto them.

Unable to hold back, Satouru pressed his fingers against her hips roughly, earning a cry of pain from the woman. Although she kicked wildly, her knees knocking into his sides to fight him, his strength, in the end, overpowered her. With one leg pinned beneath his, he raised her hip, and pulled her lower body closer to his.

Ever so slowly, he rubbed his dick against her wet folds, thrusting his hips forward as he watched her. “Even though … I hate you with a passion … I still can’t get the thought of wanting to force my dick into your wet cunt out of me,” He breathed, his thrusts continuing. “Do you feel it? How does it feel having my dick rubbing against you?” He questioned, despite her hardened glare. “You’re to blame … ever since you came here … I’ve wanted to fuck you since. There’s no doubt … in my mind … you’ve bewitched my people … even myself … After I’m done with you, I’ll personally end your life…”

It felt good, her juices collecting onto his member, the friction hot and almost agonizing. He wanted more. He wanted inside her, and he wanted to break her. “I hate that glare,” He replied. Squeezing her thigh tightly, he suddenly shifted above her, opening her legs further. Without even a moment’s warning, he forced his dick inside, as far as his member could reach, before throwing his head back. So warm. So tight. The feeling of her cunt constricting around him, urged a throaty moan from his lips.

Kagome’s head fell back, her back arched and her tears spilling from tightly closed lids. It hurt. It hurt so much. Kami, why was this happening to her? Why did it have to be her, of all people? She wanted the comfort of her friends, and most of all, she wanted her mother’s hug. Wouldn’t anyone save her?

Adjusting to the tightness of her cunt, his body pressed down upon her, he rocked his hips forward. Ever so slowly, he teased his dick. Back and forth. Back and forth. If he plunged into her too
quickly, he was sure he’d cum. There was still enough time before sunrise.

Because of this wench, he lost his opportunity to right his wrongs. His own people turned against him, and in only a short amount of time, he was untrustworthy. It wasn’t fair. “To think … High Priestess Kaede would trust you … and your bandits … over me,” He voiced, his moans falling from his lips with each thrust.

Picking up the pace, he pounded into her. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh resounded from the hut, his throaty groans much louder and his breath erratic. Satouru’s body molded against Kagome’s, her legs pinned beneath his weight, his hands grasping her breasts roughly, as his foul breath fanned her face.

“Now I can’t take … a piss … without someone looking over my shoulder…” His eyes almost rolled into the back of his head. Kami she felt so good, and the fact that she was unable to fight against him made this moment all the better. If he could have this every day of his life, he certainly would. “If you had kept quiet … and not stirred up the villagers … things could have been different between us…”

She murmured something behind her ropes, though muffled and faint, Satouru heard it. ‘I hate you.’ Well the feelings were mutual.

Nearing his climax, he stopped. If he kept this up, his seed would undoubtedly spill into her womb, and he wasn’t ready to stop. While still leaning over her, sweat falling from his brow, he watched her. Kagome’s face was turned away, her tears coating her eyes and cheeks and her face reddened in shame. He liked that expression, and he certainly enjoyed the way her body reacted to his ministrations. “Don’t go thinking I’m done just yet…”

Slowly, he withdrew his member from her folds, a small groan escaping him as he touched his dick. To his surprise and excitement, he saw the presence of blood trickling from her cunt, the substance of her juices mixed with the smell of their rut. So, she was a virgin this entire time? Perhaps whore was going slightly overboard. Drawing a finger across his dick, he brought it to his mouth, his tongue gliding over the metallic taste.

Virgin cunt, in his mind, tasted the best. When was the last time he had a good rut? Months? Though he never openly admitted, he secretly, and for a few years, had his way with the younger women of the village, the youngest at least ten years old. With the promise of never spilling his seed into them, along with a few threats, they kept their mouths shut. However, ever since the Daimyo’s men arrived to check on the year’s harvest, many of those girls were taken away to Edo to help with the village’s finance issues. Now, the only suitable women he felt a strong attraction for were very few in number, and with the villagers keeping a close eye on him, he found it difficult to make his move.

Pulling himself off the wench, he watched her turn on her side, her bound hands held to her chest and her legs closed together as she wept silently. Despite her want to escape, he reached for her once more, pulling her body into his, and instead of forcing himself atop her, he held her in his lap, her legs straddling his hips, and his member easing into her cunt slowly.

“Move your hips,” He voiced.

Her tears continued falling, her head turning from side to side frantically. No. She didn’t want this. How much longer would he continue to torture her like this?

“I said move your hips, Kagome…” In an effort to warn her, should she refuse, he dug his nails into her hip, enough to slightly break the skin.
Unable to refuse, she followed his command, grinding back and forth, the feeling of his member sliding in and out of her in a rhythmic pace. For what seemed like short minutes, her legs trembling, he suddenly thrusted upwards, the sensation creating a sickening and almost numbing feeling in the pit of her stomach; he kept it up, his hands sliding across her ass, forcing her hips down upon him with each groan in her ear.

The sound of their flesh colliding, her juices coating his dick further, and her soft pants becoming increasingly easier to hear, Satouru smirked. Yes. Just like that. Reaching forward, he slid his tongue across her neck, sucking and kissing her skin hungrily, one hand positioned on her back side, the other reaching around her head to untie the ropes restraining her mouth. “If you so much as scream or cry…” He threatened, pressing his thumb against her neck warningly, he was pleased when he saw her slowly nod. “Good…”

The rope fell away, her mouth red from its restraint, yet before even a single word could fall from her lips, Satouru’s mouth crashed into hers. A single hand gripped the back of her head, his fingers tightened around her hair painfully as he drew her in closer, his tongue exploring every inch of her moist mouth.

Though her knees were scuffed and bleeding from the friction against the floorboards, Satouru decided to finish her off with a new position in mind. Pushing her off him suddenly, her back colliding with the floor in a painful manner, he quickly turned her onto her stomach, her ass in the air and her face pressed roughly against the floor. This position suited the priestess much better and he entered her from behind, his legs pinning her own in place. Like a dog in heat, he pounded his throbbing dick inside her, his hips thrusting against her backside faster than before. So close, so close.

Suddenly, the sound of a rooster croaking from outside, stilled his wild rut, his eyes wide in surprise as he leaned over the woman. Quickly turning his head in the direction of the window, he saw the color of the sky, which was once black, now a subtle gray in color. The sound of the villagers arousing from their slumber next door, their footsteps crunching upon the grass warned him to pull out, but he didn’t.

Despite the urgency to stop, Satouru found himself in a terrible situation, especially if someone decided to walk in on; the result would certainly prove devastating. He wasted too much time indulging in his fantasy to realize it was suddenly morning. As he quietly listened to the calls of the men conversing outside his hut, mere steps away, his hips continued rocking against the wench, this time slower, agonizingly slower.

“Damn it…” He whispered, his eyes closed tightly. After allowing himself a few more near the edge thrusts, he quickly pulled out, his hand gripping his dick tightly. Falling onto his hands and knees, he held back his groans, his orgasm piquing and his seed spilling onto his abandoned futon.

She laid there, her pants noticeable and her body sore from his abuse. It was finally over, and thankfully, he hadn’t spilled his seed into her. Watching him, while laying on her side, she heard the footsteps of the men outside walking away, and though her mouth was uncovered, she didn’t utter a word, for fear of what Satouru would do after.

Once he was satisfied, despite realizing the risks, he turned to the wench beside him, and hovered menacingly over her. “If you tell anyone, I’ll fucking kill you and your friends. Do you understand me … Naomi?”

Ψ

Author Notice: (Please Read)
Naomi was the person who was attacked by Satouru in this chapter, not Kagome. Satouru was simply caught up in his strange fantasy thinking of Kagome. We really wanted to flesh out Satouru’s dark and disturbing side, and we’re pretty sure it showed in this chapter, even if it was short.
When Aiko notices the bruises upon Naomi's body, she immediately becomes suspicious.

August 12th

Tossing her dirtied kimono into one of the wicker baskets by her bare feet, filled to the rim with several pieces of clothing and rags, Kagome examined her petite appearance. Though it'd only been roughly thirty-one days since her return to this world, braving many days without enough food to satiate her hunger, Kagome noticed early signs of malnutrition upon her body.

Besides her shrunken stomach, ribs noticeably apparent and ever-growing hunger pains, Kagome couldn’t deny her frequent headaches, and inability to sleep comfortably at night. Yet, despite the disparity of the village’s situation, the fields were finally producing their harvests, harvests which were not abundant, but enough to sustain them in the coming days. Though the people were still wary of outsiders, they looked after each other, and it was enough to reassure Kagome that things would definitely get better.

Shippo made a noise beside the rolled-up futons, his hands poking out from the bottom of the blanketed basket which served as bedding for him. If anything, Kagome was thankful there was enough goat’s milk to feed the child, the child she now called her son.

Bending down before the bulbous backpack she brought with her from her time period in early July, Kagome sorted through her belongings, Aiko’s ever curious gaze watching from the other side of the hut.

“What are you looking for?” Aiko asked, slipping her arms into the sleeves of a clean kimono before closing it and reaching for an obi to tie at her waist.

Various items were pulled from the bag, items which still puzzled Aiko. Though she never questioned their uses, despite the iron cooking pots Kagome revealed a short while back, Aiko felt it wasn’t her place to say anything. A few moments later, she noticed Kagome pause, retrieving familiar garments from the large bag. “Those are the clothes you wore when you returned to us, are they not?” Aiko inquired, moving to settle herself beside Shippo.

Kagome nodded. “Yes. I should have sorted through them earlier.” They were a bit wrinkled up, but other than that, they were clean.

A small selection of various colored panties, bras, followed after by a pair of New Balance shoes, light blue Capri pants and one dark blue tank top greeted them. As Kagome reached for a clean pair of underwear, light purple in color, she slipped them on, followed after by a plain white bra.

Once dressed, she turned to Aiko, who merely looked her up and down curiously. “I know it might look strange, but it’s the only clean clothing I have,” Kagome explained. ‘There’s also my school uniform … but there’s no telling how the villagers would react if they saw that again.’
“It’s alright. I’m sure no one will mind, and it’s not like our village will be visited today.”

Smiling at this, Kagome bent down once more in front of her backpack, pulling out a plain black hair tie and a brush. After smoothing back her tangles, she quickly pulled her hair back into a high ponytail, her bangs fanning her face nicely before turning to Aiko. “Alright, I’m ready.”

A childlike laugh resounded suddenly, their eyes shifting to the entrance of the hut before the flap opened unexpectedly. A familiar little girl, with long black hair and bright brown eyes greeted them, her rosy cheeks flushed and her smile wide with excitement.

“Ume, good afternoon,” Kagome greeted, kneeling down to lift Shippo from his bed. As she eased the child into the wooden baby carrier, careful he wouldn’t fall out, she slid her arms through the leather straps, with Shippo snug against her back unmoving. After which, she reached over for her basket of dirty clothes before regaining her standing.

Noticing this, Ume’s eyes sparkled. “Are you going down to the lake?”

With her own basket of clothes in hand, Aiko nodded. “Yes. Today is laundry day. Did you gather your clothing?”

At her words, Ume nodded. “Yes! I have it outside!”

Pleased by this, the two girls, exited the hut, the little girl beside them humming happily, her own small basket in hand, as they made their way down the small trail towards the lake. On their way, several other women were making their way in the same direction, their own baskets secured against them or balanced atop their heads while caught up in conversation.

It was a beautiful day, despite a few clouds here and there. Children were laughing and playing, while the men were either out hunting, gathering wood or watching over the fields. The construction of the village would commence today, as soon as enough wood was gathered.

Ψ

Kagome rubbed vigorously at the hemp kimono, using a wet stone to cleanse the dirt from the clothes stacked beside her in her basket. The method of washing clothes, in this time period, baffled Kagome. It was understandable, since the village was impoverished that they lacked the essentials to properly clean their clothing, and as hard as Kagome pressed the rounded stone against the fabric, she felt she was only damaging it. Honestly, the issue was the lack of soap and detergent.

One after another, Kagome pulled garments from the basket, tossing the ‘clean’ ones into a separate basket, compliments of Aiko beside her. Fortunately, they were cleaning their clothing downriver, the filth and residue swept away to unknown waters.

“Sorry I’m late,” A soft feminine voice replied. “Father needed help this morning.”

Kagome smiled at the short haired woman who moved to kneel beside her, pulling out her own kimonos to wash. “Naomi, I haven’t seen you much these past few days.”

She smiled, her laugh somewhat weak. “I’ve … been helping out in the fields lately,” She replied.

Kagome nodded. Yet, as she looked beside her, she noticed Naomi refused to pull up her long sleeves, the ends suddenly wet by the cold water. Every time Naomi moved her arms to slide the rock against her kimono and fundoshi, Kagome noticed traces of bruises upon her wrist, the area was red as if raw. “What happened to your wrists?”
Somewhat startled, Naomi tugged her sleeve down, a hesitant smile gracing her face. “Oh … that’s what I get for being clumsy in the fields. It’s nothing, really,” Naomi reassured her.

“Are you sure? It looks like it hurts…” Aiko replied, arching a brow curiously. The bruises looked intentional, as if someone had squeezed her wrists painfully and just recently.

“Yes. I’m fine, truly.”

Even so, it seemed the sudden attention bothered Naomi, her eyes glancing away awkwardly while her hands gripped her kimono nervously. While it seemed she didn’t want to focus on the conversation regarding her bruises, the girls turned back to their own tasks.

Although Kagome seemed worried about her friend, she otherwise respected her wishes. Aiko on the other hand couldn’t help but notice Naomi’s pale complexion and reddened eyes; if she didn’t know any better, it would seem the young girl wasn’t receiving enough sleep. What was she hiding? Was someone troubling Naomi?

“In about thirteen more days, we should be able to harvest the millet and edamame,” Naomi voiced, forcing a smile at the thought.

Kagome frowned. Millet was a type of grass, normally produced in poor soils of farmland and could either be used as food for the people or fodder for animals. The seeds which formed upon the grass could be used to make flour or alcoholic drinks. Normally, in this village’s case, it was made into a watered-down soup, with only a palmful of the millet within their bowls. It wasn’t the most satisfying of meals, and Kagome would give anything to have a nice juicy red tomato.

The second crop which would soon blossom was Edamame or in other words, green soybeans. The crop was normally eaten by itself, sometimes steamed or boiled, and sometimes served with rice, which they were unfortunately out of. Sadly, as fast as the crop grew, and as sweet as it tasted when first picked, it wouldn’t withstand more than ten hours; its color would swiftly turn brown, the flavor would greatly diminish from sweet to sour and it would no longer be edible. If they had some type of refrigerator in this time period, the edamame would keep for at least a few more days.

“Just thinking about food is making me hungry,” Kagome sighed.

Aiko laughed. “It won’t be much longer. I went up to the mountains early this morning and found some yams for Lady Kaede.” She knew for certain the older priestess would distribute them to the people.

“You went to the mountains?” Kagome asked. Aiko must have left before sunrise.

Aiko nodded. “Yes. I was out gathering herbs and decided to forage a little further. It’s not that far of a walk, but the trip was worth it. I came back with half a basket of yams, herbs and a few mushrooms.”

As if on cue, their stomachs growled.

Ψ

With his cart filled with lumber from the Forest of Inuyasha, Kosuke guided his oxen towards the village, following the dirt path as he passed the abandoned rice paddies. There was not a single crop growing within those shallow waters, the sight rather displeasing.

Feminine laughter greeted his ears, and glancing across the way, he noticed many of the village women gathered down towards the lake. Children were running around in the water, playing and
splashing each other, while the older women were conversed in light conversation. The sight, over all, was pleasing, and he smiled to himself.

“No matter if we are faced with famine or poverty, we’re still capable of finding joy among each other,” He voiced aloud, patting the oxen’s head beside him gently.

Guiding his cart into the center of the village, he couldn’t help but notice Yuuta awaiting his return, arms crossed as usual and his stance intimidating. Bringing the oxen to a stop, Kosuke greeted the buff individual, nodding his head in greeting. “Lady Kaede informed me you would help fix up the huts. I assume you’ve some carpentry experience?”

Yuuta nodded, approaching the cart before unfastening the rope secured around the wagon. “A man must always be knowledgeable of these things. I haven’t always led such a cruel life. Knowing how to build is a requirement above all else, otherwise how could I call myself a man?”

Kosuke supposed that made sense. “I’ll have to make several more trips to the forest.” He pulled a rag from his trousers, and wiped the sweat from his brow, his gaze looking around the village. “With regards to how many huts have been destroyed, I’d estimate at least five. I’m not sure we’ll get all of them constructed before the day’s end, but we might be able to get three if we’re lucky.”

“Do you normally do things on your own, Kosuke?”

He blinked. “What do you mean?”

Yuuta merely arched a brow. “The other men have gone out hunting and only you’ve been gathering wood. Why is that?”

At his words, Kosuke only sweat dropped. “Well there was supposed to be another person assisting me, but he’s been avoiding me as of late…”

“What?”

As if to answer his question, Kosuke’s gaze drifted past Yuuta, his gaze lingering on a lone individual positioned outside a hut. “Satouru,” He replied. “He’s been like that since morning, refusing to work, let alone conversate.”

Yuuta followed his gaze, eyeing the young man with a note of irritation. “Doesn’t surprise me. He’s got a temper which anyone would avoid. I’m curious … Why hasn’t your head priestess done anything about this situation?”

“What do you mean?”

Yuuta crossed his arms. “Concerning Satouru and his ill-behaved mannerisms towards the villagers, and lack of responsibility. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say Kaede has been turning a blind eye to him.”

“That’s not true,” Kosuke replied, shaking his head adamantly. “Despite his punishment previously, our priestess has acknowledged his behavior. I’m sure she’s thinking of what to do about him and his place in the village. Ever since he tried to harm Kagome, we’ve been told to keep strict watch over him.”

Yuuta’s eyes narrowed in recollection. If he remembered correctly, he heard rumors from the people that Satouru had dragged Kagome into the woods, a short time before he and his gang met the girl. Disgusting. “Were I in charge of this village, I’d sentence the fool to a fate worse than death.”
Upon hearing the growl in his voice, Kosuke sweat dropped. It seemed Yuuta truly cared about Kagome, despite his rough exterior. “Well, if he commits one more irresponsible action, then his fate will surely be sealed. That’s what Lady Kaede told me a short while back.”

“If it comes to such, I’ll see to it personally, with or without your priestess’s instructions.”

“Aren’t you leading the hunting party?” Kosuke changed the subject.

He nodded. “I am, but I’ve let my men handle the task for the day. The head priestess has asked that I partake in constructing the huts for the day. I’ve drawn out a blueprint for the huts and—”

Before either could say anything more, a sudden commotion drew their attention away from each other, their gazes drifting towards the hill nearest the lake. Upon noticing a few village men gathered around, Kosuke and Yuuta curiously approached.

“Do you reckon it’s because of the demon?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s certainly good it’s returned safely.”

A few village men, their ages varying from early thirties to late forties, were gathered around a gray colored goat. They were inspecting the animal for any signs of wounds, but surprisingly, there weren’t any, and it seemed as healthy as it could be.

“I’d say it’s a miracle for sure. Perhaps it’s because of the child Kagome took in.”

Hearing the name, Kosuke interrupted. “What about Kagome?”

They turned at his question, smiling as they pointed towards the goat, munching on grass before them. They explained the goat, which had vanished three nights ago, the same night the strange wailing began in the Forest of Inuyasha, had finally returned.

“Ever since that night, things have started to look up for our village,” One man replied.

Another nodded. “We feel the reason why it’s started raining these past few days is because of the demon child.”

Yuuta arched a brow at this. “So, you’re suddenly believing the child may prove to be a blessing rather than an omen?”

They paused at this, looking at one another inquisitively.

“So far, nothing ill has befallen us. The insufferable heat has disappeared and, in its place, pleasant sunshine and rain.”

Another agreed. “Even if we do feel slightly uneasy about the demon living in our village, we trust our High Priestess’s decision. Were the child truly a threat, it would not live under the shelter of our barrier.”

Kosuke nodded. “I see. I wonder how Aiko and Kagome are handling the situation…”

“Speaking of Kagome…” One of the men voiced, beckoning everyone over towards the hillside. “Did you see the manner in which she is dressed today?”

Curious of the spectacle, the three men quickly rushed to the hillside, kneeling upon the ground as they peeked their heads over the incline. From beneath the hill, they caught sight of the women washing their clothes, rubbing the fabric of their kimonos and undergarments with rounded stones.
As their dark eyes shifted from each woman and child, they fell upon three girls near the bank of the lake, knelt down washing their clothes.

Kagome stood up, hefting her basket of dampened clothing and sauntered over towards the trees beside the other girls. As she bent down and placed the basket onto the ground, she reached into the basket, her back facing the hillside.

“She wore those garments before, I think. Such unusual clothing…”

The two nodded, eying her form up and down. It was peculiar, seeing a woman dressed like a man, though the style of garments were terrible different than what they were used to. And yet, the way in which she wore the clothes, which clung to her curves, left the men slightly in awe.

“I’ve never realized she had such a nice figure…” One voiced.

“As tight as they are, those trousers look kind of nice on her…”

“You think I could ask her to get a pair for my wife?” One asked almost jokingly.

At the sight of the men gawking at the women, Kosuke shook his head. “You shouldn’t talk about Kagome like that. She’s our village’s future priestess, after all.”

“Don’t get jealous, Kosuke,” One man replied, humored by the young man’s humble actions.

“Yeah. Last time I checked, she didn’t officially agree to undertake the role of priestess.”

Hearing this, they all laughed, somehow finding amusement in their choice of words, everyone except Kosuke.

Yuuta, who was annoyed by their ignorance, raised his hand. In one fell swoop, his fist collided with each of their heads, the three crying out painfully from the attack. “I suggest you listen to the boy. Watch your mouths, especially when it concerns her. Do I make myself clear?”

Though reluctant to move from their spot, the view quite nice from where they were knelt, the three village men grouchily stood up, and sauntered past the two. After which, Yuuta and Kosuke watched as they returned to their tasks, overlooking the fields and tending to their own personal affairs.

Feminine laughter reached Kosuke’s ears, and recognizing the laughter as that belonging to Kagome, he couldn’t help but turn his head in her direction. From where he stood, he noticed her laughing along with her two friends, and he smiled.

“Is there something you need here?” Yuuta asked, narrowing his gaze slightly towards Kosuke.

Kosuke’s head whipped back, his face reddened when he saw Yuuta glowering at him suspiciously. It wasn’t as if he was watching her for his own amusement. “No … not really…”

He only arched a brow, watching as the young man awkwardly stepped past him, his steps carrying Kosuke towards his abandoned cart filled with lumber. Satisfied no one was peeping on the girls, Yuuta shook his head. It seemed the men of this village only had one thing on their mind.

“Yuuta!” Kagome’s voice called from below the hill.

He jumped at this, half expecting her to reprimand him, but instead, he was greeted by her smile as she waved at him. Half tempted to turn away and help Kosuke unload the wood, he suddenly
noticed the woman step towards him before waving him down.

“Do you mind helping me really quick?”

Bemused by what she needed, he accepted, carefully stepping down the incline, despite Kosuke’s curious stare from a distance. Managing to make it down the slippery slope, the grass still wet from last night’s rain, he greeted the woman, Kagome’s two friends talking amongst themselves by the lake with Shippo beside them. “Did you need something?”

Kagome pointed towards two trees beside her, both connected by a long rope. One end was tied securely around a branch while the other was lopsided around the opposite tree’s trunk. “I kind of messed up and now I can’t reach the branch to fix it. Do you mind helping me?”

He nodded approaching the tree before reaching up easily enough to unwind the rope from its double knot. How the woman even reached so high up in the first place was a mystery to him. After that, he secured the rope around the tree’s truck and satisfied the rope was balanced and high above ground where Kagome and the other girls could reach, he turned to Kagome.

“Thank you! You really saved us there.”

Despite Yuuta’s warning not to peep on the girls, Kosuke watched first hand as the rogue man descended the incline and approached Kagome. The very sight upset him, and he realized Yuuta must have planned this from the start. Slightly annoyed and seeing no reason why he couldn’t speak with Kagome, Kosuke also descended the hill. “Kagome!” He called, smiling at the raven-haired woman.

Both Yuuta and Kagome turned at his voice, and while Yuuta obviously narrowed his gaze, Kagome otherwise smiled.

After managing to carefully tread down the hill, he approached them, his height taller than the woman, yet shorter than Yuuta in comparison. “Do you need any help?”

Kagome shook her head, pointing her thumb at Yuuta beside her. “Oh, well Yuuta already helped me.”

Hearing this, he forced a smile, scratching the back of his neck nervously. “I mean, I don’t mind helping you with the laundry…” Saying these words brought a blush to his cheeks, and he hoped he didn’t sound too strange.

Kagome mused. If Kosuke wanted to help out, then she supposed he could. It would definitely speed things along, and there was no harm in it at all. “Alright. Give me just a minute. I forgot Ume’s basket.” If Kosuke wanted to help, he could hang up Ume’s father’s clothes, that way it’d be less work for the child and herself.

As the raven-haired woman walked away, Kosuke turned to Yuuta, the two sharing a short and hard stare. “I know what you’re up to.”

Yuuta arched a brow, his face alit with amusement as he noticed obvious jealousy within Kosuke’s stare. “Oh? And what might that be?”

“You were waiting for me to leave so you could be alone with her. Well guess what? It’s not going to work,” Kosuke replied, reaching into Kagome’s basket of laundry.

Yuuta crossed his arms, watching amusedly as the young man spoke against him. ‘Really?’ He smirked. It was a first, especially between the two, which he’d displayed his jealous side,
especially with regards to the young woman. Kosuke must have thought something was happening between the two, and Yuuta couldn’t deny his interest in the girl. Kagome’s beauty far outshined that of many of the women in this small village. Not only that, but she held spirit and courage, something he found admiring in a woman.

Upon retrieving one of Kagome’s garments, Kosuke paused, his eyes taking in a strange piece of cloth held in his grasp. It was peculiar in design, not exactly a kimono, but definitely quite intriguing. A pale pink double cushioned cloth was displayed between him and Yuuta, its design slightly intricate with small yellow hearts all over its exterior. “What is this?” He asked, caressing the soft material between his forefinger and his thumb.

Yuuta shrugged, eying it as well, though he didn’t approach Kosuke. “Perhaps it would be best to put it back.”

Kosuke narrowed his gaze at his words. Now he was giving him orders? “I told Kagome I would help her, and help her I will, Yuuta. I’m not doing anything wrong,” He replied, his hands squeezing the padded cushions of the cloth while his other hand surveyed the strange straps and hooks. It was definitely used for something, but what? Perhaps Kagome would tell him?

A startled gasp resonated near them, and turning away from the strange garment, they noticed Kagome standing before them. With Ume’s basket of clean clothes held against her stomach, her startled eyes took in the sight of Kosuke squeezing the cup of her favorite bra. Her face reddened with embarrassment. “Kosuke!”

Bemused by her anger, he watched as she sat the basket down and marched towards him. Before he could back away, she snatched the garment from his hand. “K-kagome? What’s wrong?”

“What do you think you’re doing with my bra!?” She replied, tossing it back into her basket before glaring at him.

Just as confused, Yuuta noted Kagome’s unexpected embarrassment. It wasn’t as if Kosuke had picked up her fundoshi of all things. Looking closer at Kagome’s appearance, he noted her strange kimono top, sleeveless and held together without an obi. Yet, looking closer, he noticed straps beneath the shirt, straps which seemed somewhat similar to what now laid in the heaping basket. Realization struck him, his own face reddening. The cloth was most definitely used as a wrap to bound her chest.

“Your … bra?” He asked, confused by the strange word. Because he hadn’t expected this reaction, his eyes slid towards Yuuta, who wore a very awkward smirk across his face. From what he saw, Yuuta’s index fingers were pointing towards his own chest, clenching and unclenching his hands as he motioned with his eyes towards the basket.

Still somewhat bemused, his eyes shifted towards Kagome, lingering upon her chest as he fought to understand Yuuta’s meaning. It couldn’t be possible that something like that was used to…

“My eyes are up here, Kosuke!”

The sound of a slap echoed in the vicinity, the women turning their curious stares in their direction. Kagome had hit Kosuke, the red mark bright and stinging. After which, Kosuke promptly left the area, a feeling of humiliation washed upon his entire countenance, Yuuta following behind with mild amusement.

Upon seeing this, Aiko and Naomi giggled.
With a huff, she reached down into her basket and folded it over the rope, followed after by another. ‘The nerve of him. I leave for one second and the next he’s fondling my bra!’

“Kagome?” Ume called from beside her.

Snapping out of her grumbled thoughts, she looked down at the small child beside her, tugging on her pants. “Yes Ume?”

“Can I help?”

“Of course, you can,” She replied, smiling softly.

Ψ

Wiping the sweat from her brow, Aiko stood up, her clothes washed and piled in her basket. As she looked behind her, she smiled at the sight of Kagome and Ume laughing together, the raven-haired woman lifting the child so she could reach the rope to hang her kimono.

“Finally, I finished,” Naomi cheered, folding the last of her garment into her basket. Looking beside her, she noticed Aiko looking at Kagome and Ume, an ever-present smile pressed upon her face. “What is it?”

“You know, I was just thinking Kagome is very good with children. At our age, we’d be married with kids by now.”

Naomi nodded. “Father has been pressing the issue onto me as of late, but I’m not ready. Besides, most of the men in this village are simply…” What was a nice way to describe it?

“Unattractive?” Aiko laughed, noticing Naomi’s flushed expression. “We should be grateful to the few attractive men in our village. There’s Kosuke, who is probably the most charming out of all the men. He’s reliable and honest, probably the perfect man a woman would want.”

Naomi nodded. “Don’t forget Yuuta,” She replied, smiling as she noticed a blush creep across Aiko’s cheeks. “As rogguish as he might appear, he is rather handsome. He might have been a bandit at one point, but it seems he’s settled down nicely. Looking at him now, you wouldn’t think he was a bandit.”

“That’s true,” Aiko replied, trying to hide her blush. “Then there’s Takashi, Satouru and his two friends…”

At the mentioning of Satouru, Naomi blanched, her countenance still. Troubled thoughts burdened her, and she looked away dismally. “Oh … I don’t think Satouru is charming whatsoever…”

Aiko agreed. “I’m not going to complain with you there, but you can’t deny his attractiveness. I’d say, compared to Kosuke, he is second in the village. If he didn’t have such a brazen attitude, he might have been married by now.”

“I wonder which of us will be married off first…” Naomi asked.

Aiko mused. Though she didn’t have to worry too much about that, especially considering her family was no longer living, she turned her stare towards Kagome. “If it’s anyone, I’d say Kagome. Though she told me some time back she preferred being single, at least until the right man came around.”

“I have a feeling that time might come sooner than we expect.”
Aiko looked at Naomi curiously, watching as the young woman reached for the sleeping baby in Kagome’s wooden carrier before holding him snug against her chest. “You think so?”

“It’s not a mystery that Kagome is very beautiful. Practically all the men have noticed her beauty, especially the older ones with wives,” Naomi explained. “Though, I’m not sure which guy it might be to win her favor…”

“Huh?”

“I’m talking about Yuuta and Kosuke,” She replied, noticing Aiko’s countenance take on a surprised one. “Haven’t you noticed how those two seem to flock towards her? Even just a few moments ago, did you not notice the rivalry?”

Aiko shook her head. She must have missed that. So Yuuta and Kosuke both liked Kagome? Well, she knew Kosuke liked her for sure, but she never thought Yuuta would as well. A man who was once her kidnapper was suddenly a love interest. “Are you saying, one of them might propose?”

“Maybe not now but soon. If anything, I think Kagome would definitely be the first to marry, at least, before the two of us.”

That was a curious thought, though Aiko couldn’t help but wonder if Kagome really would. There was always a chance the tree would return her back to her own time, a place she truly belonged.

“Kagome!” A feminine voice called out.

As the girls searched their surroundings, they noticed Mayoko above the hillside, waving down at them. It seemed the older woman requested a private audience with their friend, and Kagome was quick to return to their side.

“What’s going on?” Aiko asked.

Retrieving Shippo from Naomi’s arms, Kagome cuddled the child against her before retrieving her basket and wooden carrier. “Mayoko and I made plans today. She’s going to show me how to make a cloth carrier for Shippo.”

“Can I go too?” Ume asked from beside her.

“Sure, you can. Just let your father know where you’ll be first, okay?”

“Okay!”

Before she and Ume turned to leave, Kagome waved to her friends. “I won’t be long. I’ll see you two in a bit.”

As Aiko waved towards the young woman, Naomi couldn’t help but notice movement from behind the trees a short distance away. The familiar face of a young man with terrifying eyes watched her, nodding his head for attention.

“Naomi? What’s wrong? You look pale,” Aiko commented, touching her friend’s cheek worryingly. Was she getting sick?

Pulling away from Aiko’s touch, the short-haired girl only shook her head, smiling slightly, though her eyes revealed fear. “Oh … no it’s nothing. Actually, I’ll be right back, Aiko,” She replied, quickly standing.
“Where are you going? I can come with you, if you like.”

Again, Naomi shook her head, this time, awkwardly moving in place. “Actually, I sort of need to relieve myself in the woods. I won’t be long.”

Understanding, Aiko watched as the young girl walked off, towards the Forest of Inuyasha. If she had to pee, all Naomi had to do was say so, but why had she acted so scared? Somehow, Aiko had a suspicion something more was going on.

As soon as Naomi disappeared over the hillside, Aiko stood up, her basket in hand before making her trek up the incline. After making her way to the top, she sauntered slowly towards the hut, not at all far from the hill before stepping inside. Placing her basket down onto the floor, she paused, a sudden thought resurfacing.

“What happened to your wrists?” Kagome asked worryingly.

Somewhat startled, Naomi tugged her sleeve down, a hesitant smile gracing her face. “Oh … that’s what I get for being clumsy in the fields. It’s nothing, really,” Naomi reassured her.

“Yes. I’m fine, truly.”

Aiko frowned. Somehow, she knew those bruises weren’t accidents. No, they were definitely left by someone. Not only that, but her friend’s complexion was pale, her eyes reddened and swollen as if she’d been crying. Whoever was hurting Naomi, Aiko wouldn’t forgive.

Turning towards the flap of the hut, Aiko stepped out, her eyes staring in the direction of the woods. Within those few moments, she made up her mind; she would find Naomi and discover the truth.

Exiting the village proved easily enough, the villagers distracted by their own tasks, and soon enough, Aiko made her way through the thicket of trees. With her guard up, her eyes scanning her surroundings, she searched the area for any signs of trouble. There was silence around her, followed after by birds chirping.

Venturing further into the woods, she half wondered if Naomi traveled this far, but before she could call out to her friend, she heard voices ahead, a feminine voice followed after by a masculine voice.

Pushing back the shrubbery of bushes and branches, Aiko immediately stilled, her breath hitched in her throat before ducking behind the nearest bush. In sheer surprise, she peered out, noticing two intimate individuals, a man and a woman, consummating within the forest, several feet away from her.

Looking closer, Aiko saw the familiar face of her friend Naomi, her legs wrapped around the man’s waist, whose back was facing her. Naomi’s back was pressed up against the rough bark of the tree as this man relentlessly pounded her, his own groans reaching her ears, but Naomi never uttered a word, her eyes tightly closed and her mouth firmly shut.

Aiko covered her mouth. What in Kami’s name was happening? No, better yet, why was this happening? She had no idea her friend was intimate with someone in the village. Who was the
Though she felt entirely embarrassed, witnessing the act of passion right before her eyes, Aiko didn’t move from her spot. Something told her to stay, despite her want to flee back to the village. As she squinted her eyes, the leaves concealing her well enough from view, she made out the outline of the man with Naomi. He was tall, quite muscular in appearance, and he certainly had an exquisite facet.

Realizing she’d been admiring his backside, along with his broad shoulders, she blushed. Now was not the time for such thoughts; this was serious! Were it found out, an unmarried daughter was secretly intimate with a man of their village, the people would certainly turn against them, especially her. It was a sin. Naomi, why was she doing this? Was it possible, Naomi loved this man?

A startled cry escaped Naomi, and surprised by the pained noise, Aiko watched in mortification as the man slapped her friend to the ground. Naomi was holding her face, tears prickling her vision as he bent over her. His hand grasped her dark strands of hair, roughly pulling her to her feet, despite her cries.

Aiko gasped. The man who was attacking her friend was none other than Satouru.
Naomi confides in Aiko, fearful of Satouru's continued attacks, and when Satouru is confronted by his friends to put an end to his obsession, he finds it difficult to stop, turning his anger this time on someone else.

“It hurts! It hurts! Please no!” Naomi cried out, tears cascading down her reddened cheeks.

Despite her cries, he pushed her against the tree, her back towards him. “Shut the hell up! I told you not to make a sound, didn’t I?!” He hollered, shoving her face into the bark before separating her legs with his knee. With her upper body pressed against the tree, he positioned himself to enter her from behind, but before he could, a voice called out.

“Naomi! Where are you?!”

Satouru stilled. The voice sounded too close to his liking, and acting fast, he pulled away from the woman, grasping his trousers which he’d thrown into a bush before quickly dressing. With one last look behind him, he concealed himself behind the trees, listening for any signs of approach.

Hearing the voice, Naomi quickly reached for her kimono, and despite her tears still falling, she shakily dressed herself. The voice which had called out belonged to her friend Aiko, and not wanting her to see her like this, she wiped the tears from her face.

With her back held against the tree, Aiko placed a hand to her chest, her heart pounding wildly. If anything, she didn’t want Naomi’s torture to continue, and so she called out, despite her own fear. Satouru would pay for what he did, and she would see to it. Taking a deep breath, Aiko revealed herself. “There you are. I was looking for you. Lady Kaede was asking for you back in the village.”

Sniffling, Naomi turned and forced a smile. “Oh, I see.”

Aiko’s hands clenched. The poor girl. She was a wreck, her face beyond red and her eyes just the same. “Is everything alright? Were you crying?” She asked, knowing full well Naomi wouldn’t reveal the truth. In her situation, Aiko almost didn’t blame her; most likely, she was mortified.

“I … was, but it’s nothing really…”

It was definitely not nothing. With Satouru listening from behind the tree nearest them, Aiko merely nodded and reached for Naomi’s hand. There was no way she was going to leave Naomi behind, despite what Satouru might do later. “Come on. We shouldn’t keep her waiting.”

Naomi followed after, hesitantly glancing behind. “What does Lady Kaede need from me?”

“She said she wanted you and I to help Kosuke with something. I’m not exactly sure what the specifics were, but she’ll explain once we get back,” Aiko lied, hoping Satouru heard every word as they distanced themselves.

As Aiko led her friend through the forest, following the dirt path along the way, she listened to her
surroundings. It didn’t sound like anyone was following them, and she was sure Satouru was probably ‘busying’ himself where they’d left him. After covering more distance, the sight of the village just ahead, Aiko stopped and released Naomi’s hand.

“Aiko? What’s wrong?”

The raven-haired woman turned, her eyes filled with worry. “Naomi … I saw what happened…”

Naomi paled, her eyes wide with disbelief. “I … I …”

It was difficult for her to fess up, and no wonder. When she saw her friend nearing tears once more, Aiko wrapped her arms around her, her friend shaking against her. “Let it out. It’s alright. You’re safe now. I won’t let him touch you again, Naomi.”

Ψ

Mayoko knelt before a small cabinet, sliding the small screen open as she peered inside, her hands searching for a particular piece of cloth for her guest. “A cloth carrier for the child?”

Seated comfortably across from her, with Shippo held snug against her chest, rocking him back and forth, Kagome nodded. After finishing up the laundry and hanging it to dry, Mayoko had called for her by the lake; earlier, she and the older woman made plans, and she offered to help Kagome create a carrier which would provide more support for her child, rather than continue using the twig carrier beside her. “Yes. I’m sorry if I’m imposing…”

“Not at all. Give me just a moment. I’m sure I have extra cloth stashed away somewhere…” Mayoko replied, pulling out a few sewing needles and thread. After a moment, she finally found the cloth, rolled up and held it out to Kagome with a smile. “There we go. The color is a bit faded, but it should provide enough support to carry him.”

Kagome accessed the light blue cloth, watching as Mayoko unraveled it from its cylindrical form, spreading it out until its length reached the other end of the hut. It was longer than it was wide, but in comparison to Shippo’s size, it was perfect. “Are you certain you don’t want it?”

“Please do not feel troubled. I have no need of it. It’s what was left over from last year, but I’m not sure why I kept it for this long.”

A soft noise escaped Shippo, his hands playing with Kagome’s ebony locks, while his large emerald eyes peered around the room. Seeing this, both Mayoko and Kagome smiled, the young woman playfully touching the kit’s nose as he kicked his feet happily.

“Shippo’s never been here before, so he’s taking it all in,” Kagome laughed.

Mayoko nodded. It seemed the child had bonded quite nicely with Kagome, and in only a matter of three days. Most likely it was the case of imprinting, which generally meant the child recognized her as his mother upon first opening its eyes. “Raising a child is a lot of responsibility and being unmarried, it won’t be easy, Kagome. Are you certain you’re ready for this?” She asked, a bit concerned. From her times spent with Kagome in the village, she knew the young girl was unwed and without children.

“I’ll manage,” She smiled. “After all, I helped my mother raise my baby brother long ago, even after my father’s passing. It wasn’t easy, but I learned a lot back then.” It wasn’t a lie that Kagome loved children. One day, she hoped to marry and possibly have a child of her own, but she wasn’t sure if such a day would arrive so early. Still, it surprised her how fast Shippo arrived in her life, and she would cherish the child and raise him as her own for as long as she was allowed.
Satisfied with her response, and knowing Kagome would care for the child wonderfully, Mayoko smiled. “Well that’s good to hear. Should I show you how to wrap the carrier?”

Looking away from Shippo, Kagome nodded. “Yes.”

“Let us stand. You may lay Shippo on the floor for a short moment.”

Understanding, she gently placed the him onto the floor, watching amusedly as his arms and legs kicked, his eyes staring curiously at the abandoned warmth from his mother. “It will only be a minute, honey.”

Standing up, Mayoko instructed Kagome to lift her arms while she gathered the lengthy cloth. As she folded the cloth in half, she gingerly wrapped it around the young girl’s petite waist, bringing the right end over her left shoulder and doing the same for the opposite end. Adjusting the crisscross pattern against Kagome’s back, Mayoko stepped around her, pulling at the ends of the long lengths cascaded over her front shoulders until the makeshift sash around her waist was tight enough.

“Oh, I think I understand what you’re doing now,” Kagome exclaimed, scrutinizing the cloth.

Bending down, Mayoko reached for Shippo, a disgruntled cry escaping him, but when she placed him into Kagome arms, snuggled against her chest, he quieted down. “He’s rather fond of you, Kagome.”

She laughed. “It took Aiko an entire day for him to get used to her. He’s such a mama’s boy.”

The older woman laughed at this. How true that was. “I’m almost done,” She replied, pulling up the sash around Kagome’s waist until it covered Shippo entirely, leaving only his small feet and head exposed. Satisfied the child was positioned inside comfortably, Mayoko took the excess cloth beneath Shippo and tucked it in. Tugging on the two long lengths lying over and down Kagome’s front shoulders, the cloth secured around Shippo tightened a little more, and easily enough, she brought both ends of the lengths crisscrossed beneath Shippo’s knees, wrapping them around Kagome’s waist twice before double knotting them in the front.

The two lengths reached no further than her thighs, perfectly out of the way during chores. Lastly, she straightened up the cloth around Kagome’s shoulders, bringing the excess ends in on both sides before enclosing Shippo into a secure cocoon against Kagome’s chest. “It’s finished. What do you think?”

Kagome marveled at the sight, hesitantly removing her arms around Shippo before smiling elatedly. “Perfect! This will definitely make things much easier for me. Thank you Mayoko.”

She only nodded, sitting down once more on her knees, followed after by the young girl. “It might take a few tries to get used to, but I’m sure you’ll figure it out soon. Should you want any alterations done to it, feel free to ask me now. I’m afraid there won’t be any other time to do so.”

Kagome blinked. There wouldn’t be another time to do so? “What do you mean? Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes,” She replied, a somewhat dismal smile creeping across her face. “I’m afraid my husband and I will be leaving tomorrow morning. Since the recent attacks and shortage of food, it’s been difficult for us, including everyone in the village. Even if the fields are blossoming with new harvests, I’m afraid we can’t stay here any longer…”

A saddened look graced Kagome’s countenance. How awful, and just when she and Mayoko were
getting along nicely. Though she didn’t want the older woman and her husband to leave, she
understood their reasoning. Would the other villagers leave as well? “Where will you go?”

“West,” She replied. “Towards the coasts of a fishing village. It’s about a two week walk from
here, and Lady Kaede has been kind enough to give us a horse for our travel.”

“I see…”

Mayoko touched her stomach gently, a faint smile lighting upon her countenance. “Most of all,
Daisuke and I need to think about what’s best for our child.”

ψ

After finding a comfortable spot beneath a tree inside the village, far away from any ears, Aiko
turned to Naomi, her knees pressed against her chest. Naomi’s tears had finally stopped, and it
seemed she’d calm down a little bit, but her eyes kept warily searching her surroundings, as if
fearing Satouru would eavesdrop and attack her. “How long has he been doing this?”

Naomi looked down shamefully. “Three days…”

“That long? Why haven’t you told anyone? Did he threaten you?” Aiko asked, doing her best not to
raise her voice, as much as she wanted to.

She nodded. “If I told anyone, he said he’d go after you and Kagome. I was too scared…”

When would that jerk stop? Not only had he tried to force himself on Kagome, but now Naomi?
Who was next? Her? “Even if he threatened you, you don’t need to feed into his desires, Naomi.
We should go directly to Lady Kaede and tell her what he’s been doing.” She replied, moving to
stand up, but she fell back in surprise as Naomi grabbed her wrist.

“No please don’t!”

“Naomi?”

“Please don’t tell anyone!” She pleaded, rubbing the palms of her hands together before her. “Even
if you tell her, he won’t stop. It doesn’t matter what kind of punishment he receives, he won’t
stop,” She explained, hugging her knees close to her chest, her shoulders trembling. “He’ll come
after me, and he’ll kill me. What’s worse … he’ll probably go after you next.”

“The only punishment he’ll receive is a death one,” Aiko countered back. “He won’t even get close
enough to try and force me or anyone into anything!”

Naomi shook her head. “Lady Kaede has never punished anyone so severely in our village. If
anything, a simple banishment will likely occur…”

“And even so, he won’t be allowed to step foot into the village,” Aiko reassured, noticing the tears
fall from her eyes. “Naomi, it’ll be alright. I’m here for you and so is Kagome. Satouru will be
stupid to try anything afterwards.”

“He … mentioned Shippo…”


“He … he said he would go after Shippo most of all. That a demon didn’t belong in the village,”
Naomi replied, turning to Aiko worryingly. “He’ll do it Aiko. He’ll go after Shippo. I’m sure of it.
“So please, don’t say anything, at least not yet…”

“So Naomi. We can’t keep this a secret. I don’t want Satouru attacking you again. No, I’m not going to let it happen.”

“Give me two days … please, just three days?”

Aiko shook her head. “No Naomi. Anything could happen within that timeframe.”

“Then … tomorrow. Give me until tomorrow, please?”

Seeing as how her friend was scared to death, and willing to confess Satouru’s actions in the morning, Aiko allowed it. Perhaps waiting until tomorrow would be better, especially considering Naomi would likely feel a lot more calm and comfortable than she was this moment. “Fine. But first thing in the morning we’re going directly to Lady Kaede. And you’ll be sleeping in my hut tonight.”

Thankful for this, Naomi hugged her. “Thank you.”

Aiko returned the hug, holding her friend tightly against her. “I’ll make sure that bastard doesn’t come near you.”

Ψ

Half an hour went by after the unexpected interruption, and believing it was safe to come out of hiding, Satouru did so. He trudged his way back to the village, his trousers tight against his nether regions, and a scowl ever plastered upon his face. That Aiko bitch had shown up at a rather inconvenient time, and if he’d been any later, she’d have caught him on the spot. “The conniving wench…”

As he made his way down the path, his eyes taking in the sight of Yuuta and Kosuke working on the foundations for one of the huts, he turned his sights towards Lady Kaede’s hut, the old woman likely inside resting. No one was looking at him accusingly, so he assumed nothing must have happened.

“Awe, he’s so cute!” Aiko’s voice called out, halting Satouru in his tracks almost immediately.

Satouru’s eyes fell upon the three girls, including Kagome and her demon child, both Naomi and Aiko gathered around her giggling at the child. He felt his eye twitch at the scene. Weren’t Naomi and Aiko supposed to be visiting Kaede? Why were they aweing at such a disgusting sight?

“Isn’t it adorable?” Kagome’s voice replied, smiling at the small child wrapped in the cloth carrier in front of her chest.

“Look at his legs go!” Aiko teased, laughing at the little Kitsune.

Satouru clenched his jaw at the sight. ‘ Giggle all you want, but your fun and games won’t last for long… ’ Just looking at them pissed him off, and with every intention to walk over and grab the child from Kagome, Satouru held back. No. Now wasn’t the time. There were far too many eyes watching. He felt the stare of Daisuke out in the fields, and without even having to look in his peripheral vision, he knew he was watching. Even that beast Yuuta kept looking in his general direction, so much so, he wanted to simply lunge at them.

“Satouru…”
Blinking, he half turned, noticing Makoto and Toshiro behind him, two young men whom he once considered his close friends. Satouru regarded them, eyeing and sensing their hesitance before him. The last he’d spoken with either of them was well over a month ago. Although he never heard them, he knew they were whispering behind his back, especially after the events which transpired previously regarding their deceased friend.

An awkward silence fell between the three. Satouru regarded them coldly, his dark eyes noticing their obvious hesitation and fear, but he didn’t say anything; in fact, he waited, calmly.

Toshiro released a breath. “Really, of all things … why did it have to come to this?” He asked, not really to Satouru, but mainly to himself. He sought clarification and answers, almost every day, but he never received anything but a cold heavy silence. “It’s been days now, since Mitsuki’s death. I still can’t believe he’s gone…”

Understanding their lament, Satouru slowly nodded. “I feel the same…”

Makoto looked away, his hands clenching. There was something on his mind, something which turned his angered stare towards Satouru. “He didn’t have to die, Satouru. We could have saved him…”

“Makoto!” Toshiro scorned, grasping his shoulder to pull him away. “This wasn’t what we talked about…”

Makoto shrugged him away. “No. I’m not going to keep silent any longer, Toshiro. About what happened to Mitsuki, I’m not going to let it go.” He turned his vengeful eyes towards Satouru, the suspect responsible for killing his friend. “Why? Why did you do it? We were right there, we could have brought him back to Lady Kaede.”

Satouru nodded, withholding his resentment, at least for the moment. “I understand your anger … but there was no saving him. You saw the extent of his injury…”

“But he was still alive, Satouru,” Makoto pressed.

“In a state of shock, yes, he was,” Satouru countered. “The bird ripped his arm clean from his socket, Makoto, and it would return to finish what was left of him. How could I let Mitsuki endure such a fate? So, I did what I felt necessary. Not even our High Priestess could have saved him.”

Makoto’s shoulders trembled, his fists clenching and unclenching. He remembered that day, the day Satouru held no remorse for his actions. The day he plunged his scythe into Mitsuki’s skull, despite their protests. Satouru murdered him. How could he simply forgive that?

Noticing his resentment, Satouru sighed. “It couldn’t be helped. I didn’t want him to suffer. There wasn’t much time to think in the situation we were all in. I ended it for him as quick as I could. You can think of me as a murderer, but I saved him. At least his death was more tolerable than Suki’s. You remember how that demon tore her in half, ate her insides, while she was still conscious?”

They nodded, recalling the horrific scene. How could they forget?

Toshiro sighed. “We’re sorry Satouru, but this entire situation … it’s really affected us,” He replied. “I mean, I would rather live on, knowing there was a chance, you know? Regardless if I lost an arm or a leg … I wouldn’t want my friend to kill me…”

“This is a mess,” Makoto replied, his eyes looking elsewhere but at Satouru for the moment.
“We don’t hate you, Satouru,” Toshiro began. “but we’re a bit concerned … We think it would be best if you left that woman alone as well.”

His eyes dangerously narrowed. Woman? Which one? Were they referring to Naomi? Did they know? “Who…”

Makoto almost snapped at the very question. “Who do you think? Kagome!” He replied, making sure his voice wasn’t loud enough for the young girls to hear. “We’re not blind, Satouru. We see you glaring at her every single day.”

Toshiro nodded, noticing Satouru’s shoulders become less tense all of a sudden. “I mean … before it wasn’t an issue. We could put up with you pushing her around but it’s gotten worse, especially after we found out you tried to rape her in the woods…”

Makoto nodded. “We never expected you to go that far. We understood you hated her … but it seems your obsession with her has gotten out of hand, Satouru.”

“Obsession?” Satouru growled.

Toshiro nodded. “Listen, why don’t you just accept the girl?”

“I’m not obsessed,” He replied, lifting his jaw high at such an absurd accusation. “I simply do not want her in this village…”

This caused Makoto to shake his head. “I don’t think Lady Kaede will kick her out any time soon, especially after the girl saved our village, not just once, but twice.”

“We might have distrusted Kagome in the past, but she’s earned our respect,” Toshiro replied. “Our High Priestess favors the girl, there’s no doubt about it. There’s a rumor going around that she might become our second priestess. Surely that’s great news, were it to happen.”

Despite Toshiro’s attempt to uplift the conversation, Satouru merely growled. “So, you’re siding with the wench?” He questioned, taking an intimidating step towards them. “The girl was shameful enough to bring a demon into our village, and you have hopes she’ll become the next priestess? Tell me, have you never heard anything so absurd?” He didn’t expect an answer right away, their troubled stares shifting away awkwardly. “This goes against the law. Were it found out, do you know the consequences our village will undergo? Immediate death,” He answered. “But I’m not going to let that happen. That demon needs to—”

“Enough, Satouru,” Makoto replied, sternly glowering at Satouru. The very mentioning of the child irked him, and he had a feeling if he wasn’t stopped now, something terrible would escalate. “Enough. If you keep this up … then we can’t be with you. We don’t want this anymore.”

Toshiro nodded, his arms crossed and his expression solemn. “I think, having Kagome here might help our village. Sure, we might not fully agree with her decisions, but if our High Priestess trusts her, then so will we.”

“We didn’t tell Lady Kaede what really happened that day, with Mitsuki,” Makoto replied. “But I’m beginning to regret that decision…”

“So, you plan to rat me out? After a month of keeping it secret? Go ahead, you’ll also receive punishment,” Satouru seethed.

A disappointed look crossed Toshiro’s countenance as Makoto stalked off. They hadn’t intended to upset Satouru, and only wanted to resolve the awkward tension surrounding them.
his back fully to Satouru, he muttered one more thing. “Sorry, Satouru. You’re on your own now…”

And like that, they were gone, leaving him standing in a fluster of internal rage. Obsessed? Accept the woman? In only a short amount of time, the wench not only bewitched the village, including the old hag herself, but she also brought in a demon, and now, the people trusted her. It didn’t make sense. It was preposterous. Absurd. Immoral thinking!

Satouru’s glare shifted towards the three girls, his eyes falling upon the short-haired woman. When he caught her eye, he nodded in his direction, wanting to finish up their earlier rut, but to his surprise, she stuck close to Aiko, turning her gaze away as she focused on Kagome, Mayoko and the baby. What? The bitch ignored him? ‘You fucking bitch, if I call for you, you come! How dare you feign ignorance!’

He was seething. Everything about this morning pissed him off. Not only had Aiko interfered in the forest, and Toshiro and Makoto interrogating him, but now this? Naomi would regret such a foolish mistake.

After looking over the foundations for the huts, thanks to Yuuta’s assistance, Kosuke urged the oxen through the village in hopes of retrieving more wood from the forest. The animal stalked down the dirt path of the village, kicking up dust as they conversed in light conversation. To their misfortune, the cart beneath them shifted, its weight falling lopsided as he and Yuuta bumped shoulders.

Kosuke cursed, pulling on the reins before jumping from his seat to access the damage. It was no mystery as to what happened; the wheel flew off again, the blasted thing. “There’s just no fixing this wheel. For some reason it always flies off.”

Still positioned in the seat, Yuuta’s eyes followed the wheel, the contraption rolling towards the direction of a lone individual with his back facing him and Kosuke. Recognizing the man from his backside, Yuuta hollered out. “Satouru!”

At the name, Kosuke looked over, noticing Satouru standing a short distance away, the wheel lying against his foot unknowingly.

He turned, his smoldering glare acknowledging the two men behind him, Yuuta leaping from the cart and Kosuke calling out. Noticing Kosuke point towards his feet, Satouru’s gaze shifted down, a small brow arched as he regarded the beat-up wheel.

“Do you mind giving us a hand? The wheel popped off again,” Kosuke replied, unaware of the irritation surrounding Satouru.

Somewhat grudgingly, he reached down and grasped the frame of the wheel, approaching the two with long strides. As he stepped around the cart, bending down as Kosuke and Yuuta lifted from the back, Satouru eased the wheel in place, retrieving a wooden hammer from Yuuta before hammering at the wheel.

“We never expected you to go that far. We understood you hated her … but it seems your obsession with her has gotten out of hand, Satouru.”

“We might have distrusted Kagome in the past, but she’s earned our respect,” Toshiro replied. “Our High Priestess favors the girl, there’s no doubt about it. There’s a rumor going around that she might become our second priestess. Surely that’s great news, were it to happen.”
Satouru paused, his eye twitching in recollection of their words. There was no way he would let that happen. The wench could burn for all he cared. If he couldn’t go after her directly, then he’d resort to a different tactic, one which would secure the safety of the villagers, including himself.

“Satouru?”

Realizing Kosuke was calling his attention, Satouru pulled away from his thoughts, shaking his head lightly. “Got lost in thought…” Was his explanation.

“I noticed. You feeling alright? You look a little pale,” Kosuke replied, noticing the bags beneath Satouru’s eyes, his complexion paler than he remembered.

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? If you don’t feel well, you should see Lady Kae—”

“I said I’m fine! Fuck!” Satouru growled, immediately regaining his standing before stalking away, leaving Kosuke and Yuuta staring at his retreat with worried and suspicious confusion.
**Marked**

Chapter Summary

Unleashing his pent up frustrations on Shippo, Satouru comes to a realization of his corrupt and obsessive behavior, but even that isn't enough to protect him from his destined fate.

Kosuke made one last trip to the Forest of Inuyasha, his oxen guiding him and his cart filled with lumber to the ever-quiet village ahead. Empty streets greeted him, stray dogs and chickens frolicking in the night across the dirt paths as he leapt from his cart, guiding the animal the rest of the way towards the barn. Exhaustion pooled from him in droplets of sweat coating his face, his top clinging to his back and the thought of a nice cooked meal weighing heavily on his mind.

Earlier, Yuuta aided him in the forest, cutting down a few large trees without so much of a hassle, though on their return to the village, Yuuta was called upon by a few village men for needed assistance with the animals. By then, the sun began its slow descent and although no huts were erected, he'd gone after one last load of wood for the day.

Nearing the barn, he paused, looking out across the fields cloaked by shadows of the night, his eyes shifting towards the huts, no lights greeting him from within. The people had long since turned in and realizing there was only a matter of hours before dawn, he tugged on the reigns and approached the darkened barn ahead.

Once outside the structure, he untied the animal from its ropes, guiding it inside the straw covered floor before tying the animal to a post on the other end of the barn. Loud snores greeted his ears, and without even having to light a candle, he knew it was the occupants without huts lying asleep within. Careful not to arouse them from their exhausted slumber, Kosuke stepped back outside, his eyes turned upwards towards the bright crescent moon.

“Ah, there you are,” Came Yuuta’s voice. “I was beginning to wonder if I should fetch you from the woods.”

Kosuke turned, noticing the familiar outline of one of the bandits walking around the other side of the structure, and he smiled. “It took longer than I expected, but I believe we should have enough wood for tomorrow to get started,” He replied. “I take it you are on watch tonight?”

Yuuta nodded. “Yes, and you as well.”

He blinked. Was he on watch tonight? A sigh almost escaped him. Here he thought he might get some well-deserved sleep, but that wasn’t the case. “It must have slipped my mind,” He despondently replied.

Yuuta laughed, smacking the young man on the back before approaching the cart. “Here. I’ll help you unload.”

“Much appreciated, Yuuta.”

For several minutes, the two unloaded the cart, the two conversed in light conversation, the snores
of the occupants within the barn fueling their amusement.

“Are you still a little sore with what happened earlier with Kagome?” Yuuta couldn’t help but inquire, his dark eyes shifting to Kosuke beside him as he settled a few pieces of wood beside the barn.

“You mean the incident with her laundry?” He asked.

Yuuta nodded. “I take it that was the first she’s ever hit you?”

Kosuke scoffed. “Why are you bringing that up? It was a misunderstanding. How was I supposed to know that was her … wrap?”

He chuckled. “Indeed. It came as a surprise to me as well, but she certainly didn’t leave you room to explain yourself. But after that, you’ve been a little sore.”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

Yuuta only rolled his eyes. No matter how much his companion tried to conceal it, he knew the incident troubled him. “Oh really? Then why were you quiet the entire day after it happened? Have you thought about apologizing to her?”

“That has nothing to do with it, Yuuta,” Kosuke replied, scoffing. “And what makes you think I won’t apologize?”

He only shrugged, smirking to himself. “You like her, don’t you?” He expected a quick retort, but instead, he received a silent response, and looking over his shoulder, he noticed his companion’s eyes widen in surprise, as if he’d just been found out. “Did you think I didn’t notice?”

“And if I do, why should it matter? What about you?”

Yuuta arched a brow. “What about me?”

Kosuke paused for a moment, trying to figure out how to blatantly ask his feelings concerning Kagome as well. Did he like her just as much as him? “Well …”

Something clicked in Yuuta, and he couldn’t help but chuckle in realization. He was curious of his feelings for the girl. How interesting. Was this jealousy? “You are curious of my attachment with her, am I correct?”

Kosuke nodded. “From what I’ve seen, the two of you have been awfully close since the incident when you all returned to the village…” He couldn’t help but wonder of their relationship.

Yuuta hummed a response. “If I remember correctly, I did stake my claim on her then. Of course, you remember just as well. At the time, you were adamant on protecting her…”

After dropping the lumber onto the ground, Kosuke stared at the rough exterior of the barn, recalling the moment Yuuta and his men barged into the village, setting huts aflame and stealing the women. At the time, even he was no match against his brute strength.

He turned suddenly, his hands clenched at his sides, his eyes narrowed suspiciously at him, though Yuuta didn’t pay him much mind as he gathered the remaining pieces of lumber. There was a question burning in his mind, one which questioned what else happened after Kagome and the other girls were taken hostage that night; did Yuuta remain true to his words about making Kagome his? Did something else happen?
Yet, before he could interrogate Yuuta, something in his peripheral vision moved, a shadowy figure of a man darting through the empty streets, with something held tightly in his arms. Bemused, Kosuke turned away from Yuuta, his gaze watching the silhouette sprint down the path away from them and the village, his direction headed towards the Forest of Inuyasha.

“Kosuke?”

“I’ll be right back…” He replied before running off in the same direction.

Confused by Kosuke’s unusualness this late in the night, he turned his attention back to the cart and unloaded the remainder of the wood. After carefully stacking the last beside the barn, he wiped the sweat from his brow and rolled his shoulders and hearing a successful pop he sighed in relief.

A distressed cry broke him from his reverie, his eyes widening at the familiar and unexpected feminine scream. Without a moment’s pause, he darted away from the barn and towards the huts down the path, his feet carrying him to Aiko and Kagome’s hut.

Ψ

In an instant, Aiko arose from her futon, her body turning quickly at the sounds of a startled and troubled cry beside her. Confused by the sounds of knocking against wood beside her and the shuffling of sheets, Aiko quickly lit one of the candles, using one of the matches Kagome brought back with her from her time period, and as the flame drew higher, she saw Kagome on all fours searching the hut, her face panicked. “Kagome? What’s wrong?”

Even Naomi awoke with a start, sitting up from the shared futon with Aiko before curiously looking around the hut until he eyes fell upon Kagome, pushing aside her bedding in a panicked state.

“He’s gone!” Kagome cried, the basket which her darling Shippo previous slept was empty, the basket turned on its side as she crawled on the floor of the hut, searching every inch and cranny for the baby. “Shippo is gone!”

“What?!” Aiko and Naomi cried out in surprise. How was the child gone?

Unexpectedly, the flap was thrown open, and as they turned their eyes to the person standing half way in their hut, they saw it was Yuuta. “What’s happened? Are you alright?” He asked, his eyes frantically shifting between the three girls.

Aiko quickly got to her feet, her hands clasped in front of her worriedly. “It’s Shippo. He’s missing.”

Kagome sprung to her feet as well, her hands clenched upon his kimono top, a look of desperation marred across her troubled face. “He’s gone. Shippo is gone! My baby is missing!”

While this was certainly troubling news, Naomi couldn’t help but place a hand to her mouth. It wasn’t possible that…

Yuuta grasped her shoulders, running his thumbs soothingly over her in hopes of calming her down. “Be calm. I’m sure we’ll find him.”

Voices resounded from outside, and as the girls, including Yuuta, stepped out, they saw the confused and worried faces of the villagers, some mostly half asleep, while others were shaken by the cry. They were looking at Kagome and the others curiously, and as the huts around them alit with candle light, more stepped out of their huts, confused by the noises.
“We heard a scream,” One of the young men exclaimed. “What’s happened?”

“Is everything alright?” Mayoko asked from beside her husband.

“Mama, why is she crying?” A child asked curiously, noticing the tears falling down Kagome’s face, her entire form settled into Yuuta’s embrace.

Despite the commotion, Aiko stepped in front of her friends. “Shippo is missing. Someone must have taken him while we were asleep,” She replied, earning startled reactions from the villagers.

“A kidnap!?” An older man inquired.

“Oh dear!” Some of the village women exclaimed, covering their mouths from the shock.

Unfortunately, while Yuuta was on patrol for the night, he hadn’t witnessed the event take place, and feeling partially to blame for this, he felt a strong inclination to drop to his knees and apologize to Kagome, but he held fast. “I was on patrol this evening, but I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

“Wasn’t there another person on patrol with you tonight?” An older man asked.

Yuuta nodded. “Kosuke, but he only returned ten minutes ago from the forest. We were stacking the remainder of the wood so it would be ready for tomorrow’s construction,” He explained.

“No one saw who took the baby?” Mayoko questioned, hurrying to Kagome’s side to comfort her, but they only shook their heads.

“If someone took the child, then certainly that person would be missing this moment, right?” Someone in the crowd asked.

Yuuta nodded. “It must have just happened while we weren’t looking. Look among you. Who among you is missing? Only then will we know.”

They did just that, identifying each other curiously. It certainly wouldn’t have been a child, as most were still asleep inside the huts, unaware of the situation. As for the older folk, it was difficult enough for them to get around on their feet, let alone get away with a child. So, it must have been someone younger, but who?

“You don’t suppose, it was Satouru?” Naomi asked, covering her mouth fearfully. Even as she looked upon the crowd, there was no signs of him anywhere.

Toshiro and Makoto, who were once friends with Satouru, shared a glance with each other, and as they took off for his hut, which wasn’t too far from where the villagers were gathered, they noticed his house empty. Turning back to the villagers, they called out. “Satouru isn’t in his hut!”

Surprised gasps resounded among the villagers, and as they each looked among each other, they couldn’t help but believe he must have been behind this unfortunate event. There was no doubt in their mind, he was the culprit, after all, he was always going against Kagome, going against the very idea of a demon child living among them.

“That bastard…” Aiko seethed.

After hearing this, Kagome suddenly felt faint, her hands tightening upon Yuuta’s kimono. “He took Shippo. He’s going to kill him…” She replied shakenly.
“Kosuke missing as well!” Someone called out suddenly.

“I thought he was on patrol?” Someone asked.

At that moment, something clicked within Yuuta’s head. Only a short moment ago, he witnessed Kosuke take off towards the forest, as if he was following after someone. Yuuta cursed in realization. “Damn it! Kosuke must have run after him!”

“What do you mean?” Aiko asked, whipping her head in his direction.

“I was wondering why Kosuke suddenly took off towards the Forest of Inuyasha. He must have saw Satouru running in that direction,” He admitted.

In an instant, Kagome pushed away from him, her legs carrying her quickly in the direction of the forest down the dirt path. If that was the case, he was planning to murder her child, far away from the village so now one would witness it. And most certainly, he would feign ignorance to Shippo’s disappearance. No. He couldn’t do that. Not Shippo!

“Kagome?! Come back!” Aiko called out.

“Kagome!” Naomi cried.

Easily enough, Yuuta managed to catch up with her, and grasping her arm, he pulled her back, despite her frantic attempts to pull away from him. “Kagome, stop! Calm down!” He managed to force her body towards him, his hands held tightly upon her shoulders and once he caught her utmost attention, he looked her in the eyes, trying his best to reassure her. “It’ll do you no good to get worked up and run into the woods.”

“He’s going to kill Shippo!” She cried, trying to pull away. “Please, let me go! My baby!”

“We’ll get him back. I promise you. I need you to calm down first!” He exclaimed, trying to soothe her worries.

“But he’ll … He’ll…” Kagome’s words fell short as her vision darkened suddenly and losing her balance, she fell against Yuuta unconscious.

Yuuta cursed, and as the other villager looked on in worry, Yuuta reached down and tucked his arm beneath her knees and carried her quickly, passing Naomi and Aiko as he made his way towards the High Priestess’s hut.

“He’s crossed the line! He’s gone too far this time!” Makoto couldn’t help but reply.

Toshiro nodded. “What do we do? Should we search the woods? What about the demons?”

Arriving at the old woman’s hut, and thankful there was a faint light within, he called out to the High Priestess. “Lady Kaede! Lady Kaede!”

“What is all this noise?” Her aged voice cried out, and after a moment, she emerged from the hut, pushing back the flap as she looked upon Yuuta and Kagome confusedly. “What has happened? Kagome?” Seeing the anger and worry flashing through his gaze, along with that of the other villagers gathered up so late this evening, she beckoned Yuuta inside, followed after by Aiko and Naomi.

Carefully laying the raven-haired girl down onto the wood flooring, Aiko and Naomi quickly gathering around their friend worriedly, Yuuta turned to Kaede. “It would seem Satouru is up to
Hearing this, Kaede’s eyes widened, and she nodded. “It does not surprise me in the least. Satouru, without a doubt, probably intends to murder the child. It may already be too late…”

“Regardless or not, he’ll not get away with this. There’s a chance he might not even return to the village afterwards, especially since he would be the first suspected,” He replied. “I’ll round up my men and search the woods and find him, and if I have to, I’ll kill him.”

Kaede nodded. “I’ll stay with Kagome. Ye bring Satouru back, and alive at all costs. He will be dealt with publicly within the morning, if he is found. Vengeance can wait until then.”

Understanding, he left he hut, sidestepping past Mayoko who quickly entered inside before falling to her knees beside Kagome and the other girls.

Ψ

You had to have it all
Well, have you had enough?
You greedy little bastard, you will get what you deserve
When all is said and done
I will be the one
To leave you in the misery and hate what you've become

Intoxicated eyes, no longer live that life
You should have learned by now, I'll burn this whole world down
I need some peace of mind, no fear of what's behind
You think you've won this fight, you've only lost your mind

Heaven help you

Ψ

His legs carried him further and further into the depths of the woods, the sinking feeling within the pit of his stomach becoming much stronger in his sense of desperation. There was no turning back.

By now, he was sure there was notice of the infant’s disappearance and unmistakably, his as well. There was no returning back to a seemingly normal peace of mind; in truth, he felt he lost it ages ago, though he wouldn’t admit it.

Did it matter?

As he dodged low branches, trudged through thick thorny bushes, he searched his surroundings. Was he being watched? Was he being followed? Satouru paused in his trek and turned, his eyes squinting through the darkness encompassing him. There was no one, but he heard laughter on the wind, whispers mocking him, and he felt a shiver run down his spine. No. There wasn’t anyone there. It was only his imagination.

The incessant crying of the baby in his arms grew louder which each breath, and while he’d had the blanket over its head, in hopes to muffle its noise, he discarded it, tossing it onto the ground at his feet. As his dark eyes took in the demon before him, its cheeks reddened in obvious discomfort and unaware of its predicament, he scoffed.
“Disgusting. Creatures like you deserve to burn…” He replied, holding it out and away from him in disdain. He could always drown it in the river and throw the lifeless corpse down a ditch for the wolves to eat, but he felt more satisfaction ending its pitiful life differently. “I’ll return you to hell, from whence you came demon.”

Lowering himself onto his knees, he laid the child on the ground and withdrew the scythe strapped to his side, the blade sharpened the day prior. As it’s edge glimmered in the moonlight, he raised it above his head, a twisted smirk gracing his dark expression.

“So ye truly wish to raise this Demon as ye own?” Kaede finally replied after a moment’s pause.

Kagome nodded. “Of course. If anything, I’ll hold full responsibility.”

Understanding, despite Satouru’s want to rid the child from their village, she nodded. “Very well. Then, for the time being, the child may stay.”

“Lady Kaede! This is unthinkable!” Satouru growled. “We can’t harbor Demons! If the Daimyo finds ou—”

Kaede narrowed her gaze at the young man beside her. “He won’t find out unless someone in our village reports it. I have trust in Kagome. While it may be against our customs to care for Demons, we must remember that Kagome was raised differently. She was raised with a gentle kindness within her, and ye have all witnessed it. Despite having the blood of a priestess flowing in her veins, she helped a Demon in distress, despite our fear going out into the woods. Her instincts as a priestess, despite her lack of training, drove her to help that Demon and deliver its child to this world,” Kaede replied. “I have no doubt in my mind, the child, under her care, will grow up just fine. Were my sister still alive, I feel even she would have gone out of her way to do just the same…”

Satouru’s eye twitched at the memory. “Don’t blame me for this. Blame her. After all, she brought you into our village, knowing the consequences beforehand. She killed you, not I,” He replied before plunging the blade down towards it’s skull.

Someone grabbed his arm unexpectedly, and before he could turn to see who had stopped him, Satouru was roughly pulled away from the child, the scythe ripped from his grasp and pushed to the ground, his assailant above him with his hands at his throat.

“What the hell?!” Satouru cried out, trying in vain to push the person off him.

Kosuke glowered at the pathetic man beneath him before tossing the scythe away from him and throwing his fist at his face. “Are you out of your mind?! What were you thinking?!”

“K-Kosuke?!” Satouru bit out, struggling beneath the young man’s weight. “I’m doing the village a favor!” He replied. “Get off me! I haven’t finished what I started!”

Again, Kosuke’s fist met his face, but he was overwhelmed when Satouru shifted beneath him and effectively kicked him in the stomach, causing him to fall back by the force. “Finish what? The murder of a helpless baby?! Do you really think this will solve anything?!”

“Piss off, Kosuke!” He replied, regaining his standing before glowering at him. “This doesn’t concern you. Have you ever heard tell of such a thing? Demons and humans coexisting peacefully?”

“Satouru!”
He scoffed. “No … I suppose you’ve already sided with the wench. You’ve all lost your minds. Am I the only person with enough sense to realize our differences? No one will listen to me. No one! Do my words not matter anymore?”

Picking himself off the ground, Kosuke placed himself between Satouru and the crying baby, not trusting the crazed man standing in front of him. “Listen. Let’s talk about this. You’ve been bottling up your anger for a while now…”

“Listen? Since when have you listened?! No. I’ve had enough. If I can’t voice my concerns then what does it matter what I do? It seems actions are more important than words these days, right? After all, isn’t that what your priestess did?”

“Leave her out of this,” Kosuke warned.

This brought a chuckle from his lips. “Why Kosuke, she’s the entire reason for all of this. It all stemmed from her, the attacks on our village and the demon behind you. It was all because of her and her dark magic. You’ve been fooled by her as well…”

“It has nothing to do with dark magic, Satouru! Have you lost your sanity?”

He shook his head, a deranged chuckle causing his shoulders to tremble. “I am not the one who’s lost sanity. The entire village has. You’ve been blinded for so long, so long, that even my words no longer matter…” He replied before taking an intimidating step forward. “Now move away…”

When Kosuke failed to do so, Satouru charged him. For minutes, they scuffled on the ground, each topping the other aggressively, both delivering hits after hits, but Kosuke kept himself steady, trying his best to tire him out so he couldn’t harm the crying child.

“This isn’t the time or place for any of this!” He replied, forcing Satouru onto his back.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” He replied, and although his wrists were held down by the man above him, he raised his knee quickly, earning a pained cry from his rival before easily pushing him off. Quickly regaining his standing, he reached out for the baby mere steps away and held it tightly against his chest before withdrawing a small dagger from his pant pocket.

Wiping the blood from his mouth, Kosuke looked up, his eyes widening fearfully. “Let him go! Satouru, stop!”

A twisted smirk appeared upon his lips. “If you come near me, I’ll kill the child. If I were you, Kosuke, I wouldn’t make any sudden movements…”

He swallowed, sweat beating his forehead as he regained his standing. “Satouru…”

Without saying another word, Satouru turned and sped off further into the woods, Kosuke’s footsteps quickly following after. As he tried skirting behind trees and avoiding the areas where their animal traps laid, he eventually came across a stream. Quickly crossing it, despite being slowed by its currents, he reached the other side, turning to glance over his shoulder as Kosuke fell behind.

There was no turning back. If Kosuke had seen him, then he was sure the rest of the village was out searching for him. He had to get away, far, someplace even they could not find him.

He wasn’t sure how long he ran, his pants coming out heavily, and his throat dry from the arduous distance he placed between himself and the village. After some time, he paused, turning around, and greeted by the silence of the forest, he realized he must have lost Kosuke.
“Damn it all. And all because of you!” He seethed, glaring at the child in his arms. Why did he still have it? He could have slit its throat back there in front of that fool, but he didn’t. “You fucking wretch…”

“Satouru!” Kosuke shouted.

Alarmed by the voice, he turned around. He was closer than he thought, and without even a moment to spare, Satouru continued running. How much longer would he keep this up? Looking over his shoulder once more, he saw the faint outline of the man following after, yet before he could mutter a curse under his breath, he lost his footing, the ground at his feet suddenly dropping. With an intake of breath, he tumbled down the steep slope, his body colliding with the sharp stones before he unceremoniously fell to the bottom, the baby falling from his arms, its incessant crying increasing.

Sure, he’d sprained something, he muttered a curse, and picked himself up into a seated position. “Damn…” Nothing was going right. As his eyes trailed up the slope behind him, he noticed he’d fallen quite a way’s down, and thankful he didn’t lose his life, he shifted his gaze to the crying child scuffed up and bruised. Even after that fall, it still survived, then again, it was no ordinary baby.

“I’m tired of hearing you cry,” He muttered before crawling towards it, his dagger still in hand. Before he could even press the blade to the child’s neck, there was a shift in the wind around him, and perturbed by the eeriness in the night, he glanced around.

Unexpectedly, a blue flame kindled before him, and startled by the sight, he backed away, his eyes widening in alarm. The flame hovered innocently in front of him, separating him from the crying baby before a few more appeared within the vicinity. To his disbelief, he saw the child engulfed by the surreal warmth of the flames, neither burning or harming him, and bemused, he backed away.

“What the hell…” He muttered, scooting away until his back hit the side of the hill.

“Satouru!” Kosuke’s voice called out, but as he paused inches away from certain doom, he looked down the cliff, his eyes locating the runaway just below. Yet, as he stood there, peering down, he saw mysterious blue lights, and confused by them, he couldn’t help but wonder if it was the work of a demon.

As the child’s crying finally ceased, the baby falling into content slumber, the rest of the flames drifted away from him, the flames wrapped around her translucent state as she stood before him clad in nothing but her ghostly form.

“W-who are you? Demon?” He asked, kicking his feet in hopes of putting some distance between him and her, but he couldn’t run, at least, not with his sprained ankle.

The creature bared its fangs at him, her clawed hands which were still at her side.

“You pitiable creature who dares harm the life of an innocent…” Her melodious voice, which sounded somewhat feral, replied, her amethyst gaze glowering at the human before her. “I shall not forgive you for harming this child, you who reeks with the scent of blood…”

Blue fire. Blue fire? Why did this seem familiar? As he looked upon the ghostly form of the demon, it wasn’t long before he put the pieces together. If he recalled, his village men reported three days ago, before the demon child was brought into their village, the signs of blue flames in the Forest of Inuyashasha. Was this ghost the mother of the baby? “You’re…”
Without even a word, she lifted her hand, and within seconds, his entire body burned, the flames which surrounded her previously, scorching his flesh, and he cried out hysterically. “Let this be a lesson.”

His scream resonated throughout the woods, chilling Kosuke to the bone as he witnessed the entire spectacle from above the cliff. Somehow, he didn’t feel inclined to help him, not after what he did. And yet, as he looked on, his eyes noticing the child laying quietly behind the ghostly figure which he assumed was its deceased mother, he couldn’t help but wonder if the ghost would take the baby away after all of this was over. If so, then what about Kagome?

The flames which burned his body consumed him entirely, and his incessant screaming didn’t let up. It hurt. It hurt so badly that it felt like he was actually within hell. Even his bones felt as if they were on fire and any moment would melt, disfiguring him into nothing more but ashes.

“If you ask me, she seems to enjoy parading herself around in these whorish clothes!” Satouru replied sarcastically.

“I’m the farthest thing from a whore you jerk! How dare you! Get your hands off me!”

A resounding smack across her face forced Kagome to the ground at his feet, and she cried out painfully.

“You bitch!”

Satouru’s eyes widened. What was this? Why was he recalling things which had happened a while back? His mind became flooded by the memories, memories which unexpectedly haunted him and with each instance, cut through him like a knife.

“You can’t run forever, Kagome!”

“Let me go!”

Annoyed by her persistence, Satouru pants came out heavy, his grip tight up on her. “Quit your yapping! No one can hear you!” When she refused to stop, his hold upon her became rough, warning her to stop. With one arm wrapped tightly against her waist, he used his free hand to grasp her chest, gripping her painfully.

“No!”

Unable to even keep herself upright with his weight upon her, her face was pushed into the cold soil, and Kagome felt her kimono become looser on her as her obi fell onto the ground.

His hands roamed her body, slipping past her open kimono, kneading her breasts, and she cried out helplessly for him to stop, but he wouldn’t. He squeezed her breasts, while his other hand found her panties, his fingers mercilessly trying to slip in between the fabric to feel her, but her persistent struggling made it difficult.

“No! Get your hands off me, you pervert!”

A dark chuckle escaped him as he licked her neck, enjoying her gasps from his ministrations. “But your body is responding well to my touch, Kagome.”

“Get off me!”

“Not until you are completely submissive to me, bitch!”
He groaned, holding his head achingly. Stop it. Why was this happening? It was too much. It hurt so much! “Stop showing me this!” He hollered at the ghostly form of the demon in front of him.

“We never expected you to go that far. We understood you hated her … but it seems your obsession with her has gotten out of hand, Satouru.”

“We might have distrusted Kagome in the past, but she’s earned our respect,” Toshiro replied. “Our High Priestess favors the girl, there’s no doubt about it. There’s a rumor going around that she might become our second priestess. Surely that’s great news, were it to happen.”

“I said stop it…” He replied, falling onto his side, his eyes wide as he felt the familiar feeling of a blade cutting through his back, the edge slicing through his flesh like hot fire.

The familiar image of a cracked skull greeted his memory, and laying there in convulsions, he recalled the events which took place a month ago, the day their village underwent an attack by a terrifying demon.

The bird shrieked, its large wings suddenly tearing through parts of the fishnets. Grasping onto the netting with its mouth, it pulled, practically dragging Satouru’s friends towards it without mercy, but they held tightly, trying their best to remain grounded in their spot.

“Don’t let up men! Kill it! Hold onto the net!” Satouru bellowed, driving his sickle into back, tearing at it flesh.

“We can’t hold on much longer, Satouru!” One of his friends cried out panicked.

“Spears and arrows, nothing is working against it!”

Satouru cursed, watching almost helplessly as the hole in the netting grew larger. “Shit! Pull back! Pull back!”

Within mere seconds, the netting broke and the bird lunged free, the expansion of its wings throwing the men off their feet. It shrieked at them, and at that moment, the villagers ran around the huts in fear, hiding behind the structures while others took cover within.

“I said pull back!” Satouru shouted.

As two of his friend released the net and backed off, following Satouru’s orders, one of them wasn’t so lucky. Mitsuki, who was still holding tightly to one end of the netting, was paralyzed in fear, and the crow demon took that moment of shock and dragged the young man towards it.

It happened instantaneously. One minute, Mitsuki was being pulled and the next, the demon reached out with its talons and bit hard into his arm, blood pouring from the open wound. Mitsuki cried out, his free arm reaching towards Satouru and his friends, but they remained frozen in their spot, watching helplessly as the bird bit into him.

Before anything could be done to stop it, the bird flew off with its captive. Mitsuki’s arm was held tightly in its beak, the rest of his body hanging limply as it covered a great distance over the village. Not long after the bird’s ascent, Mitsuki’s body dropped, falling into one of the rice paddies away.

“Damn it!” Satouru cursed, ignoring his two friends who were frozen in fear and fled towards the area Mitsuki fell. While the bird remained distracted above them, he arrived at the rice paddies shortly after and saw his friend half submerged in the water. Bending down, he reached out and pulled his friend above the surface, dragging his body onto the grass to inspect his wounds. Upon
seeing the severity of his injuries, Satouru paled.

Still alive and thankful, Mitsuki smiled somewhat pathetically. When the bird flew off with him, his entire arm had been ripped from its socket, and though he was losing a lot of blood, he was still alive.

“Mitsuki…”

“I’m alright. It’s not as painful as it looks,” He replied before a ripple of pain overcame him seconds after, but he only relaxed in Satouru’s arms, his breathing a bit erratic. “I think I’ll live…”

“Mitsuki!”

“Satouru, is he alright?!”

The sounds of his two friends running towards them a distance away didn’t reach his ears. Something flashed in Satouru’s gaze, his eyes lingering on the extent of the injury before looking up toward the bird circling overhead. There was no saving Mitsuki, that much he knew, and even if he said he was alright, there was no way of escaping such a fate.

With that thought in mind, Satouru laid his friend in the grass, a somewhat passive look overtaking him. The sorrow he felt moments ago for Mitsuki faded from his face and instead was replaced with nothing, not even remorse. “I’m afraid this is the end of the road for you Mitsuki…”

“What? What are you … talking about?” While Mitsuki confusedly looked up at his friend, he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of fear when he saw Satouru raise his sickle over his face. “S-Satouru! No wait! Don’t kill me!”

The sounds of his two friends behind him were nearing, and as time was ticking, Satouru knew it had to be done. “Even if we manage to save your life, you’d only slow everyone down as you are now. What use would a man be without an arm?”

“Satouru no! Please, spare me!” Mitsuki cried out, trying in vain to scoot away, kicking his legs in hopes of putting some distance between them, but it was useless.

Grasping his leg, Satouru leaned over him and raised his scythe.

“Y-you killed…” Toshiro voiced with trepidation, the sight of the blood surrounding their friend’s skull and dripping from the blade caused him to pale.

“W-we could … have saved him…” Makoto replied fearfully, hesitant to approach Satouru.

“I didn’t want to do it…” Satouru voiced, holding his head, eyes wide at the memory. “I didn’t want to do it. Mitsuki … was like a brother to me…” His friend. He didn’t mean to kill him. Why did he do it? What made him do such a thing? “I didn’t…” What had he done? With his own hands, he struck his friend dead, and he recalled the blood which coated his own hands. It was his fault.

Murderer … Murderer … Murderer … Murderer

Voices suddenly whispered around him, louder than the scorching flames encompassing him. They were pointing at him, laughing and mocking him. No. He wasn’t a murderer...

Managing to climb the steep slope on the other side of the hill, Kosuke heard the mumbles of
Satouru just below, and though he wasn’t sure what was happening, he couldn’t help but wonder if this was the end of him. After carefully sliding down the rest of the way, he slowly crept against the side of the hill, watching from around the corner as Satouru lay there, holding his head while staring blankly at nothing.

The flames which still consumed his body was fierce, and as Kosuke shifted his gaze towards the ghostly visage of the Kitsune, he slowly backed away and crept around the trees before approaching Shippo’s sleeping form behind the demon.

Taking the child into his arms slowly, he suddenly caught the eye of the Kitsune, looking at him over her shoulder. Immediately, he stilled, his eyes widening fearfully, but to his relief, she did nothing to him besides acknowledge him and her baby safe against his chest.

Her arm, which remained outstretched, palm towards Satouru’s still form, she clenched her hand into a fist, the flames around him immediately fading before darkness overtook Satouru. Satisfied with his inward turmoil, she looked one last time at the man cradling her baby before nodding softly, a weak smile etched upon her face. And, within moments, she faded with her blue flames, disappearing into the night as if she was never there.

Falling back onto his rump, Kosuke released his breath, the child in his arms safe and asleep, safe without a scratch on him. It was a relief the situation didn’t end differently, and though he hadn’t anticipated the mother of the child appearing to stop Satouru, he was otherwise grateful she remained in this world in spirit form.

Curious if Satouru was still alive, he regained his standing and approached his still form across the way. As he neared, he knelt beside him, his brown eyes taking in the sight of his torn kimono and trousers, but what confused him were the dark blue symbols etched deeply into his skin, all over his body and beneath his clothes. Symbols which branded Satouru murderer and rapist.

“Kosuke! Satouru!”

“Kosuke!”

“Where are you?!”

Voices which most certainly belonged to a search party brought Kosuke away from his musings. Picking himself up, he cupped his mouth with one hand. “I’m down here! Beneath the steep hill!” He hollered as loudly as he could.

To his relief, a moment later, he saw multitudes of torches lighting the night just above him, and he saw the familiar faces of Yuuta and his bandit friends looking down at him.

Eventually the men managed to climb down the incline and after tying Satouru by his hands and legs with rope, certain he wouldn’t awaken and run off, the bandits begrudgingly looked at Yuuta.

“Are you sure we can’t just kill him?”

“Shit like him doesn’t deserve to live!”

“He took boss’s baby, Yuuta! I think we deserve to at least give him a beating!”

Yuuta shook his head at the bandits. “Lady Kaede instructed me to bring him back alive and his punishment will be dealt to him when the sun rises. Do as you’re told and take him back to his hut. I want two of you guarding him, I don’t care who. Do you understand me?”
They nodded dismally, and despite not being able to beat the unconscious man senseless, they roughly carried him back up the hill and to the village, voicing out several insults, a few spitting their saliva onto his face.

Pleased the suspect responsible for all this was caught and would soon be brought to justice, Yuuta turned back to Kosuke, who was standing before him with the sleeping child in his arms. “While you were very brave to go out and save the child, you were also foolish.”

Bemused and somewhat offended, Kosuke scoffed. “Foolish?”

Yuuta nodded. “You took off running in the middle of the night, without telling me or Lady Kaede anything, Kosuke. I had no idea where you were going so suddenly. It wasn’t until I heard Kagome scream that I, along with the rest of the village, figured out Satouru was behind it and that you most likely saw him run off towards the woods. You could have lost your life against him.”

“If I hadn’t, Satouru would have been long gone by now. There’s no telling what would have happened to Shippo if I hadn’t caught up to him and intervened,” Kosuke retorted, defending himself. “This child is alive because of me, and that’s what matters.”

Yuuta sighed. “Even so, you should have told me. I could have chased after him with you. What if he overpowered you? From what I’ve seen, you’re not very skillful when it comes to combat,” He replied, once more wounding Kosuke’s ego. “He would have easily overwhelmed you, just as I easily overwhelmed you once before.”

Kosuke nodded slowly. He supposed he could have told Yuuta, but at the time, he was still boiling internally at suspicious thoughts concerning him and Kagome. “It just didn’t cross my mind at the time. I saw someone running in the night, and I wanted to see who and why that was.”

Again, Yuuta sighed. Still, Kosuke was alive and so was Shippo, and he was thankful for that. “My words were not meant to offend you, but I wanted you to understand the reality of this situation. Next time something happens, tell someone first,” He replied before looking down at the child in his arms. “Is Shippo alright?”

“He’s fine…”

“I noticed strange marks all over Satouru’s body,” Yuuta muttered. “Do you happen to know how he attained those?”

“Shippo’s mother intervened after Satouru tried running from me. She used her magic and tormented Satouru to the brink of unconsciousness. She left those marks behind after she vanished,” Came his reply.

“I see,” Yuuta accepted the answer, after all, he recalled Kagome explaining that she had helped Shippo’s dying mother conceive the child three days ago. Perhaps her spirit still lived on in this world. “In any case, I’ll carry Shippo.”

Kosuke scowled, holding the child closer to him. “I’ll carry him back.” He replied before limping away slowly, though Yuuta only shook his head at the sight.

“How will you carry him safely back when you can hardly walk?”

Not long after his inquiry, Kosuke fell to his knees, groaning as the pain in his leg prevented him from standing. The scuffle with Satouru earlier definitely hindered his movement, and realizing Yuuta was right, he sighed defeatedly. “Damn…”
“Everything alright down there?” Daisuke’s voice called from the top of the hill. “Do you need any help?”

Glancing up, Yuuta grinned. “Perfect timing. We could use your help.” Approaching Kosuke, he scanned his body for signs of injury, and after noticing most of his pain remained in his leg, he took Shippo from his arms. “I’ll carry Shippo the rest of the way back while Daisuke helps you. The sooner we can get back and get some peaceful sleep, the better.”

Drinking the herbal tea given to her by Lady Kaede, Kagome allowed the warm contents to flow down her throat. She awoke moments ago, confused at first until she realized her son was missing. The women who surrounded her, Aiko, Naomi, Mayoko and Kaede all comforted her, and she learned a large group of men went out in search of Satouru and Shippo. An hour and a half roughly passed since the incident, and still no word arrived. Was her son alright?

“Are you okay now?” Aiko asked, rubbing her back softly.

Kagome nodded.

“It will be alright dear,” Mayoko comforted her, holding Kagome against her chest lovingly. “The boys will find Shippo, I’m certain of that. Have a little faith, my dear.”

Again, she nodded, her eyes downcast as she held the steaming cup of tea on her lap.

Suddenly, the sounds of noises outside reached their ears, and believing the men had returned, everyone quickly got to their feet and ran out of the hut, Kaede following slowly behind. They caught sight of the bandits, carrying a tied up and unconscious man in their grasp, and upon close scrutiny, they saw it was Satouru. Without even offering a bow to their High Priestess, the bandits arrived at the hut which belonged to Satouru and discarded his limp form within; they didn’t emerge for a short while.

“That was Satouru!” Aiko cried out. “He looked terrible. There must have been a scuffle.”

Naomi nodded. Hopefully Shippo was alright. But where was Kosuke and Yuuta? “Not everyone is back yet…”

Mayoko squinted her gaze, and at the sight of Yuuta, Kosuke, her husband and Shippo returning safely, she couldn’t help but smack Kagome on the back gently. “Look there! He’s safe!”

Looking in her line of direction, Kagome’s face alit with surprise, and without a word, she ran towards them, Aiko and Naomi following after. When she saw Shippo asleep in Yuuta’s arms, she ran to him, her arms encircling his waist as she hugged him, careful of Shippo in his arms.

Blushing from the sudden contact, he touched her shoulder gently. “He’s safe. Not a scratch on him,” He replied, feeling her grip around him loosen.

As tears fell from her eyes, Kagome pulled away slightly from Yuuta, smiling thankfully up at him. “Thank you for saving him. Thank you…”

Still somewhat flustered from her hug, he scratched his cheek awkwardly before pointing his finger back towards Kosuke and Daisuke behind him. “Actually, it was not me who saved Shippo. It was Kosuke.”

Surprised by this, her cerulean eyes shifted to Kosuke, who was a little beat up, leaning against
Daisuke for support before approaching him. Once standing before him, she enveloped him in a hug as well, her arms encircled around his neck, and for a moment, she remained like that. “Thank you so much, Kosuke,” She voiced.

Blushing at her hug, he smiled, and as she pulled away slightly, he saw her face inch closer to his, and bemused by her close proximity, her breath mere inches from his face, her soft lips fell onto cheek gently.

Pulling away, her face just as red, she offered him a grateful bow before turning and taking Shippo from Yuuta’s arms and disappearing into Kaede’s hut, the other girls following after her, though they sent surprises stares in Kosuke’s direction before closing the flap behind them.

Turning his head away slightly, and embarrassed by the unexpected kiss, Kosuke couldn’t help but smile to himself. He expected a hug, but not that. Still, the fact that Kagome got up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek definitely lifted his mood, and as Daisuke gave him a knowing smile, he helped Kosuke into Kaede’s hut in hopes of getting his wounds tended.

As everyone disappeared, Yuuta remained standing awkwardly outside the hut, staring blankly at his boots. For some reason, despite receiving an embrace from Kagome, he felt somewhat uneasy when she kissed Kosuke. Why was that? Whatever it was, he felt a little unnerved.
Trial

Chapter Summary

The day of Satouru's Trial has finally arrived, and with it, Kaede asks Kagome and Yuuta to venture North to deliver a message to an old friend in hopes of saving their village.

August 16th

A nauseating smell filled his senses coupled with a thunderous and aching throbbing of his cranium and feeling a warm sensation pooling around him as if he were laying in a warm bath, aroused him from his slumber. Satouru awoke to a dim surrounding, the sunlight shining through the open window of his hut, and as he laid there, discerning his state of mind, the smell which awakened him became much stronger in a sense and reeked of animal piss.

“Well look who’s awake,” Came a deep voice beside him, followed after by an amused chuckle.

Bemused by the voice, Satouru turned his head to the side, his blurry vision taking in the sight of a taller man standing over him, his trousers pulled slightly down. A steady stream of yellow urine splattered onto his already soaked clothes, and realizing he was laying in puddle of piss, Satouru immediately sat up and scooted to the farthest side of the hut entirely disgusted.

“What the hell?!” Satouru bellowed, looking down at himself in complete disgust. How long had he been asleep, and how long had those useless bandits been pissing on him? His arms were tightly bound by rope in front of him, and realizing he was unable to free himself, he glowered up at the bandit, mocking him with his smirk.

The bandit laughed at the sight, finishing up his business before pulling his trousers back up. With one last look at Satouru and his obvious discomfort, he stepped out of the hut, and immediately after, Satouru heard the distinct sounds of masculine voices just outside.

Recalling last night’s event where he attempted to murder the demon child in the woods, he shuddered at the memories. The bastard Kosuke had followed him which resulted in his missed opportunity to eliminate the demon from their village. If that wasn’t bad enough, the child’s dead mother attacked him with an onslaught of disturbing memories which he’d done previously to others months before. The image of his dead friend still weighed heavily on his mind, and he shuddered at the thought. Why did the demon show him those things?

The flap to his hut opened, a couple familiar faced bandits stepping inside, their cocky expressions amused at his current state. Although they found the smell emanating within the room pungent and disgusting, they otherwise stepped over the puddle and roughly dragged him out of his hut, throwing him onto the ground at the feet of others.

A chorus of laughter bellowed beside him, and feeling entirely humiliated, he slowly pushed himself up onto his knees, but he paled when he saw the numerous eyes of the villagers watching him from a distance, a large throng gathered just outside. A chill immediately swept down his back, the hairs on his body standing erect as he felt the resentful gazes pierced through him.
“Get up you piece of shit! The High Priestess is expecting you!” One of the bandits hollered, throwing a kick into his side, which caused Satouru to double over in discomfort, though he refused to give them the satisfaction of hearing him cry out in pain.

“We got something special awaiting you this morning, you piss stain! So, after she’s done with you, you better expect we’ve got something as well!”

Realizing there was no escaping this time, Satouru slowly regained his standing, despite being unable to use his hands. From there, he was pushed roughly from behind and forced to walk the rest of the distance to Lady Kaede’s hut, and with each heart pounding step, the villagers watched him, their displeased expressions obvious in his peripheral vision.

Unexpectedly, something sailed through the air and hit him in the side of the face, its smell reeking of rot, the juices slipping past his closed lips and he realized it was a rotten tomato. Several rotten pieces of vegetables were thrown his way, coating his already disheveled appearance, its scent mingling with his abhorrent smell.

“You’re disgusting!” Someone shouted.

Following after that, several more insults were thrown, and as most of the children threw rotten food his way, the adults began tossing stones, many ranging from small pebbles to sharp stones the size of their palms and chucked them at him.

Satouru felt the nasty sting on the side of his head, his shoulders, side, arms and legs, but he refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing his anger. Instead, he continued on, his stare focused entirely on Kaede awaiting him up ahead, her expression not bothered in the least.

“Die you son of a bitch!”

Turning his head slightly, he caught sight of an elderly man, skin and bones, running towards him with a large and flat board, and unable to dodge the attack, the board hit him severely in the back of the head. Losing his balance, Satouru fell onto his face, his mouth filled with the dust from the dirt. Everything around him spun, and for a moment, he couldn’t move, and blinked away his dizziness.

Before the old man could continue his assault, one of the bandits stood between them, and pushed the older man aside gently. “That will be enough of that. We want him alive for the time being.”

Disgusted but accepting his words, the old man spit a huge glob of saliva at Satouru’s face before rejoining the crowded villagers. “Filth like this doesn’t deserve to live,” He muttered, gripping the board in his hand tightly.

“Get up!” Someone said from behind him. “I won’t say it again!”

Following the orders, despite growling inwardly at the humiliation, Satouru pushed himself up and regained his standing once more. Despite his pounding head, he trudged onwards. Withholding his shameful appearance and easing his face into an expressionless mask, Satouru lifted his head and stared blankly ahead, the sight of the older woman in priestess clothing awaiting him.

As he drew closer, the entire village gathered around, and pushed him into the midst of the circle, he was forced to his knees from behind, his eyes staring into the faces of Lady Kaede, Naomi, Kosuke, Kagome, Yuuta and Aiko in front of him.

Noticing his tattered clothing, despite being drenched in a pungent smell, Kagome couldn’t help but notice various dark markings all over his body, markings which represented Murderer and Rapist. Leaning into Kosuke beside her, her child held securely asleep in her arms, she whispered
to him. “Those markings…”

Hearing this, Kosuke leaned in as well, eyeing Satouru. “The vengeance of a deceased mother…”

Shippo’s mother? Kagome gasped. “You mean, Shippo’s … Are you saying she intervened?”

He nodded. “She deemed him a murderer and because of his actions, I believe she isn’t wrong. She appeared before us in the woods last night, during the scuffle between myself and Satouru. I believe it was Shippo’s cry which caused her to intervene.”

Kagome cradled her child close to her chest, recalling the events which transpired last night. When he went missing from their hut, she was certain Satouru had killed him, but upon having him returned to her an hour later, she realized just how much she couldn’t live without the child. Fortunately, it seemed Shippo’s mother was still watching over him, despite having passed on three days ago.

Seeing Kagome’s scornful stare blazing into the suspect, Kosuke pulled her aside, despite her confusion. Once he was sure he was out of earshot, he leaned into her once more. “Last night, I heard Satouru say something while he was consumed by the flames. It’s bothered me…”

“What is it?” Kagome asked.

“I heard him cry out “I had no choice. I had to kill him…”

She blinked. Killed? Now that she thought about it, there were several markings all over Satouru’s body which said Murderer. Who did he murder then? “He’s killed someone? From our village?”

He nodded. “I do believe so…”

If that was the case, then surely it was news to her and everyone else. “The only other person who died in our village, besides Tsuki…” She replied, recalling the ominous day when the bird demon attacked, swooped in and devoured one of their own; it was traumatizing situation, which even she couldn’t erase from her memories. A thought suddenly struck her. No. There was someone else who died that day. “Wait…”

Before she could finish her sentence, two faces approached them, and as they acknowledged them confusedly, Kagome realized these two young men were once Satouru’s close friends, Toshiro and Makoto.

“We have a confession to make,” Makoto replied, lowering his head apologetically.

Surprised by their words, Kagome and Kosuke moved closer to them, making sure no one else heard them from their short distance away. Sure no one was listening, they turned their curious stares to the young men.

“What is this about?” Kosuke asked.

“It has to do with Satouru,” Toshiro replied. “He killed someone.”

Before he could finish, Kagome’s eyes widened. “Do you mean … it was Mitsuki?” She asked, and her thoughts were answered when their eyes widened. So, it was true.

Makoto shared a look with Toshiro and they both nodded. “Yes. After the demon bit his arm completely off and dropped him into the rice paddies, all of us ran to see if he was alright. Satouru got to him first and Mitsuki was still alive. We…”
Noticing Makoto’s hesitance to continue, Toshiro took over. “We witnessed Satouru kill our friend. Mitsuki didn’t want to die. I’m sure we could have saved him, but Satouru … ever since that moment, he’s changed…”

“Why have you kept quiet about this for so long?” Kosuke asked, narrowing his gaze.

Makoto only shook his head. “We didn’t tell anyone about his murder. We should have, but we were too afraid of what Satouru would do after. We understood his obsession with hurting you, Kagome, was the only thing fueling his anger in our village. There’s no telling what else he would have done, but we’re sure our lives would have been over…”

“Please forgive us for keeping this for so long!” Toshiro bowed, squeezing his eyes tightly shut as he anticipated some sort of remark from the young girl and guy in front of them.

Understanding their regret to reveal the truth after so long and their fear of what might happen should Kaede learn the truth, Kagome placed a comforting hand on both their shoulders, offering them a small smile, which took them by surprise. “It’s alright. I forgive the two of you. Thank you for telling me. I’m sorry about what has happened to Mitsuki; no matter the situation, he didn’t deserve that. Once this is all over, we’ll prepare a memorial for him.”

Their eyes suddenly welled up in tears, and grateful for her understanding and generosity to forgive them, they couldn’t hold back their lament any longer. As much as they tried to fight back the onslaught of tears, they leaned on each other for support.

Taking a deep breath, Kagome nodded to Kosuke, and the two returned to the crowd and took their place beside Kaede and their friends. Absolute silence surrounded everyone, the villagers and everyone glaring scornfully at Satouru, who otherwise didn’t seem fazed by the situation. In fact, he put up an air of indifference around him, which only annoyed Kagome further.

Stepping forward, Kaede narrowed her gaze. For years, she’d put up with Satouru’s antics, his crude mannerisms towards certain people within the village, and after everything he’d done to torment her people, she realized she could not hold back her disdain for him. “Despite having been warned in the past, Satouru, ye continue to disappoint me and shame our village. Last night’s circumstances will not be overlooked.”

Satouru scoffed at her words. “Then kill me. Why do you keep hesitating? You know exactly what I’m capable of.”

“Damn this man…” One of the bandits murmured, clenching his fist tightly. That was no way to talk back to their High Priestess, despite having only recently accepted her since living in the village. That man lacked common sense and righteous morals, a man’s whose head was filled with ignorance and hatred.

Despite his words, Kaede only nodded. “Yes. We are all very well aware of ye capabilities. What has turned ye heart so cold?” She asked, but he didn’t answer. “It’s clear ye distaste for my people runs high, especially concerning this child here,” She glanced briefly at Kagome. “Since the start, ye have been against her, going so far as to force yeself onto her, and not only that, make off with her child in the dead of the night.”

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“Shes a witch!” Came his explanation before he suddenly regained his standing. “That’s exactly what she is! You all don’t see it, but you’ve been bewitched by her powers. From the start, did you all not resent her when she first arrived?” He asked, though no one answered. “Even back then, she wasn’t easily trusted among us, and yet, you’ve all started treating her as if she were family. What has she really done for this village?” Satouru asked, raising his voice louder by the second. “Not
only has she brought certain disaster to us, whether in the form of those barbaric bandits, but also that demon! If that wasn’t bad enough, despite losing our own people to bloodshed, you’ve allowed her to raise a demon child in our village! If she were a priestess, as you claim she is, she would have never allowed such a thing!”

Annoyed by his words and his slandering towards her friend, Aiko stepped forward. “The only person bewitched is you, Satouru! The fact that you cannot have her, you’ve gone to disgusting lengths to hurt her and the people around her. The only person who is at fault, is you!”

Despite the murmurs in the crowd, an elderly man stepped forward, a cane in hand as he glowered down at Satouru. “Fifty years ago, that was not the case. Our fair priestess Kikyou showed mercy to a half demon. I’ll admit, back then, I was skeptical of having a half demon live among us, but my thoughts changed when I saw his loyalty to protect us from harm. Even back then, Satouru, our priestess held a kindness in her heart, just like Kagome here,” He replied, receiving many nods of agreement from the other villagers, including Kaede herself.

Kaede continued. “Ye were brought before the village this morning, and though I intended to punish ye myself, I have decided to leave that decision up to Kagome, since it concerns her and her child,” She replied.

Satouru scoffed, shifting his gaze towards the raven-haired woman. Punish? He wanted to laugh. Despite having been physically harmed by the girl in the past, he only found the situation ridiculous. In the end, it all came down to this.

Handing her child to Yuuta beside her, despite Kosuke’s comforting hand on her shoulder, Kagome approached Satouru, her face betraying her loathe. Ever since last night, she was fully prepared for this moment between herself and Satouru. When she stood at least a few feet away, she scoffed. “The sight of you angers me to no end. I have tried to be patient and forgiving for all that you have done to me, but I cannot turn a blind eye to this, not after what you did to Shippo and Naomi.”

There was a sudden pause at the mentioning of Naomi, and with it, the villagers looked between both individuals, Naomi clinging closely to Kosuke’s side, her resentful gaze peering at Satouru from a short distance.

Satouru glowered at her. So, the wench decided to courageously tell them? He should have killed her when he had the chance. Then again, it didn’t matter anyways. What was the point in denying his crime? After all, he was standing there, soaked entirely with piss and fresh wounds from the villager’s stoning.

“Speak up!” One of the bandits hollered, annoyed by Satouru’s suspicious silence.

“It’s nothing new,” He replied, suddenly chuckling to himself. “I’m surprised you’re only just now approaching me about this. Yes. I fucked her, I fucked them all, behind your backs, and you know what’s more?” He asked, looking into the eyes of the many angered villagers surrounding him. “I liked it,” He replied, satisfied by the disgusted look appearing on Kagome’s face. “When I couldn’t get to you, Kagome, I had to make do with what else was around, regardless if it was my own hand or some other wench. It’s your own fault. If you had only submitted to me that night, none of this would have ever happened. Besides, it’s not like I actually saw Naomi as I raped her. All I could think about was you and my revenge. So clearly, the fault rests with you, Kagome…” He found amusement in his sick confession, despite the hostility brewing among the people.

Unable to hold back her tears, Naomi sobbed into Kosuke’s arm, feeling anguish and shame within the situation. Beside her, Kosuke patted her arm, his eyes staring angrily in Satouru’s direction.
Without any hesitation, Kagome reeled her arm back, and before Satouru could dodge, her fist collided with the side of his face and he staggered back, losing his balance before falling onto his back with a busted lip. Her breath came out a little erratic, her heart pounding deafeningly in her ears. Disgusting. To think, such a deranged and vile man existed, and even after punching him, it didn’t feel like enough.

This wasn’t the first time the villagers saw this side of Kagome, in fact, they remembered previously her scuffle with Satouru in the past. Though she looked small and fragile, deep within her, there was a fire, one which had yet to die out as the days went on. Rather than stop her, they instead, cheered her on, pleased by the notably exasperated expression gracing Satouru’s countenance.

Kagome seethed, her hands still balled into fists, shaking at her sides. “You’re not a man. You’re a monster. Like those marks on your body, they speak the truth. You’re nothing but a murderer and a manipulative rapist,” She replied, trying to hold herself back from knocking the smirk off his face. “I’ll keep this short, because just looking at you makes me sick. After what you’ve done to me, Shippo, Naomi and everyone else, you will not be forgiven. As for what you did to your friend Mitsuki … you will also not be forgiven.”

Raising his bound hands to his face, he wiped away the small dribble of blood from his lip, though his smirk only remained. So, it seemed his old friends had finally ratted him out.

“Mitsuki?” Kaede voiced, bemused suddenly by Kagome’s words. “Are ye saying Satouru had a hand in Mitsuki’s death?”

Kagome nodded. “It was brought to mine and Kosuke’s attention just recently that Mitsuki didn’t actually die when he was attacked by the demon. In fact, despite losing his arm, he was very much still alive.”

“What is this about?” Someone asked, turning their fingers at Satouru accusingly. “Did he kill him?”

Toshiro and Makoto, who’d been standing off to the side fearfully, shared a look and with silent agreement, approached the circle before collapsing to their knees apologetically. “Forgive us, Lady Kaede!”

Outraged by this unexpected news and the fact that it was kept secret, Daisuke hollered at the young men. “You were both aware of this from the start? Why did you wait until now to tell us?”

Seeing their trembling shoulders and realizing they might also receive punishment, Kagome stepped between them. “Please do not be angry with them,” Kagome pleaded to the villagers and to Kaede. “They were too afraid of what Satouru would do. If anything, we should be thankful they confessed. Let’s not take out our anger on them, because they also have lost someone very precious to them. Mitsuki was a dear friend to them, and it’s clear this entire situation has left them with many regrets,” She replied.

Lifting his head, Toshiro regarded the young woman standing protectively in front of him, and grateful for her generosity, he turned to Lady Kaede. “Mitsuki, I’m sure he could have been saved, but Satouru brandished his sickle and struck him in the skull. He believed that by doing so, was the best course of action, despite the situation.”

Makoto nodded. “Mitsuki wanted to live. Despite missing his arm, he wanted to live…”

Scoffing at their words, Satouru lifted himself from the ground and regained his standing,
staggering only slightly. “That’s right. I killed him,” He replied, earning a disappointed look from Toshiro and Makoto. “He would have slowed us down because of his injury. There was no saving him. I did him a favor.”

Angrily, Makoto stood up and balled his fists, turning aggressively towards Satouru. “He was still alive! Stop saying he would have slowed us down! There’s been plenty of people in our village who have sustained terrible and life-threatening injuries and still survived!”

“I did him a favor. I ended his life before that demon could finish him off and tear him to shreds. Would you have wanted him devoured like that girl?!” Satouru countered just as loudly.

The father of Tsuki, the girl who had perished that fateful day, suddenly cried out, his fist raised. “Don’t you dare speak of my daughter! She was still half alive before you pushed me away from her in her final moments! You … I would have rather died with her than let her pass on so early in her life! I never got the chance to say goodbye to her! You took that from me!”

Despite his words, Satouru only looked away, his eye twitching. No one understood him. No one.

“You’re all fools…”

“It’s over, Satouru,” Kagome replied, stepping around Makoto and Toshiro. “As Lady Kaede said, she’s left the decision regarding your punishment to me,” She explained, eyeing him scornfully. As much as she wanted to assault him with her fist and inflict the same amount of damage he’d caused her in all her days living in the village, she couldn’t bring herself to do so. “Satouru, I banish you from this village. Don’t ever return.”

“You banish me?” He inquired, arching a brow at the hilarious remark. How the tables had truly turned. Now she was given the power as if she were someone of importance. A forced laugh escaped him, his shoulders trembling from the sheer stupidity of it all. “Fine. I’ll leave. I’ve grown tired of this shitty place anyways,” He replied, looking around the village curiously. “I refuse to live among demons and witches, and a bunch of piss smelling bandits. This village will not thrive for much longer, I can assure you of that.”

Despite his rudeness, Kagome no longer acknowledged him and turned her back before returning to Yuuta’s side, taking her child back into her arms once more. “Kaede, I’ve said what I had to say…”

Understanding, the High Priestesses raised her hand. “Ye heard the child. Untie his ropes. As of right now, he is no longer under our protection. From this moment on, Satouru, ye are a stranger to us. Pack ye things and leave, and if ye should ever return, I will see to it ye own execution,” She warned.

As Yuuta approached the young man, whose face was alit with morbid amusement, he was sure he was boiling within. Despite the humiliation he must have felt at the moment, Yuuta untied his ropes, freeing his arms before turning away.

Looking at his reddened wrists, he looked back up at Kaede and Kagome, but they’d already turned their backs to him, and as his eyes scanned the throng of villagers surrounding him, they too, turned their backs to him, no longer acknowledging his existence. Scoffing, he turned on his heels and despite having sprained his ankle last night, forced himself away from them and through a separated gap within the crowd. There was no use packing up his things, especially since his entire hut reeked with the smell of urine.
Once he’d placed enough distance between himself and the village, Satouru paused in his trek and glanced back, the village just below the hill of the forest in front of him. How dare those foolish people do this to him. Those wretches. That wench was a fool not to have him executed on the spot, but instead, hoped he’d live on regretting all his mistakes for the rest of his life. Pathetic. They’d pay for this humiliation one day, that he was certain.

With no idea where his feet would carry him, he decided anywhere was better than here. Turning around, he continued on his way, but there was a sudden rustle in the bushes near him and turning at the sounds of approaching footsteps, he was suddenly attacked, his vision filled with the sight of eight large men. “What the hell do y—” His voice became muffled as a long stretch of rope was secured around his mouth and head, his hands tied behind his back. After which, he felt something hard hit the back of his head, and soon after, his vision darkened.

Satouru wasn’t sure how long he’d been unconscious and hearing the distinct sounds of masculine voices near him, she awoke to eight large men gathered around him, smirking devilishly down at him. Unable to say anything, despite the rope tied around his mouth, he glared.

Unable to resist, one of the bandits raised his leg, kicking the young man precisely in the stomach, and with satisfaction, watched him double over in pain. “That’s for the times you’ve made our boss suffer, you dirty mongrel!”

“I believe we have yet to give you a proper farewell.” One replied, grinning from ear to ear. “Men, why don’t we show him what it means to cross us.”

Nodding in agreement, they suddenly pulled him aside, dragging his body until they arrived at a flowing stream. After which, they forced Satouru down onto his knees, before pushing his head into the water, regardless if the water slipped through the rope into his mouth.

It burned, the water coursing past his lips and down his throat, and as he kicked and struggled against their weight, he was unable to pull his head up. Relentlessly, they continued this onslaught, allowing him only a few seconds of reprieve to gather what little oxygen he could before his head was dunked forcibly back into the stream.

“I was beginning to wonder where you ventured off, but I see now why…”

At the voice, the bandits turned unexpectedly, their eyes as wide as saucers when they noticed Yuuta suddenly behind them, his eyes taking in the scene before him. They intended to quietly teach Satouru a lesson, but they never expected Yuuta to stumble upon them.

Seeing his approach, one of the bandits stepped between Yuuta and the others. “We’re going to personally give him a proper farewell, Yuuta. After what he did, we don’t plan to stand back anymore!”

Another nodded. “Don’t try and stop us, Yuuta.”

“Even though we know she is against violence and has told us not to do anything bad, we can’t hold back any longer,” Another replied. “He crossed the line. He went after her son and for that, he won’t live to see the sun again.”

Sidestepping around the bandit blocking his path, Yuuta approached the stream and knelt beside two of the bandits holding Satouru’s head beneath the water. Without a word, he grasped the back of the suspect’s kimono top and pulled him up from the water, despite the bandits disapproved glares. “Kagome ordered for his banishment, not death,” He replied, shaking his head disappointedly at his men.
“Even so, he crossed us!” Someone replied.

“He hurt the boss and tried to hurt her child!”

“Scum like this doesn’t deserve to live!”

Despite their repetitive replies, Yuuta only sighed. As much as he wanted to end the bastard’s life, he wanted to remain true to Kagome’s wishes. From his understanding, Kagome wasn’t the type to wish harm on others. “Still, I believe Kagome would be very displeased by your behavior. Wouldn’t you agree?” He asked, and noticing their shoulders drop at his words, they knew he was right.

A muffled noise escaped Satouru through his ropes, and bemused by what he was saying, Yuuta untied the ropes behind his head, the bandits around gathering close. “What was that?”

“You disgusting vermin!” Satouru spat. “Once this is over, I swear this won’t be the last you’ll see of me!”

Satouru’s words pissed them off, but because Yuuta was with them, they held back their assault. “Shut your fucking mouth! Do you know the situation you’re in right now?!” Someone replied.

“I swear to Kami, I’ll make you and that fucking wench pay for this. This isn’t over!” Satouru growled, despite being surrounded at all sides by monstrous heathens.

“You’re not in any position to bad mouth her!” Another replied just as harshly before pulling him up from his seated position and raising his fist to his face.

Another sigh escaped Yuuta and deciding he didn’t want to see any more of this, he turned his back to his men, but before leaving, he looked over his shoulder briefly. “Finish up quickly and return back to the village, that’s an order,” He replied before disappearing past the line of trees.

Spitting out a collection of blood which gathered in his mouth, Satouru sat there, seething irritably at the bandits, trying in vain to escape the rope tied at his wrists. Somehow, he didn’t like the situation he was in this very moment and couldn’t find it in himself to laugh.

Certain Yuuta was gone, the bandits shared a look, their eyes shifting between Satouru and themselves. Somehow, just letting this despicable creature run free didn’t settle well with their thoughts. In fact, the earlier threat of claiming vengeance weighed heavily on their mind.

“What should we do? Do we let him go?”

“I’m not finished roughing him up yet!”

“But Yuuta said to make it quick and return…”

“Did you not hear what he said? He said he would return and make them pay, especially boss!”

They nodded at this, and after a moment of quiet bickering between themselves, they turned fully to Satouru, bounding his mouth once more, with their minds already made up. There was no way in hell they would allow him to walk freely any longer, and with the sun pressing down upon their backs, they cracked their knuckles.

Ψ

Shortly after Satouru left the village, Mayoko and Daisuke said their farewells to the entire village.
Today was the day they would head West to a fishing village to start over; because of the shortage of food, they found it difficult to get by within the village and concerning Mayoko’s pregnancy, Kaede believed it would be for the couple to leave.

Mayoko and Daisuke explained they would pray for the well-being of the village and hope for a fruitful harvest in the coming year. And as Kaede offered up one of her horses to the couple, the entire village saw them off until they disappeared into the distance.

Eventually, the crowd dispersed, the people returning to their mundane and repetitive chores around the village. While Kagome was hoping to return with Aiko back to the hut, with Naomi in toe, Lady Kaede suddenly called for Kagome to speak privately within her hut, which confused the young girl.

“Huh?” Kagome blinked, her cerulean gaze staring peculiarly at a written missive, rolled up and tied securely with string in the palm of her hands. Bemused as to why it was given to her by Lady Kaede, she looked up at the older woman seated across from her. “I don’t understand. What is this?”

Despite her confusion, Kaede cleared her throat and motioned towards the letter. “Since the recent attack, I’m afraid our shortage of food is greatly depleting, despite our small harvest still growing within the fields. I fear, that even with that, it will not be enough to sustain my people’s hunger,” She replied dismally.

Kagome nodded, completely understanding Kaede’s concern. “We’ve been fortunate so far, but I’ve noticed some of the villagers have grown weak and sickly as a result…”

“Indeed,” Kaede replied. “The letter within ye hands, I have written the night prior, despite the unfortunate events, and it explains our troubled situation as of now. Normally, I do not find comfort reaching out for help, but I fear if this continues, our village will likely succumb to extinction. Kagome, I would like for ye to deliver this missive for me in my stead.”

Deliver? To where? “You want me?” She asked, blinking confusedly at the High Priestess.

Kaede nodded. “There is no other person suitable for the task but ye, Kagome. In fact, sending ye off with this would definitely help ye as well and ease my restless mind.”

“I … don’t understand. Where am I to deliver this?” She asked. From her knowledge, she’d never set foot anyway outside the Forest of Inuyasha, and despite having come from the future, she knew nothing about the terrain of the ancient past. In fact, she wasn’t entirely good with directions either. “Are sure you don’t want to send someone else? Why me of all people?”

It was a question which the old woman had thought long and hard about for days now, and in her mind, sending Kagome felt like the right thing to do, especially since she became caught up in so much since her appearance. “Do ye remember our conversation that day, the day in which your powers surfaced?”

Kagome nodded. How could she forget. It was the same fatal day, dusk to be exact, in which the bird demon attacked their village. As if by some mystical means, she managed to save the entire village, and it was all because of a powerful jewel within her, a jewel which should have perished long ago.

“For some time, our village has remained protected since that fatal night,” Kaede replied. “the day in which I placed the Beads of Subjugation upon ye wrist. Bearing the Sacred Jewel within ye body, that bracelet has protected all of us. Ye do remember the story about how the jewel was once
"Yes," Kagome replied. If she remembered correctly, Kaede told her a story of her childhood, a time which took place fifty years ago when her sister Kikyou protected the village. The jewel was supposedly destroyed by a clan of Demon Slayers and never resurfaced again until now. "Are you saying…"

Again, the old woman nodded. "I wish for ye to deliver this letter to the Demon Slayer Village," Kaede explained, earning a surprised reaction from the young girl seated across from her. "A long time ago, our village was once on friendly terms with the clan. I’ll admit, I haven’t heard much from them for years now, not since the death of my sister. Even so, a friend of mine lives within the village, someone I haven’t seen in ages. I’m sure that person would be more than willing to offer a helping hand to us."

"The Demon Slayer Village…” Kagome whispered. "How far is that?"

"A five day walk North from here,” Came her reply. “Of course, do not fear, I will not be allowing ye to venture there on ye own, Kagome. In fact, I have asked Yuuta to accompany ye on the trip. Also, this is not only a trip which will aid our village, but one which will aid ye as well, Kagome.”

"Me?"

"Since ye harbor the Sacred Jewel, I’m certain it’s reappearance will startle the clan. In the letter I have given to ye, I have explained the situation regarding ye own problems. Perhaps, in some way, they may be able to help ye, though I am unsure whether or not they can remove the jewel from ye. However, they may be able to supply ye with more information regarding it,” Kaede explained. "As ye know, I only have little knowledge of the jewel, despite its capabilities."

So that was the reason why she wanted Kagome to make the trip, because it not only involved their village’s dire circumstance, but also involved Kagome’s appearance in this world. If the Demon Slayers were able to destroy the jewel fifty years ago, would they be able to remove it from her body?

Noticing the child silently processing the information given to her, Kaede turned to the flap of the hut. “Ye may enter,” She replied, noticing a figure standing just outside the door.

Pushing back the flap, Yuuta stepped in, bowing his head respectively to the older woman, his eyes turning to Kagome seated ahead of him. In his arms, he cradled a restless baby and knelt beside the raven-haired woman. “He’s been making a fuss for a while now,” He explained, apologizing to Kagome.

Understanding, she took Shippo from his outstretched hands and cradled him against her chest, rocking him gently until he calmed his whimpers. “There, there. It’s alright now. Mama is here.”

Turning towards the High Priestess, Yuuta placed the palms of his hands onto his lap. “I apologize for the intrusion, but I was wondering when you wished for us to set out,” He asked.

“Tomorrow,” Came her reply, despite Kagome’s surprise. “As I said before, this is an urgent matter. And since the trip will take five days at most, I surmise ye return within two weeks’ time. There are only four months left before we experience Winter, and by that time, I hope things have returned to seeming normalcy.”

“Understood. We’ll prepare for the trip right away, Lady Kaede,” Came Yuuta’s response. Picking himself up onto his feet, he bowed once more to the head priestess before stepping out.
After his retreat, Kaede turned her attention to the child in Kagome’s arms, it’s small hands touching the woman’s long strands of hair. “It may also be a good idea to take ye child with ye, Kagome.”

“Shippo? But it’s dangerous, as you’ve said before. It might be safer leaving him behind with Aiko.”

“The Demon Slayers, from what I gathered long ago, are a knowledgeable clan, and would not turn the child away,” She replied. “I’m certain they can offer advice on how to properly raise Shippo, especially since ye are adamant to raise him. Let them have a look at him once ye arrive safely, and from there, ye burdens will become less than they are now.”

Despite wanting to leave Shippo safely behind in the village, she couldn’t bring herself to tell Kaede no. Instead, she offered a slight bow to the older woman, her eyes staring worryingly down at the child in her arms.

Ψ

Hours passed since Satouru’s banishment and as the bandits trudged further and further away from the village, they waited until nightfall before exacting their vengeance upon Satouru. They stood within a ravine, situated entirely by many hills and with their tools brandished, half of them began cutting down the nearest tree, the others watching Satouru menacingly.

The night weighed heavily on, the moon at its highest, and as Satouru came to accept his fate, he watched silently and bound as the bandits near him began digging a hole, so deep, it took well over half an hour to unearth. Following after, the lumber which they cut down with their axes were thrown into the pit shortly after, and once they were satisfied with their results, all eight roguish men turned their attention to him.

One of the bandits knelt beside Satouru, scrutinizing the blank expression gracing his face before slapping his cheek roughly. “What’s with that look? Have you already given up on life?” He asked, though he didn’t expect a response, flicking the thick rope bound around his mouth. Instead, he only received a dirty look, which only slightly amused him.

The men gathered around laughed.

“We were going to let you live the moment Yuuta arrived, but because you made that comment about our boss and wanting revenge, we couldn’t sit idly by any longer.”

“You know, for someone who reeks of piss and acts like shit, you sure do know how to piss someone off. I’m surprised Lady Kaede kept you alive for so long!”

“Are we ready? I’d like to get back soon for supper,” One of the bandits replied, stretching his arms above his head exhaustedly, a yawn escaping him.

With one final smirk at the disgusting man seated before them, two of the bandits reached over and roughly grabbed him by his arms, dragging him towards the edge of the pit before releasing him.

Nothing could be seen at the bottom, and while Satouru anticipated his fall shortly after, the mere hesitance from the bandits only heightened his fear. So, this was it? This was the end? What had he accomplished in life which led to this? Was this really what awaited him, after everything he’d experienced in this god forsaken world?

If anything, it was the fear of the unknown which frightened him. Rumors of a hellish void, teaming with unbelievable and terrifying demons lurking within an underworld of nothing but
brimstone and fire. Though he’d never truly believed its existence, he suddenly had his doubts, his eyes glimpsing a lit torch from his peripheral vision.

*Murderer ... Murderer ... Murderer...*

The voices which plagued him last night were whispering in his ears, and unable to block out the voices, his hands bound behind him, he squeezed his eyes shut. No. Not again.

Upon noticing the young man’s trepidation, one of the bandits stepped up behind him, a sudden smirk upon his lips. “If boss should ask why we were late, we could say we were *letting you go* after seeing you off,” He replied, earning chuckles from all around.

“You mean like *this*?” Someone asked, kicking Satouru’s back legs, causing the young man to stagger forward before falling into the depths of the hole at their feet, his body colliding achingly against the hard pieces of lumber at the bottom.

A chorus of laughter resounded after, and as Satouru laid in darkness, the sharp edges of the wood beneath him digging into his flesh, he scrutinized the small space encompassing him. Unable to move, let alone escape from the pit, he glanced up, glowering at the numerous faces peering down at him. They were not the faces of humans, but demons.

“Let this be a lesson, Satouru,” One of them replied, raising a flamed torch above the pit, his smirk illuminated by the dancing embers. “It’s *over*...” He replied, dropping the torch suddenly.
Relieved to partake in this journey to meet with the Demon Slayers and hopefully help Kaede's village, Kagome begins worrying about the future and the Sacred Jewel.

August 17th

Yuuta regarded the young man standing across from him, his eyes staring incredulously upon his words. Since that morning, as soon as he awoke, he prepared to pack his things before setting out, but he was interrupted when Kosuke arrived outside his barn, apparently only just now finding out about the trip. “Lady Kaede asked that I accompany Kagome,” He replied, crossing his arms indifferently. 

Hearing this, Kosuke couldn’t help but frown. Despite his own injuries, he knew he was unable to accompany Kagome himself, but still, the mere fact spurred jealous thoughts within him. “And you say she asked for her to bring Shippo along?”

Yuuta nodded. “As strange as it is, she did say that. Apparently, bringing the child will benefit Kagome, since the Demon Slayers are quite knowledgeable. I don’t know anything more about them.”

Still, even after everything Kagome had dealt with in the past few days, he wondered if this was a bit too much. Without even having to look hard, he noticed her exhaustion, and he only wanted for her to sit down and relax with certain peace of mind. “The journey will be hard on her, for sure…”

“Even so, it’s what the High Priestess wants. Delivering this letter is of utmost importance to the village. We’ll likely not return until two weeks’ time, if not sooner,” He replied, stepping back inside the structure to pack his things, or what little he had.

Kosuke followed him inside. “Two weeks?” The thought was ridiculous and without a horse? “I could certainly escort Kagome there on a wagon. The terrain North is not easy.”

Yuuta only sighed. “No, I need for you to remain here, Kosuke. Besides, with me gone, who will aid the men in constructing the huts? We prepared everything the night before and it would be a waste of your skills if you didn’t participate,” He replied, placing one of his daggers into his pockets before reaching for his quiver of arrows and bow leaning against the furthest side of the hut.

“Listen—”

Yuuta only interrupted, turning on Kosuke with an arched brow. “Besides, you’re still a bit beaten up after that scuffle with Satouru. Let’s say I brought you with me, could you protect Kagome and Shippo?”

“Of course!” He replied without hesitation.

“I’ve had more training than you ever had, Kosuke. If you couldn’t defeat me, even without
injuries, what makes you think you can protect them? Especially if a demon were near?” Noticing the young man’s silence, Yuuta only sighed. “That’s enough. You’ll only get in the way as you are now. If you want to be of use, stay here and help the villagers.”

Ψ

“Kagome, do you really have to go?” Ume asked from within the hut, her large brown eyes watching curiously as the raven-haired woman folded an extra kimono for her travels, packing it neatly within the hiking bag sitting off to the side. “Can’t someone else go? It’s dangerous outside the barrier. What if you get hurt?”

While kneeling on the opposite end of the room, preparing a small collection of nuts, berries, fish and mushrooms for Kagome’s and Yuuta’s travels, Aiko smiled fondly at the child, who was curiously gazing into the foreign bag. “Lady Kaede is sending Kagome on a special errand. She is going to deliver a message so our village can receive help. Since they are also knowledgeable about demons, they might help Kagome with Shippo.”

Despite her words, Ume sighed. “I guess. How long will you be gone for?”

Kagome smiled, ruffling the child’s hair softly from beside her. “Lady Kaede says the trip on foot will take five days. Within two weeks we’ll return.”

“Two weeks? You’re going to be gone for two whole weeks?” The child gasped, not entirely pleased by this news. “That’s too long! Can’t you take a horse?”

Kagome shook her head, taking the child into her arms before hugging her closely. “I’m afraid not. The villagers need them, and besides, it won’t be that long. Me, Shippo and Yuuta will return before you know it,” She explained, hoping to comfort the child on her lap.

“But … what if you like their village more than ours? What if you decide not to come back? You’ll disappear again…” She sniffled, her large brown eyes gleaming with fresh tears.

Disappear again? Was Ume referring to the time she briefly returned back to her own era? Musing for a moment, she recalled meeting Ume shortly before it happened, and being her first friend in the village, she understood the little girl’s worry.

“Never come back? Of course, I’m going to come back. You, Aiko, Naomi and Kosuke, not to mention Lady Kaede will all be here waiting. This village has become like home to me,” She replied, hugging the child close against her chest. “I won’t disappear, and I’ll be back before you know it, Ume,” She replied, combing her fingers through the child’s hair before kissing her forehead gently.

Relieved by her words, Ume’s face alit with joy, and she returned the hug before pulling away from Kagome to entertain Shippo in the basket beside them.

A few minutes passed by, and after preparing a small amount of food for the trip, Aiko wrapped it in a large cloth before settling it carefully inside the backpack. “Kagome, are you sure you want to take this with you? It might draw unnecessary attention…” She asked.

Despite Aiko’s worry, Kagome nodded. “It should be fine; besides, it will be a lot easier carrying that, especially since I’ll be having Shippo with me.” Besides that, she never really put the backpack to good use besides carrying her supplies back to the past. “I hope you don’t mind that I leave my stuff in this chest here until I return.”

“It’s no trouble,” She replied before turning her gaze towards Shippo briefly. “The villagers are
likely waiting to say their goodbyes. We shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

“You’re right,” Came Kagome’s reply before zipping up the hiking bag and crawling over to the basket. Reaching over for the wrap she began using to carry Shippo with, she slowly attempted to wrap it around herself, following the instructions Mayoko gave her yesterday. Despite Aiko’s offer to assist, Kagome waved it away, finding the task much easier than she first thought.

The flap to the hut opened suddenly, and curious of the guest, they noticed it was a Naomi, peering within with a timid smile. “Hello. Don’t mind me,” She replied before shifting her gaze towards the little girl seated beside Kagome. “There you are, Ume. Your father was looking for you. Even though I don’t know why, I should have known you were here to begin with,” She laughed.

“Papa?” Ume asked and at her nod, the child stood up. “Okay,” She replied, turning towards Kagome and Aiko. “I’ll properly say goodbye at the gate when you leave.” With that said, she quickly hugged Kagome and hurriedly exited the hut, leaving the three girls smiling fondly at her retreat.

Settling herself beside them, Naomi only grinned. “That little girl is so attached you, Kagome. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were mother and daughter.”

Aiko agreed. “Well, she does possess a motherly charm about her. There’s no denying that.”

Satisfied she had Shippo securely snug against her chest and certain he wouldn’t fall, Kagome smiled, her hiking bag entirely packed. “It wasn’t much, but I think I should be good to go from here.”

There was a soft knock outside the hut, their heads turning curiously at the flap. “Kagome, do you have a moment?” Kosuke’s voice called out suddenly.

At this, she quickly got to her feet, and approached the flap before stepping outside, her two friends within peeping out curiously at the quiet exchange. “Oh, Kosuke. What’s up?”

“I tried to get Clover for you, but she wouldn’t follow me,” He replied, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly, a strained smile upon his face. “I was hoping you might be able to help me?”

Understanding, Kagome pushed back the flap, smiling at the sight of Aiko and Naomi standing right there eavesdropping. “I’ll be stepping out with Kosuke. I’ll meet you guys at the gate.” After which, she left down the path with him, their feet carrying them towards the meadow.

“That guy is hopeless…” Naomi sighed, closing the flap behind her.

“Give him time. After all, Kagome hasn’t been here that long, remember?” Aiko replied.

“Well if he waits any longer, someone else might steal her away…” Naomi exclaimed, hinting entirely at a particular bandit with whom Kagome would be making the trip with.

Upon hearing this, Aiko couldn’t help but slightly frown. Did Yuuta truly have feelings for Kagome? Somehow, the thought displeased the young woman, but she otherwise kept it to herself.

Ψ

Walking side by side, Kosuke couldn’t help but smile softly at the woman next to him, her small child nestled gently against her chest, touching her long wavy locks excitedly. “Are you excited to leave the village?” He asked, receiving a short nod from Kagome. “I was informed you and Yuuta would be visiting a clan of Demon Slayers.”
“Kosuke, have you ever met them?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t. I’ve heard rumors about their kind, but I’ve never seen them before. Actually, I was a bit surprised when Lady Kaede said she was sending you there to ask for help. I had no idea she was friends with them...” He laughed. “I’m certainly hoping for some good news out of all this.”

She smiled. “Hopefully they’re as kind as Lady Kaede made them out to be. We might be supplied with enough food to get us past our troubles.”

“Have you ever traveled around before?” He found himself asking, though, she only shook her head. “If you don’t mind me asking, I’m curious about your village. What’s it like?”

“Well ... it’s pretty difficult to explain. It’s kind of big, I suppose, lots of huts,” Kagome replied, imagining the large city structures surrounding her small home settled on top of a large hill.

“That explains a lot. You grew up on a shrine of a well to do family. I suppose you must have been sheltered from the outside world, right?” He asked, side glancing her curiously.

She blinked. “Sheltered? What do you mean?”

He sweat dropped. “Well, I mean with regards to demons. When we first met, you seemed confused of the very idea of their existence. I can only assume your family hid the harsh reality in order to protect you, or am I wrong?” Otherwise, it didn’t make sense.

“Oh yeah,” She replied, feigning ignorance. “My grandfather was always using his sutras to ward off demons and evil spirits, so I normally remained inside our village most days. Grandfather was pretty strict when it came to my safety...” She lied, but it seemed Kosuke was buying it.

“I see. It makes sense now,” He laughed. “I was a little curious at first. I hope I’m not prying, but can I ask a personal question?”

She nodded. “I guess.”

How would he begin? From his understanding, when Kagome first arrived, she was often harassed and scorned, and yet, there came a time when she returned to her village, disappearing for an entire month. Although he never asked her, he was curious. “Why did you come back?”

“How?” She merely blinked curiously at him. “What do you mean?”

“You briefly returned home once before and you were away for at least one month, but why did you return? Especially with regards to how the people treated you before?” He asked.

As the two arrived upon the meadow, the cattle grazing just ahead, the two paused beside an old fence, and as Kagome mused quietly, Kosuke found her silence baffling and somewhat suspicious. She was absentmindedly brushing back a lock of Shippo’s auburn hair which was sticking up from his forehead.

“Kagome?”

“Kosuke, I can’t answer that without...” She trailed off, unsure whether or not to tell him the truth, the truth that she came from a different era. From her understanding, only Kaede and Aiko knew the truth, and it probably wouldn’t do any good for anyone else to know. After all, Kaede specifically told her to reveal the truth.
“Without what?”

Sighing, she turned towards him. “Without telling you a secret.”

Surprised by her words, and somewhat hurt she couldn’t reveal the truth to him, despite their friendship, he reached out for her hands, taking them into his own gently. “Whatever secret you have, you can trust them with me.”

Looking softly into his sincere gaze, Kagome sighed once more. What could it hurt to tell him part of the truth? “I didn’t think I’d be able to return home. I wasn’t sure how, especially since I arrived to Lady Kaede’s village by accident that day. I became separated from my family and my little brother,” She replied.

He remained silent, listening to her words closely. Judging by her expression, it seemed she truly missed her family, but there was something more to her story she wasn’t revealing. How did she become separated from her loved ones? “How did it happen?”

Kagome shook her head. “It might sound unbelievable, and even to this day, I still can’t understand it. I was playing with my younger brother when I was suddenly forced away from everything around me. The next thing I knew, I awoke in an entirely different environment, my family nowhere to be seen,” She explained. “After experiencing a rough time in Kaede’s village, somehow, I returned home, by the same mysterious means. I remember how worried my mother was, and I felt her embrace after so long…” She replied, trying to keep the Goshinboku Tree and her era a secret.

“What forced you away from your family?” He asked.

“My grandfather believed it was the work of a demon,” Kagome replied, and at this, Kosuke nodded in understanding. “Perhaps his sutras failed to stop it from first happening, but after praying for days, I managed to return home for a short while. The reason I returned was because I had a dream…”

He blinked. “A dream?”

She nodded. “I dreamt the village was in the midst of ruin, the huts set to embers in the night…”

“Kagome, do you perhaps have the gift of sight?” He asked incredulously. “If so, then you see things before it actually happens.” Somehow, he wondered if this was normal for those who had spiritual powers flowing through their veins.

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. It could have been mere coincidence, but it was the first dream I had which really startled me. I saw familiar people hurt in the dream, I saw many on the verge of death, including you…” She mumbled, trying to erase the image from her mind.

Realizing he had caused her discomfort, and feeling entirely troubled, he placed a hand to her face, moving a strand of hair from her eyes and behind her ear. “Forgive me for asking, but, it was thanks to you, everyone survived. Me, Lady Kaede and everyone else,” He replied softly and with a smile.

Kagome smiled, blushing at his words. That was true. In the end, everyone survived the horrid fire, and for that, she was thankful. “You’re right…”

“Kagome…”

At the sound of her name breathed from his lips, she looked up, his face drawing slightly closer to
hers, though he maintained a level of comfortable distance between them. “Yes?”

“There’s something I need to…” He trailed off, mesmerized by her beautiful eyes. “No, I have to tell you … the thing is, Kagome … I wanted to tell you how much I—”

An unexpected animal noise resounded from behind him, and startled from his focused conversation with Kagome, Kosuke fell back in surprise. Falling onto his arse, he glowered at a goat which had coincidently snuck up from behind. 

Kagome laughed at the sight, unable to contain her giggles. The expression marred across Kosuke’s face was hysterical, as if he’d seen a ghost, and she leaned back on the fence to steady herself. “Clover! That wasn’t very nice,” She lightly scolded the animal.

“I swear that goat has it out for me…” Kosuke replied, picking himself off the ground before warily stepping away from it.

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s nothing. I don’t want to talk about it,” He replied, turning his head away, his face darkening in embarrassment. Out of all the things to happen, why did he have to fall in front of her and to a goat?

She looked between him and the goat, arching a brow curiously. “Kosuke, what happened between you and Clover?” She asked, grasping his sleeve from beside her.

Ψ

“Where is she?” Yuuta muttered aloud, his eyes searching his surroundings near the gate. Half an hour had already passed and still she had yet to arrive, and he was beginning to wonder if she’d forgotten.

Aiko only giggled at his frustration. “She is with Kosuke. They went to get Clover.”

“Who is Clover?” He asked, arching a delicate brow.

“It’s the goat which gives milk to feed Shippo,” She answered, as if it were obvious, but it was certainly news to him.

He almost rolled his eyes. “She went all the way out into the fields to fetch one particular goat? There’s a couple more in the barn I could have roped with us easily enough…”

“Yes, but Kagome is quite fond of Clover.”

What a strange name, but before he could utter his disapproval, he heard Kagome’s familiar giggling in the distance, and turning, he caught sight of her and Kosuke walking alongside each other, a familiar gray coated goat trudging closely behind, a rope tied around its neck. Pleased he didn’t have to go after her himself and throw her over his shoulders, he watched them with curious interest.

“It’s not that funny Kagome…” Kosuke replied, his face red with embarrassment.

Despite his uneasiness, Kagome only clung to his arm, her face reddened by her own nonstop laughter. “I’m sorry, but it really is. Poor Clover…”

“Poor Clover?” He replied, slightly hurt she was siding with the goat. “What about me?”
“I don’t know Kosuke, it seems like Clover is more of the victim than you are,” She laughed. Managing to calm herself and her breathing, she took a deep breath and exhaled, though she couldn’t remove the wide smile from her face. Noticing Yuuta up ahead, she waved, quickening her steps with Clover close behind her. “Sorry about that. I got a little caught up.”

He only nodded, eyeing the small creature before looking back the young girl beside him. “I’ve seen a packed mule before, but never a packed goat…” He replied, noticing the large bags tied upon the animal’s back.

“Well,” Kagome began, smiling at her handiwork before patting the goat gently atop the head. “We wouldn’t be able to carry just the milk with us because it would spoil. So, I figured this was a good idea. I’ve packed our blankets within one of the bags, along with some containers to feed Shippo, and a few other necessities.”

“I see,” Came his reply. “What’s that on your back?”

Turning slightly, Kagome displayed the hiking bag to him, flashing a peace sign, but he only looked at her fingers confusedly. “It’s my brother’s hiking bag. I’ve packed my clothes and some of our food within. If you need me to carry anything of yours, just ask and I will,” She offered, noticing his bow and quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder, a small cloth carrier wrapped over his shoulders and back, most likely containing his little belongings.

“We won’t be back for a while, so you should say your farewells,” Yuuta replied nonchalantly, taking the rope from Kagome’s hand before approaching the gate.

Despite his disinterest to remain beside her, she turned towards the crowd behind her, her two friends Aiko and Naomi enveloping her in warm embraces before saying their goodbyes to Shippo.

Feeling two arms wrapped tightly around her leg, Kagome smiled and knelt down, hugging the small child close to her. “I’ll miss you Ume. You be good while I’m away, alright?”

“I will! I’ll miss you too, Kagome. Come back soon, okay?” The little girl asked, her smile wide and her eyes sparkling.

“I promise,” She replied, kissing her forehead before waving her off, watching lovingly as the child ran back to her father’s side before waving back at her.

“I’m leaving now. I shouldn’t be gone for too long,” She replied, offering a respective bow to the entire village, to which they returned, wishing her a safe trip.

“Good luck boss!”

“Be safe!”

“We’ll miss you, boss! Watch out for other bandits!”

“Boss, be safe!”

Smiling at the bandits who were crowded behind Lady Kaede, waving their hands in her direction, Kagome couldn’t help but notice a few with obvious disappointment and sadness in their faces, a couple of the men balling into their hands. Seeing this, Kagome laughed. “Goodbye boys! Behave while I’m gone!”

“Take care, Kagome,” Kosuke voiced beside her.
Turning, she smiled, scratching her cheek shyly. “Thanks, Kosuke. It’d be nice if you could come along, but you’re needed here in the village,” she replied, slightly disappointed.

He nodded, as much as he didn’t want to see her go. “By the time you’ve returned, we’ll hopefully have new huts erected. It won’t be much, but at least the people without homes won’t have to sleep out in the barn for much longer.”

Speaking of huts, she wondered if the bandits would be remaining in the village after the rebuilding, but she shrugged the thought away. “I should get going. Take care, Kosuke, and don’t overwork yourself while I’m gone,” she teased, touching his shoulder softly before turning away.

“Be safe,” he replied, watching her walk away.

An hour into their travels, the two-sauntered side by side down a worn path in the road, the terrain which stood at a great distance before them stretching for miles. Silence fell between them, the latter drawing more so from Yuuta than Kagome, and for Kagome, she found curious interest and excitement of what laid ahead, her cerulean gaze glimpsing distant mountains and grassy meadows.

Snug as a bug within the wrap against her chest, Shippo found contentment watching his mother, his large emerald eyes glimpsing her bouncing raven locks and loving smile before curiously eyeing the large man walking beside her. For most of the walk, the child remained quiet, immersing himself in the passing trees and wildlife surrounding them.

“Wow, it’s so beautiful…” Kagome commented, her straw sandaled feet crunching on the grass with each step. Kept so long in a small village, breathing in the constant smoke from their fires and busying herself with relentless chores, it felt nice escaping it, breathing in the fresh air and absorbing the sunlight.

Feeling a tug on the rope securing Clover behind her, Kagome paused and glanced back, noticing the animal’s immediate distraction as it munched hungrily on a patch of weeds in the road. Deciding against interrupting it, Kagome waited what seemed like ten minutes, but when the goat failed to pull away from its excited feast, she sweat dropped. “Come alone, Clover. We don’t have all day. You can eat all you want later when we take a rest,” she chided.

It bleated something rude at her, and despite her futile attempts, the goat only ignored her, savoring the delicacies of the wild grass between its teeth.

“Why did you name it Clover?” Yuuta asked, not perturbed in the least with the distraction.

Looking away from the creature, she waved Yuuta closer, pointing to a white patch of fur upon the backside of the animal’s back, the pattern outlined in the shape of a four-leaf clover. “See? I figured the name suited her.”

Seeing this, an amused chuckle escaped him. Looking back at the goat munching away without a care in the world, he clicked his tongue, earning its attention in a heartbeat. “Come. We should keep going.”

“Let’s go Clover,” Kagome replied, and without having to tug on the rope, the animal followed behind obediently, to which Kagome was thankful. Pleased it was listening, she sighed. “I feel like I’m walking a dog…”

Once more taking in her surroundings, the beautiful environment of the ancient past, Yuuta on the other hand remained entirely passive during their travels. Back home, Kagome only ever noticed
such beauty in the countryside, which she rarely visited, but she was used to the incessant and bustling streets of Tokyo, with towering structures and buildings around every corner. Yet, despite the differences in the eras, Kagome felt a sense of peacefulness here.

Feeling an urge to take off into a sprint, Kagome held back. If she did that, the unexpected and rough movement would likely frighten Shippo and quite possibly draw an irritated look from Yuuta. “You know, you can relax a little bit, right?” She teased, pushing his shoulder lightly. “It’s a beautiful day and the sun is shining!”

Yuuta rolled his eyes upon her exclamation. “Don’t forget we’re outside the barrier. There’s danger all around us.”

“It doesn’t look like anything will jump out as us any time soon,” She retorted, sticking her tongue out at him. Kagome half wondered if the butterfly fluttering past her would transform into a demon, but she found the thought rather comical and unbelieving. Yuuta was worrying a little too much, and although Kagome witnessed first hand the capabilities of demons, Mistress Centipede for instance, it felt peaceful at the moment, and she didn’t want to spend such a moment worrying whether or not such a creature would appear.

A startled whine shifted Kagome away from her silent musings, the sight of her baby crying, and hoping to comfort him with a soothing lullaby, his temper slowly diminished. She supposed to constant movement bothered Shippo, especially since he was used to laying in his wooden basket at home.

While she smoothed away his auburn bangs from the child’s face, it’s emerald eyes closing in contentment, Yuuta’s gaze drifted to her small wrist where a familiar blue and white beaded bracelet sat. “I’m curious,” He began, earning her stare after a short pause. “I noticed you share the same bracelet as Shippo. I understand he needs it to freely leave and enter the barrier, but why do you have one as well?”

“You know how I supposedly have priestess blood running through my veins?” She asked, eyeing the small and painted stones briefly. “This bracelet acts as a means to nullify those powers, especially since it’s brought nothing but harm to the village. Since I have no control over it, Kaede says I should never remove it.”

“I see … but you do plan on becoming a priestess in the future, right?”

Kagome shrugged. Honestly, she wasn’t entirely sure about that. If there was a way to remove those powers, then she was sure no one around her would suffer. “I haven’t put much thought into it…”

He crossed his arms after a moment, his ears listening to Kagome’s every word. “Regardless if you choose to become their priestess, it might benefit you to take up some training. The last thing you want to do is get caught up in a situation where that bracelet could cause more harm than good.”

More harm than good? “What do you mean?”

Yuuta sighed. “Let me put it this way,” He began, his gaze focused entirely on her beside him. “Let’s say there comes a day you and Shippo are in danger and there’s no one around to protect either of you. By some unfortunate accident, that bracelet of yours breaks, what will you do then?” He asked, noticing her eyes widen in understanding. “According to you, it keeps demons from sensing your powers. Within a matter of minutes, you could wind up swarmed by them, both of you overwhelmed. Like before, your powers would undoubtedly unleash, purifying anything within so much distance, even Shippo.”
Kagome gasped, clutching her child close to her. “What?”

At her response, he arched a brow. “Do not forget, he isn’t human. Like all demons, even he would suffer. The last you want on your conscious is the death of your child. Perhaps … you should keep that in mind…” Yuuta did not intend for his words to upset the young woman beside him, but he hoped it would bring understanding to the situation, regarding herself and her son.

A chill swept down her spine, and despite his advice scaring her, she realized he was right. What if such an instance occurred in the future? What if the bracelet broke, not only would she draw unnecessary attention to herself and others, but she might accidentally hurt Shippo. Somehow, she wondered if without even having the bracelet on, would her touch harm her child?

Although priestess blood coursed through her veins, she lived an ordinary life back in her era without so much of a hassle, but upon crossing five hundred years into the past, her bloodline supposedly awakened. No. That wasn’t right. According to Lady Kaede, the Sacred Jewel, a creation which existed centuries back and housed incredible and terrible powers, must have manifested itself within her, but for whatever reason it was, Kagome wasn’t sure. Could those powers have been the result of the jewel and not simply her bloodline? It was certainly possible, and the more Kagome thought about it, the more fearful she became.

‘But why me? Why did the jewel decide to appear inside my body? It doesn’t even make sense. Actually, none of this makes sense. Here I am, walking an empty road, five hundred years in the past, a child in my arms, with a terrifying jewel inside my body wanted by both humans and demons.’ If anything, all of this felt like something straight out of a fairytale, a fictional book of ancient Japanese myths, only right now, it was real, too real to her liking.

A sudden thought struck her, enough which perked her head to look at Yuuta beside her, though his attention remained focused on his surroundings. Since they were embarking on a journey to meet with a clan of expert Demon Slayers, Kagome wondered if it was possible they could remove the jewel from her body. If those powers truly did stem from the object, then, maybe they could destroy it; at least then her worries would greatly diminish. Then again, if the tree did let her return home, she could quite possibly have it surgically removed by qualified doctors, without fearing infection or death. Thinking realistically, Kagome was sure she’d have a lot of explaining to give as to why such an object was within her body.

‘Kaede says the jewel resides within my chest, but I’m not exactly sure about its precise location…’ Kagome mused. Yet, she wondered, how terrible the extent of her injury would be once removed, if possible. ‘What Yuuta said was right. I have no idea how to control these powers, nor do I feel comfortable taking up priestess training. Still, I’m pretty sure it has nothing to do with my bloodline.’

With such troubling thoughts weighing heavily on her mind, Kagome sighed. She hated feeling like this. But, then again, if Yuuta hadn’t said anything, she would have never realized how fragile the bracelet around her wrist was. One small inconvenience could easily result in a bad ending for her and Shippo, and as his adoptive mother, she didn’t want to throw him into any danger.

‘Alright. When I meet with the clan, I’ll see if there is a way they can remove the Sacred Jewel, and from there, I guess I’ll see what happens next…’
Cold Truth

Chapter Summary

After learning about what really happened back when the Harvest Inspector came to Kaede's Village, Yuuta and Kagome find themselves at odds in their discussion. What should they do with this learned knowledge? Meet with the Daimyo or ignore it?

August 20th

Three days since they left Kaede’s Village, Yuuta and Kagome continued in their destination North, their legs sore from the long trek and their bodies weary from traveling. Since last night, they’d eaten the last of Aiko’s food she packed the morning prior to their departure, and while they searched the woods near them for any signs of food, they luckily came across a couple fruit trees and wild mushrooms.

Often during their trek, Shippo fussed, the two having no other choice but to rest, and while Yuuta spent that time checking their surroundings and refilling their containers from streams, Kagome comforted the baby. They were fortunate, bringing Clover along, her milk being the sweetest among the few goats Kaede kept in her village; it was enough to calm the child and soothes his worries.

Since time was of the essence, Kagome and Yuuta only allowed themselves a short time for reprieve, enough to wash up, calm Shippo and relieve themselves before continuing on their path. The journey was tiring, especially for Shippo, who found the incessant bouncing unbearable, his crying almost never-ending.

Kagome sighed, holding her child against her as she ran her hand over his back gently. “It’s alright. We’ll rest in a little bit honey,” She replied, hoping to comfort him, but her efforts were in vain this time.

Yuuta, noticing Kagome’s distress, frowned. “Perhaps it would have been best to leave him behind with Aiko.”

Kagome nodded. “I think so too. Shippo doesn’t like being jostled around so much…”

It was nearing sunset, hours during their travels, and realizing the night would soon fall upon them, Kagome groaned; her legs were killing her, and she was fairly certain there were blisters on her feet. Walking around for three days straight, in straw sandals no less, wasn’t exactly comfortable. Kagome could put up with walking around the village in them, and most days running around barefoot, but traveling these long distances hours at a time, it proved a bit too much for the girl. In fact, this was probably the most exercise she’d ever had in her life.

“How much further?” She asked, slowing her pace gradually every minute.

“Within two more days, we should reach our destination,” He remarked, and noticing Kagome lagging behind, he stopped, allowing her time to catch up before matching her pace. “Would you like me to carry him?”
Kagome nodded. “Just for a little bit, if you don’t mind.”

Nodding, he took the child into his arms, Shippo’s incessant crying continuing. Without Shippo’s weight upon her, he watched as Kagome stretched her arms, a yawn escaping her as she looked around her surroundings. “It’ll be dark soon. We should begin searching for a place to make camp.”

Another yawn escaped her, but she only nodded. As her eyes rested on the sun setting in the distance, she turned back to Yuuta. “We’ve been traveling for a while but why haven’t we seen any villages or people?”

“There are no other villages near Kaede’s,” He answered. “It’s usually like that, with small villages. Kaede’s village lies further away than other provincial villages, especially that of Edo.”

“Well, it was certainly an interesting question, but he wasn’t sure how to answer it so easily. “It’s always been like that, at least, from my understanding…”

It was no wonder Kaede’s village was suffering; she didn’t even have neighbors close by to help her people out during their difficult times. Wouldn’t it be easier to have neighbors? At least then, there would be others nearby to help. “Have you been to Edo Village?”

Yuuta nodded. “A few times before, I have.” He answered, recalling the time a couple years back. “It’s a long trip away, further than where we’re headed now. If I had to estimate, I’d say it was a seven-day trip on foot from Kaede’s.”

“Apparently our Daimyo lives there,” She replied, recalling an incident when she recently arrived. It was probably a month ago when the Daimyo’s men visited the village and were thoroughly displeased with the harvest; in the end, the men took some of the village’s women and children. Aiko revealed those children were taken to Edo Village, to pay off the remaining debt Kaede owed them for the failed harvest; it hadn’t been a good visit, in fact, Kagome was lucky she hadn’t been taken during the time. “I’m not sure why we didn’t just reach out to him instead and explain the situation…”

At her words, he only arched a brow. “You intend to confront the Daimyo? That’s a foolish thought, one which could cost you your life.”

She looked up at this, bemused by his comment. “From what I’ve learned, a Daimyo rules over certain provinces and gains their income from humble and middle-class villages, and that income comes from the harvest which they tax upon the people,” Kagome replied, earning a slight nod from Yuuta. “From this, the people receive protection from their Daimyo, but what protection has Lady Kaede’s village garnered from this? None. Despite their poor harvest this year, don’t you think they deserve a bit of leniency?”

“How so?”

Kagome pouted. “I mean, the Daimyo’s people are clearly suffering. People are starving and there’s a high risk with Winter quickly approaching, that the village might not even make it until next year. I think, maybe, it might be best to reach out to him and tell him the situation in person. Maybe, if he understood—”

“If he understood the situation you were all facing, do you think he would help you?” Yuuta interrupted. “Kagome, if things were as simple as you say, the world would be a much brighter
place to live, but such places do not exist. I’ve lived for twenty-eight years, and I’ve seen the cruelty of this world, the cruel ambitions from those with power,” He replied, as if recalling a painful memory from his past. “It was a long time ago, but I almost forgot what it was like to live a life of normalcy…”

“Is that why you became a bandit?” Kagome asked.

For a moment, he remained silent, his eyes looking elsewhere, following the sight of their silhouettes at their feet. “Partially…”

“I see…”

Although it wasn’t a path she’d want anyone to take in life, she couldn’t help but understand why he made the choice. Life in the Sengoku Era was far different than it was in her time period. Sure, there were people suffering in her world, but at least there were people who were willing to reach out a hand to others, regardless of their birth or humble beginnings. Even so, Kagome couldn’t help but wonder if there was also some fault in her thinking as well. She couldn’t just rightly come out and tell the people they were wrong to do this, especially since this is how it’s always been. Their eyes just haven’t opened in understanding yet and wouldn’t for another few hundred years.

Silence fell between them an hour after their discussion, both wrapped up in their own personal thoughts. Shortly after, Shippo eventually quieted, his eyes closed in deep slumber against Yuuta’s chest.

Sudden realization hit Kagome. “Wait a minute. You’re twenty-eight?”

This question caught him off guard, his eyes staring curiously at the girl beside him, her mouth agape in wonder. Upon noticing her large eyes wandering his body from head to foot, he squinted his gaze. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Well … I-I … I thought you were older…”

He suddenly stopped, turning fully towards her. “How old did you think I was, Kagome?”

“Well, I don’t know…” She couldn’t help but cover her mouth with her hand as she looked away, trying her best not to laugh at his serious expression. “I guess … late thirties?”

Yuuta scoffed.

“But you know … a good late thirties. You know there are a lot of good looking guys in their late thirties,” Kagome replied, sensing his irritation at her reply.

He wasn’t sure if he should take that as a compliment or not. Once again, he couldn’t help but scoff and step away from her, continuing down the path without her beside him.

Noticing this, Kagome stifled back her laughter and followed after. “Yuuta, don’t be mad,” She replied, trying her utmost to apologize through her small giggles, but he simply turned his head away from her. “Yuuta!” Unable to hold back, she wrapped her arms around his, pulling his arm closer to her until it was pressed innocently against her. “Yuuta!” She playfully called his name. “I’m sorry!” Her words came out like a squeak, which only caused her to laugh more. “Don’t be mad at me.”

Releasing a sigh, he turned his head slightly, his brown eyes shifting downwards to the raven-haired woman clinging to his arm, her breasts pressed against him. He fought to control the blush upon his face, but when she caught his eye, he quickly looked away.
“Yuuta!” She whined. “Look at me!”

“I don’t want to,” Came his reply.

A pout formed upon her lips, her eyes narrowing at Yuuta. Could it be men in this era were sensitive about their age? Then again, the bandits were quite sensitive when she walked in on them bathing that one time. “Men…” She scoffed, turning her head away, her arms still wound around him.

“Woman,” Came his reply. “Since we’re on the subject, Kagome, how old are you?”

Caught off guard by his own question, she couldn’t help but blink. “I’m eighteen?” She replied without hesitation, her eyes squinting at Yuuta suspiciously. “Why?”

“Hm, nothing…” He replied, his eyes lingering on her face for a brief moment.

‘Even though she is eighteen, she has a youthful face.’

“Hm, what?” Kagome asked, leaning her head against him curiously.

“By your childish ways, I thought perhaps you were ten,” He remarked, snickering at her surprised expression.

Upon hearing his reply, Kagome slapped his shoulder, and he threw his head back with laughter. Unable to remain angry, she laughed along with him. “Oh, I get it, pay back!” Joking aside, she felt exhaustion creeping up upon her, and as the two fell into a comfortable silence, Kagome rested her head against his arm, one arm wrapped around his.

Turning his head slightly to look at her, he couldn’t help but notice her eyes were closed as she leaned against him. This was the first time she’d ever gotten so close to him, and for the moment in which it lasted, he felt content. Focusing back on the road ahead of them, he suddenly noticed an interesting sight appearing over the horizon. “Kagome, look ahead.”

Opening her eyes slowly, she shifted her gaze upwards at Yuuta, his eyes looking elsewhere, and looking in his line of sight, she saw the outline of a village a distance away.

“Within the next hour if not less, we should—”

“Finally!” She loudly exclaimed. “I’m so tired of walking!” She complained, bumping her head further into his arm, a slight yawn escaping her as she leaned into his warmth, despite his flushed expression.

Within half an hour, they reached the small village, Kagome’s footsteps quickening with each step, and as they curiously swept their gaze over the huts, they realized they were slightly larger than those back home.

There were numerous wooden stands outside the huts, hand woven baskets made from straw and twigs on display with many decorative bowls and cups crafted and smoothed from wood with intricate paint coating their exterior. Stands with various vegetables and fruits decorated the old tables, and as Kagome and Yuuta stepped further into the settlement, they noticed old men and women storing them within their huts.

“Hitomi Village,” Yuuta replied, eyeing a small wooden sign near him. They came a long way, but he was glad they managed to reach a settlement before evening.
Kagome frowned, eyeing the village, the fields in the distance filled with vegetation, and she looked at Yuuta. “This village is a three day walk from Lady Kaede’s. I wonder why she didn’t reach out to these people for help. They have so much food, and it looks like their fields are flourishing.” Not to mention their homes were slightly bigger.

“Despite residing in the same province, it’s likely because villages do not attach themselves to others. Outsiders, depending on the village’s views, are either seen as simple travelers or likely spies or thieves. In this day and age, there is much distrust between people.”

“Even so, some form of communication or understanding should exist, Yuuta,” Kagome fired back, her frown growing. When she first arrived at Kaede’s village, she was seen as a thief, a troublemaker who might do them wrong, and according to Yuuta, it seemed many other villages were the same. “You don’t think they will capture us, do you?” A sudden worry rose within her.

Her words amused him, and as his eyes scanned the faces of the villagers, many which were too immersed in their daily chores to notice, he simply shook his head. “You needn’t worry. If I noticed any signs of hostility, I would have led us away from here the moment we arrived.”

“Are you travelers?” A voice asked suddenly.

Their gazes fell onto a small little boy, probably no older than ten years, holding a large basket filled with vegetables. His hair was pulled back into a short top knot, dressed in ordinary clothing, plain trousers and a long sleeved brown top, knotted in the middle of his waist. “We haven’t had a visitor in a long time.”

“We were making our way in this direction when we saw your village,” Kagome smiled, her worry fading slightly. “We’re not bad people. I promise.”

At her remark, he laughed, small little dimples appearing on the sides of his cheeks. “Of course, you’re not. How can someone pretty like you be bad?”

Kagome’s smile widened at this, and she had every urge to pinch his cheeks, but she resisted. From beside her, she noticed Yuuta roll his eyes. “We were hoping to find a place to stay for the night.”

Since the village was small, there were likely no inns, but if the villagers were willing to allow them a peaceful night’s rest, they wouldn’t mind sleeping in the barn.

“A place to stay the night?” He asked, musing for a moment. “If you want, you can stay with me!” The boy exclaimed, turning suddenly before nodding his head. “Follow me.”

Traveling down the path a short distance, they arrived before a slightly larger hut, and though its shabbiness remained just like the others presiding in the village, Kagome and Yuuta couldn’t help but wonder if their village had a priestess of their own. The small child dropped his basket outside the front of the hut and pushed open the flap of the door, calling out for his mother and father. Within moments, the family emerged, their eyes staring quizzically at them.

Hello,” The mother greeted, noticing the small child tucked within a cloth carrier against Kagome’s chest. Seeing this, she smiled warmly. “You must be travelers. We often do not receive visitors from outside Hitomi Village.”

“Please excuse the intrusion,” Kagome apologized.

Yuuta nodded, stepping slightly in front of Kagome, his stature a bit taller and more intimidating than the family. “We were hoping we might find a place to lodge for the night.”

“Father, mother, would it be alright if they stayed the night with us?” The little boy asked,
receiving a soft pat on the head from his father.

The mother looked to her husband for an answer; in truth, she didn’t have a problem allowing these people a place to stay, but since her husband was the ruler of the house, she awaited his response with silent curiosity. **“Dear?”**

“It wouldn’t be any trouble. There’s enough space in our hut for you to sleep,” The husband replied, grinning politely, and at his words, Kagome and Yuuta sighed in relief. “Prepare more rice for our guests,” He directed to his wife.

Nodding, she turned to Kagome with a soft smile, her hands gesturing for the young woman to follow her inside. **“You must be weary from your travels. Please, come inside and rest.”**

“Oh, thank you,” Kagome replied, turning back to Yuuta for a brief moment before stepping inside the hut.

As soon as Kagome disappeared from their view, the husband smiled at Yuuta, slapping his shoulder playfully. **“That’s quite the wife you’ve got there, young man,”** He laughed. **“A pretty young girl like her is rare these days.”**

Yuuta only blinked, but he didn’t deny the older man’s words. **“You’re right. There’s no one quite like her,”** He replied, reminiscing briefly on their first encounter.

“Come. My son was helping us to empty the stands before storing the rest of our vegetation away. Since you are here, the process will take less time!”

Seating herself on the floor, Kagome looked around the inside of the hut. Unlike Aiko’s and Kaede’s, the inside was a bit more spacious and there were chests, small cabinets and various jars and buckets against the walls. On the other side of the living space, Kagome curiously watched the older woman kneel beside what looked like a large hearth, which she could only assume was made from clay and sand, it’s color an off white. A steaming iron black pot was suspended from its rim as she stoked the fire beneath with a long iron rod.

It took Kagome a moment to realize this village had Kamado stoves, despite its poor appearance. Crawling closer to inspect the hearth in more detail, she noticed there were two stove tops, and if she learned anything from history, the first stoves introduced to Japan began in the early Kofun Period, several hundred years back. Back then, the people lived in thatched pit houses, some either having one Kamado within their small homes or those who preferred a fire pit to anything else for their cooking. After so many years, it was still a bit surprising the Kamado stove remained in its natural state, but one thing had changed since the Kofun Period; there were now two stove tops instead of one.

Noticing the young woman behind her inspecting the hearth, the older woman smiled. **“Oh, is this perhaps your first time seeing one?”** She asked politely.

Realizing her hand was touching the rough surface of the hearth, Kagome pulled away and nodded. **“Yes,”** She lied.

“Really?” The woman’s curiosity heightened at this and she frowned at the young girl before closing the iron latch on the hearth. **“That’s a bit surprising. You must have traveled very far if you’ve never seen a Kamado Stove before. Tell me, I’m curious, where have you and your husband traveled from?”**

Kagome blushed at her words. Husband? The family must have thought she and Yuuta were
together, then again, it probably wasn’t that much of a surprise. After all, she and Yuuta were traveling alone together, and with a baby, so it made sense. “Oh, well our village is a three day walk from here, just south actually.”

“Oh? How strange…”

“Strange?”

She nodded. “I wasn’t aware there were still villages in the Musashi Province who were without Kamado Stoves; I’m guessing your village must be rather poor?” She inquired, before covering her mouth suddenly. “Oh, please forgive me. I hope I did not seem rude…”

“Oh no, it’s alright. And yes, our village is very poor. We’ve been struggling for some time now, unfortunately…”

“I see … I’m sorry to hear that … Forgive me,” She bowed her head dismally, her thoughts musing upon the troubles of the young family. Noticing the small baby cradled within her cloth carrier, its sleeping face the only thing visible, she smiled.

“You have a beautiful child. Is it a boy or girl?”

“A boy,” Kagome smiled.

Ψ

After assisting the father and son with storing the leftover vegetables and grains into the storage, they returned within half an hour, their food cooked and prepared upon a low rising wooden table. Rice porridge, steamed tomatoes and other vegetables, grilled fish and a few side dishes greeted them, the smell emanating within the hut only fueling Kagome’s and Yuuta’s hunger.

“It looks delicious!” Kagome marveled. She was so used to scavenging for mushrooms, edible plants, fruit and eating only millet and rice, that she almost drooled at the sight. It was times like this, she missed her mother’s homecooked meals. “Thank you.”

“Please, help yourselves. You must be famished from such a long journey,” The woman explained, offering a large fish to both Yuuta and Kagome, who shared it between themselves eagerly.

Earlier when they arrived, the older woman offered Kagome a basket for her son, and as she glanced at the slumbering baby, she smiled motherly. Although he was snug as could be, wrapped up securely in his cloth carrier, his ears and tail hidden from sight, Kagome only hoped he wouldn’t move around too much and startle the family.

“Kintaro!” The father yelled suddenly, his child nowhere present within the hut. “Come inside and eat, or you’ll go without for the night!”

The sounds of quickened footsteps fell into the room, the sight of the small little boy quickly bounding to the table beside his mother before looking at his bowl of rice eagerly. “I was putting the chickens away, father.”

“You should have done that earlier,” The father chided, shaking his head before ruffling his son’s hair.

Kintaro glanced up from his bowl and looked at the pretty young lady seated across from him and his family before looking at the space between her and her husband. Without a word, and smiling brightly, he grabbed his bowl and stood up, moving quickly to sit in between them, despite Yuuta’s
curious stare. “Can I sit here?”

With a mouth full, Kagome only nodded, smiling at the child.

“Now Kintaro, you mustn’t bother them,” His mother lightly scolded, patting the empty space beside her, but the child only shook his head.

“I want to sit next to her!”

Swallowing her rice, Kagome smiled at the family, sweat dropping slightly. “He can sit with us. We don’t mind. Thank you again for letting us stay the night, and for feeding us. We hope we haven’t inconvenienced you…”

“Nonsense. We were glad to take you both in. After all, it’s dangerous to be sleeping out in the woods, especially with a child,” The father replied. “Most villages aren’t as nice as ours, so you were both lucky to come to Hitomi village before dusk.”

Yuuta nodded, chewing between mouthfuls. “You seem to be doing rather well in the village. Your fields are flourishing beautifully,” He commented.

Kintaro nodded. “We make a lot of money from our crops! Father and I always travel to Edo Village to sell what we have!”

“Really?” Yuuta arched a curious brow.

The father nodded. “In the past, it’s been difficult, but as our village began growing, we’ve had more hands helping us in the fields. Our Daimyo has been very lenient towards us thus far, and we’ve managed to sell our wares and crops in Edo. I would reckon we receive more than ten mon depending on the quality of our vegetation.”

“That’s a lot of money,” Yuuta inquired, pulling his bowl away from his mouth before glancing at Kagome briefly. “For us, it’s quite the opposite. We’ve been struggling for some time now…” He replied, shaking his head.

The older man suddenly frowned, looking between the two curiously. “I never asked, but where is your village located? You mentioned you were traveling earlier.”

His wife tenderly touched his shoulder, shaking her head suddenly, as if to deter him away from the question, but he only insisted.

“Our village is a three-day journey just south,” Kagome answered, placing her utensil onto her finished bowl. “We were actually asked by our Head Priestess to deliver a letter to a close friend of hers up North. We still have a couple days more before we reach our destination.”

He mused, finding the situation baffling. Why send out a man and woman, with their child no less, on a dangerous journey to deliver one letter? It seemed rather strange, and his curiosity got the better of him. “I’m sure your husband could have managed the task on his own, but why send you and your child as well?”

This question caught them by surprise, each knowing the reason, but uncertain whether or not to admit the entire truth. Yuuta only accompanied Kagome to protect her, and Kagome was making the journey not only for their village’s suffering but also for questions about the Shikon Jewel within her body and its connection to her spiritual powers. As for Shippo, Kaede was certain the Demon Slayers might assist Kagome’s knowledge of how to carefully raise him, since they were a clan of knowledgeable slayers.
Kagome only sweat dropped, not sure how to answer that. Thankfully, his wife smacked her husband gently across the shoulder, and he weakly laughed, giving up on asking any further.

“What is the letter about?” Kintaro asked, eyeing the woman beside him.

“Now Kintaro, that is none of our business,” His mother lightly scolded him.

Kagome only shook it away, smiling weakly. “No, it’s no trouble at all. You see, our village has suffered greatly over the past couple months. Our harvests have been poor, and due to…” She paused, glancing briefly at Yuuta beside her, though he only ignored her as he bit into his fish. “unexpected events, we’ve lost a couple people from demon attacks, and our fields were trampled by passing bandits recently.”

“Oh dear,” The mother’s eyes grew wide with fright. “Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that…”

“Were you hurt by those awful bandits?” The little boy scooted closer to Kagome, his large eyes staring worryingly at her.

“No no,” Kagome explained, sweat dropping when she caught Yuuta’s curious stare beside her. “They simply came and trampled our fields and left, once they realized we had nothing to offer them…”

Unexpectedly, the father slammed his fist against the table, causing it to move under the force; it startled Kagome for a moment. “Those no-good disgusting bandits! We had a small group of bandits barge into our village a few months back as well, but we chased them out. They didn’t stand a chance against our men.”

Coughing slightly, Yuuta pounded his chest, a few pieces of vegetables lodged in his throat. After a few hits and drinking an offered bowl of water from the wife across the table, the contents finally slipped down his throat.

“What if those were the same bandits who attacked your village…” The woman asked. “It was a good thing your husband was with you.”

Kagome weakly laughed. “Besides losing a few huts to a fire, our men chased them off, and…” She trailed off, placing a hand over her mouth to stifle a small giggle, her eyes shifting to Yuuta on the other side of Kintaro. “my brave, strong husband fought with one particular bandit who tried to ride off with me.”

Yuuta scoffed. Kagome was directing her story entirely at him and his men. Well, it wasn’t a lie; his men did barge into their village, trample their fields and set fire to the huts, not to mention made off with her and the village girls. While he wouldn’t admit the entire truth to the family, for fear of scaring them and chasing them off, he decided to play along with the idea that they were a husband and wife traveling together; at least that way, there wouldn’t be any suspicion or accusations directed at Kagome for accompanying a man unwedded.

“Thank goodness you are alright. I can only imagine the detriment your village must be facing. I’m sorry you had to go through all of that,” The mother replied solemnly. “So, I take it this is why you’re making the journey?”

Kagome nodded. “Yes. We aren’t sure what else to do…” It was more of a last resort if anything.

Kintaro blinked. “Why don’t you talk with the Daimyo? You know, he often listens to his people. I’m sure he would help your village. After all, our village has been doing really good.”
The father nodded. “I agree. While I’m sure whoever it is you are traveling out to seek help from can certainly help your village strive on, it would certainly be better to bring up the situation to our Daimyo,” He explained with a shake of his head. When he noticed the discontented stares on the young ones faces, he blinked. “What? You don’t believe me?”

“I think there might be more to their story, dear,” His wife replied softly. Judging by their expressions, it seemed the two didn’t take too kindly to the Daimyo at all, their faces looking away in disbelief. “Tell me, what else is wrong?”

“Well then … let’s hear it. Why do you hesitate to travel to Edo Village?” The father asked, his arms crossed and his brows raised curiously.

Kagome sighed, recalling the time two months back when the Daimyo’s men arrived at Kaede’s village; it was around the same time she first arrived, captured and held hostage. The men arrived to check the harvest, arriving earlier than intended and treated the people terribly. Young girls and boys were taken as a result of a failed harvest, the soils too dry to nourish the roots of their crops and the sun too hot in the sweltering heat.

“His men arrived to check the harvest a couple months back. During that time, our crops were slightly withered and with the lack of rain then, they were thoroughly disappointed. We were informed our taxes had increased, despite remaining stationary for five years and had risen to eighty mon per year. It was a ten mon increase within our taxes…” Kagome replied. “Since we were unable to pay the full price, those men took several children, explaining they’d work and earn money to help the village strive on a little longer. So far, our Head Priestess has given forty mon to them and we’ve been informed they’ll visit within September for the remainder of the tax…”

“What?” The mother gasped, her face appearing almost disbelieving.

“Is this true?” He asked, arching a brow and clenching his fists.

Noticing their reactions, Yuuta looked up curiously. “What? You act as if this is the first you’ve heard of it.”

“Because it is,” Came his reply, his voice becoming louder. “Those men whom you speak of also visited our village, but they did not mention anything about a raised tax. It’s always been forty mon per year,” He explained, his family nodding in agreement. “How could any village manage to pay eighty mon per year for a harvest? It’s ridiculous, and to think you’re struggling as it is to pay season to season! It’s hard enough making enough and setting the remainder aside for taxes! I hate to say this, but your village has been cheated.”

“Cheated?” Kagome’s eyes widened in disbelief. If that was the case, then this was certainly serious. “I can’t believe this…” This wasn’t right. It wasn’t fair. Why was this happening to Kaede’s village? Were other people suffering just the same? Was it because of the failed harvest?

“Father, those men can’t get away with that! That’s also a crime against the Daimyo!”

He nodded. “Indeed, a punishment worthy of death. This situation definitely shouldn’t be overlooked,” Came his reply. “Perhaps you should visit Edo Village and explain everything to our Lord. If your village should fall further into ruin … I’d hate to see such nice people lose their homes…”

The mother clapped her hands, earning everyone’s attention suddenly. “Alright. That is enough of that. Let us all enjoy our dinner. Kagome, would you like another serving?”
Kagome blushed at this and nodded her head. “Yes please.”

“No need to be shy. If you wish for more, just say so. We have plenty to go around. That goes for you as well,” She directed at Yuuta, filling Kagome’s bowl with more rice and vegetables.

Bending down outside the hut, Yuuta rinsed his face with water from a bucket. Standing up, he looked up at the pale full moon lingering high in the evening sky before entering back inside the hut. The mother and Father were pulling out their futons from the cabinet, preparing themselves for bed, a lighted candle illuminating the room in a soft orange glow.

Crossing the living space within, Yuuta retired to Kintaro’s room, an attachment to the hut separated by a large shoji screen door next to the kitchen. As he made his way across the old floorboards, he heard laughter from the other side of the screen and sliding the door open slightly ajar, he looked within.

Their futon was already laid out, a single sheet of blanket which he knew him and Kagome would undoubtedly share together; the very thought left him feeling uneasy, especially considering he wasn’t intimate with her. However, this wasn’t the first he’d shared a bed with a woman, but that was a long time ago.

Kintaro marveled at the baby, it’s large emerald green eyes staring curiously up at him from his basket, the warmth of the blue cloth wrapped entirely around him. “Your baby has pretty eyes! I’ve never seen such a color.”

Seated upon the blankets beside Kintaro, Kagome nodded, touching Shippo’s nose tenderly while smiling. “Well he certainly doesn’t get it from either parents,” She commented weakly, laughing.

Kintaro’s gaze shifted to Kagome’s face, his brown eyes looking into her sparkling blue eyes for a brief moment. Unlike her child or husband’s eyes, hers were different, unlike anything he’d ever seen before. “Your eyes are pretty too. They are as vibrant as the morning skies.”

Kagome blushed at his compliment. “My mother says I get them from my father.”

“Really? Do other villagers have the same kind of eyes as you and your son?” Kintaro couldn’t help but ask. From his knowledge, everyone all over Japan, at least to his understanding, had brown eyes, but never light-colored eyes. Somehow, he felt a bit envious of that.

Kagome only shook her head. “Not really,” She lied. “It’s actually pretty rare, having blue and green eyes. Since my father had blue eyes, I guess it wasn’t surprising I inherited that from him, and I suppose those genes carried on through our son here.”

“Genes?” Kintaro blinked. What did that mean?

Hearing the conversation taking place on the other side of the shoji screen door and seeing Yuuta standing with his back against the door silently, the father lifted himself up from the floor and approached with a smile. Leaning against the door lightly, he peered within, his son talking animatedly with the raven-haired woman before laughing suddenly and patting Yuuta’s shoulder. “It would appear my son is quite smitten with your wife.”

Yuuta smirked at this, looking back within the room once more. “Well it wouldn’t be the first this has happened.”

The older man lifted a brow. “Oh? So, your wife’s beauty attracts a great many I would take it?”
Well that doesn’t surprise me. You’re a lucky man to have met a nice girl like that. If I were you, I’d keep her close at all times. There’s no telling when someone might take her away, my son for instance,” He teased, earning a chuckle from Yuuta beside him.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Yuuta voiced.

Sliding the screen door open, Yuuta stepped inside, and the father of Kintaro called out. “Alright, Kintaro. It’s time for bed. We should let these two get some rest.”

“Can’t I stay with them a little longer?”

“You know they have a long journey ahead of them in the morning,” His father replied. “They will need all the rest they can get tonight. Come along now.”

Sighing, the child lifted himself from the futon, his feet carrying him towards his father, but he paused beside Yuuta briefly. His eyes met the taller man’s, and they stared at one another, a certain jealousy welling up inside the boy.

Yuuta noticed the child’s stare, half amused and half curious if he would say anything at all. But the child only looked away from him, stepping out the door and waving good night to Kagome before sliding the screen shut behind him. One they were gone, Yuuta turned back to Kagome. “They seem like a pleasant family.”

She nodded, her hands touching the soft blanket of their futon. Somehow, she felt a bit uneasy. Tonight, she and Yuuta would share a room together, under the pretense that they were husband and wife. “Kintaro has taken a liking to Shippo, it would seem.”

“And you as well,” Yuuta commented, removing his boots before setting them against the wall. His eyes drifted towards the young woman, traveling her figure before lowering his gaze to the futon. Yuuta looked away, somewhat hesitant to join her. “We have two days remaining before we reach our destination,” He replied before sitting beside his sword, bow and quiver of arrows.

Kagome blinked. “Are you sleeping over there?”

“Would you rather I join you?”

She blushed, her eyes turning away slightly. “Oh … I … mean the floor will be pretty cold tonight…”

“I’ve slept in worse places, Kagome. Besides, it wouldn’t do my mind any ease if I were to share the same futon as you. After all, we are not lovers. I wouldn’t want to put you in any uncomfortable predicament because they believe we’re married.”

Realizing he was right and thankful he cared about her enough to not put her in any awkward situations, Kagome smiled. As she watched him lay down, his back turned towards her on the opposite side of the small room, she mused. Her eyes shifted to her backpack, and remembering she packed an extra blanket within, she stood up and approached it.

Unzipping the bag, she reached in and pulled out a long brown woolen blanket before approaching Yuuta and draping it over top him. He didn’t say a word to her generous act, and she returned to her futon, slipping beneath the comfort of the blankets before blowing out the candle near her.

Half an hour passed, and although Yuuta had already fallen asleep, softly snoring on the other side of the room, Kagome remained awake. Her thoughts lingered on the discussion earlier at the dinner table, and how they learned Kaede’s Village had been cheated by the Village Inspectors two
months back. Although Yuuta was against the idea of confronting the Daimyo, Kagome couldn’t help but wonder what their next course of action would be.

‘Yuuta was against the idea of traveling to Edo, but does he feel the same after learning this?’ Kagome wondered, reminiscing on their discussion earlier that day.

“I’m not sure why we didn’t just reach out to him instead and explain the situation…” Kagome voiced.

At her words, Yuuta only arched a brow. “You intend to confront the Daimyo? That’s a foolish thought, one which could cost you your life.”

Kagome pouted. “I mean, the Daimyo’s people are clearly suffering. People are starving and there’s a high risk with Winter quickly approaching, that the village might not even make it until next year. I think, maybe, it might be best to reach out to him and tell him the situation in person. Maybe, if he understood—”

“If he understood the situation you were all facing, do you think he would help you?” Yuuta interrupted. “Kagome, if things were as simple as you say, the world would be a much brighter place to live, but such places do not exist. I’ve lived for twenty-eight years, and I’ve seen the cruelty of this world, the cruel ambitions from those with power,”

Remembering their conversation earlier that day, Kagome sighed. Perhaps there was some truth in Yuuta’s words. Approaching the Daimyo certainly wouldn’t be easy, and while the family felt adamant on their thoughts concerning the welfare of their village, Kagome wasn’t sure what to do. In less than a month, September would come and with it, Takeo and his men would return to the village to inspect their harvest and likely cheat Kaede and the entire village out of more money. Kaede’s village was suffering enough as it was. Should they travel to Edo Village with this new knowledge in mind? Or, would doing so only bring more trouble to Kaede’s people?
When Kagome blacks out during their journey, they are soon met with three mysterious girls who are more than they seem.

Sunlight peered through an open window within the room, its rays warming Kagome’s face, and stirring from a well-rested sleep, her eyes fluttered open. Sometime during the night, the futon must have fallen away, the blankets in disarray around her. Soft cooing and movement from beside her drew her attention to a small baby kitsune, his large green eyes staring back at her, a small smile etched across his porcelain face.

“Good morning sweetie. How long were you awake?” She cooed, hugging the child close to her, her fingers combing through his auburn hair and twitching fox ears.

As much as she wanted to drift back to sleep, she couldn’t help but smell a mouthwatering aroma drift into the room. The sounds of feet pitter pattering outside the shoji screen door and the familiar sounds of an iron pot bubbling with delicious food urged her into a seated position.

Judging by Yuuta’s folded blanket beside Kagome’s hiking bag, he must have gotten up much earlier. Yawning, she looked around the room, her eyes gazing up towards the open small window. The sun was high in the sky, and if she had to guess, it was probably somewhere around the afternoon.

‘Our plans were to get up at first light and set off. I didn’t mean to sleep in…’

Setting Shippo into the basket beside her, she picked herself off the bed and removed her kimono, bending down to retrieve a clean garment from her bag and dressed herself. After tying the dark blue obi securely around her waist, she checked herself, smoothing out the wrinkles before bending down to fold and roll the futon up, placing it up against the wall.

With that taken care of, she reached for Shippo’s carrier and wrapped it around her body, lifting Shippo during the duration of her wrap until he was snug against her, his ears and tail concealed. Unfortunately, there was no helping her hair at all, her long ebony strands somewhat messy and in need of a thorough cleanse. Not wanting to deal with the strands falling over her face, she reached into her bag and withdrew her brush and hair tie, combing her hair until she styled it into a high ponytail.

Satisfied she looked half decent, she exited the room, sliding the door closed behind her. Upon leaving, she noticed Kintaro’s mother working diligently at the Kamado Stove, tossing a few vegetables into the boiling pot before stirring the rice in her wooden steam pot. “Good morning,” She softly called.

Not noticing the child behind her and knelt before the burners, she turned and greeted the young girl with a smile. “Good morning, my dear. Did you sleep well?”
Kagome nodded. “Yes. Thank you again.” Realizing there was no sign of anyone else within the hut, Kagome glanced around. “Where is my husband?” She asked, still not used to calling Yuuta by such a name. Then again, it was kind of fun, pretending.

“Kintaro and my husband went to gather vegetables from the fields for lunch. Your husband left earlier to help. They should be back soon.” She explained, stirring the rice carefully. “He is such a hardworking man. You are lucky to have him.”

“Is there anything you need help with?”

She nodded. “Lunch is almost done, but will you help set the table? The bowls are in the cabinet.”

Approaching the cabinet, Kagome retrieved five wooden bowls, plates and utensils and placed them carefully onto the low rising table. Once they were placed, she heard her child cooing against her, and smiling, she hugged him against her. “You must be hungry, huh?”

Seeing the young woman embrace her baby, the woman couldn’t help but smile tenderly, moving away from the stove towards her. Wiping her hands onto her kimono, she looked at the child. “I didn’t get a good look at him last night. May I?”

Kagome nodded.

Bending down so she was eye level with the child, she noticed his large green eyes staring back at her. They were as vibrant as a polished gem with small amethyst specks surrounding his irises. “Kintaro was right. Your baby has usual and beautiful green eyes. Is this a trait passed down in your family?” She asked, receiving a nod from Kagome after. “I noticed you have bright blue eyes.”

“I get it from my father’s side of the family. He had blue eyes as well, but my mother’s eyes are brown. I suppose the trait carried over onto Shippo, but I’m surprised his eyes are green.”

She nodded in understanding. “Such a rare trait, but certainly beautiful. You must receive many compliments and questions about it.”

“Not really, then again, I haven’t done much traveling,” Kagome admitted softly.

Before long, the table was set with the delicious cuisine, steamed rice and vegetables once again, but despite that, it looked delicious. As Kagome helped her carry the rice pot over towards the end of the table, they heard familiar voices pour into the hut.

Yuuta stepped in, his physique drenched in sweat as he wiped his forehead, his cheeks slightly red from the effort in the fields. Normally, his strenuous efforts focused more on carpentry than anything else or swordsmanship but bending down in the fields for only a short amount of time certainly was rigorous. “Looks like it’s going to be a scorcher today. I doubt we’ll get any rain,” He commented, approaching the table before plopping down beside Kagome.

Accepting a dry rag from the woman, Kagome reached over and dabbed the cloth against his face, hoping to dry away his sweat. “You are usually a morning person. Why didn’t you wake me up? I could have helped you.”

He leaned away slightly from her touch, his eyes fixed upon the rag before taking it from her hand. Wiping the cloth against his neck, freeing himself from the rest of the sweat accumulating on his cheeks and forehead, he placed it upon his lap, his legs crossed over the other. “It’s alright. You were up with the baby last night, and you haven’t had a decent night’s sleep…”
“Thank you,” She smiled.

He nodded, smoothing back his bangs from his forehead, acknowledging the father and son as they joined them at the table, the little boy moving to sit on the other side of Kagome. “Once we’ve eaten, we should head out.”

“You didn’t work too hard in the fields, did you?” She asked. She knew farming wasn’t really something he specialized in, but he seemed alright, if not a bit hot from the sweltering heat outside.

“No. I only helped carry the baskets and store the rest of the crops in storage,” He replied, accepting a bowl of water from Kagome.

“I worked hard Kagome!” Kintaro exclaimed beside her. “I worked really hard!” He couldn’t help but lean back and squint his eyes at Yuuta.

Kagome giggled. She wasn’t oblivious to the child’s attachment towards her. It was painfully obvious he was a bit jealous of Yuuta, wanting to receive the same affection from her as well. “Oh, you must have! I can tell! You are so big and strong,” She replied, touching his arm gently.

“Like your husband?” He asked, perking up at her compliment.

“Not likely…” Yuuta murmured under his breath, but he only received a slight pinch on his thigh from the woman beside him. He hadn’t anticipated her fingers anywhere near his legs, let alone his thigh, and he tensed at her touch.

Leaning close to him, Kagome whispered into his ear, removing her hand from his leg, much to his relief. “Be nice.”

The mother of Kintaro couldn’t help but giggle at the sight, pouring her husband a bowl of water before filling his bowl and plate of rice and vegetables. “The two of you remind me of me and my husband before we married.”

The rest of their lunch carried on in long conversation, discussing various topics regarding their village, the perks of traveling back and forth from Edo to Hitomi Village, and seeing the sights of the beautiful mountains along the way. Somehow, the conversation drifted to how Kintaro’s mother and father first met, and for them, it was love at first sight, back when they were just children growing up together.

No sooner had they eaten, and after feeding Shippo the milk from Clover, who was tied outside the hut, both Yuuta and Kagome packed up their belongings. The family followed them towards the exit of the village, the sweltering heat blazing down upon them.

“Regardless of what you do, I wish the best for your village,” The husband replied, his wife moving to stand beside him. “While I may not have met with the Daimyo personally, I’ve heard he is a kind man who listens to the concerns of his people. There’s a chance if you visit Edo Village, you may be granted an audience with him. However, keep in mind, there are many others who wish to meet with him as well.”

Yuuta nodded at this, shifting his gaze towards Kagome, who appeared lost in thought, most likely thinking about their village back home.

“No you really have to go, Kagome?” Kintaro asked, arousing her from her thoughts suddenly when he took her hand, not wanting her to leave.

“Well I have to. How else will I get our message delivered to help the village?” She teased, smiling
at the boy.

“You can always stay here with us and your husband can keep on going….” He replied, as if it were the simplest idea he could think of. Kintaro looked at the taller and robust man, meeting his eyes faintly before looking back up at Kagome pleadingly.

Despite Yuuta appearing unfazed by the child’s dislike for him, Kintaro’s father otherwise found the situation rather hilarious, slapping his knee completely amused by his son’s words and behavior for the woman. His son was bold, taking after him too well; it seemed he really took a liking to Yuuta’s wife.

Kagome sweat dropped, feeling Yuuta’s gaze watching her silently. “That does sound tempting…”

“So, you will stay?”

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I can’t. My village is counting on me.”

Kintaro released her hand, nodding his head dismally but also in understanding. Perhaps he was hoping too much for something that just came into his life, as brief as it was. “Oh…”

Bending down in front of him, she ruffled his hair, grinning. “But maybe I can come back and visit. We have to pass through your village on our way back home after our trip.”

“Well?” His eyes lit up at her words, and he turned towards his parents. “Father, is it okay for them to stay the night when they come back through?” At his nod, he turned back to Kagome smiling widely. “I’ll wait here for you! You have to promise to come back and see me and my family!”

Smiling at his enthusiasm, Kagome nodded and held out her pinky finger, though he only stared at it in confusion. “I pinky promise. This means I cannot go back on my promise.”

Understanding, he interlocked his pinky with hers and they shook on it, both smiling as they came to their agreement. “Don’t forget.”

Standing up, she and Yuuta bowed respectively to the family, and with one final wave to Kintaro, who seemed crestfallen to see them leave, they turned and left the village, Yuuta tugging on the ropes with Clover following behind them.

Ψ

An hour after Kagome and Yuuta left Hitomi Village, a horse pulling a wooden cart, filled with an abundant of barrels and cloth sacks, sauntered through the village. Upon the back of the cart, two young women sat, perched upon their knees as they looked out across the village, watching the peasants who attended their menial tasks. The driver was also a female, her black hair pulled high into a long ponytail, tied by a white tie.

Dressed in a similar fashion, their short thigh-length kosodes ranged from greens to blues and even a bright magenta, the sleeves of their garments no longer than their elbows and narrower than what was customary among women; it was a fashion which no other villager in the surrounding area wore, and despite its slight indecency, revealing a great bit of legs, nothing was said as the horse pulled to a complete stop.

Overtop their kosodes, plain sleeveless beige vests were worn over top, tied at the front with a black obi, it’s length much shorter than their kosodes beneath. Within their obis, small short blades were strapped, and easy to unsheathe, should any reason pass during their travels.
Atop their heads, they wore large straw hats, which helped block the harsh rays of the blistering sun shining down upon them. Black tabi cloth adorned their feet, and thin brown leather encompassed the entirety of their ankles rising just below their knees and tied off by a thick piece of cloth, course straw sandals completed their look.

As their driver leapt from the front of the wagon, her retreating form disappearing into one of the huts before them, the two girls released a sigh. They’d been traveling for days it seemed, and right now, this was the last stop left until they returned to their village.

Rui, a young girl with shoulder-length brown hair, her fringe resting just above her large brown eyes, only sighed. Mercilessly, she waved her uchiwa in front of her face, the fan doing little to no good as it only threw hot air at her. Sweat fell from her brow, her reddened cheeks exposed to the harsh rays as she released a pained moan. “This heat is unbearable!”

Chiyoko nodded. “I just hope Itsuko doesn’t take too long.” Unlike her companion who was dressed in a lightly colored magenta kosode, she was dressed in a blue kosode, her brown hair tied up into a half ponytail. The remainder of her long locks fell along her upper back, and white band was wrapped around her forehead absorbing most of the sweat accumulating onto her brow, as well as holding back a few stray bangs from falling over her eyes.

Rui leaned against the rails of the cart, her eyes scanning the villagers with slight disinterest. When she noticed a familiar face standing amidst a stand filled with an assortment of pottery, she perked up. “Hey. If my eyes aren’t deceiving me, that’s Kintaro.”

Chiyoko looked up at this, following her friend’s stare. “Wonder what he’s looking at?” She asked, noticing the little boy staring at his hand.

Sharing a brief glance, they nodded and leapt from the cart, their cushioned feet guiding them towards the little boy a short distance away. When they arrived before him, their height exceeding him a great deal, he remained oblivious to them.

“Hey Kintaro!” Rui exclaimed, her hands placed upon her knees as she smiled gleefully at him. “You’ve gotten a bit bigger since we last saw you.”

Chiyoko nodded at this. The last they visited this village was three months back, and despite their repetitive cycles around Musashi Province on their frequent business trips, she agreed with Rui. When she noticed the child still caught up in his own musings, his eyes staring widely at his hand held up in front of his face, she shared a glance with her companion once more. “Hey, are you alright? Is there something wrong with you hand, kiddo?”

“She held my hand…” Kintaro’s voice softly muttered, answering their question surprisingly.

She held his hand? Who? Now that they were looking closer, they realized the little boy had a dreamy look upon his face, his eyes sparkling as if some divine being had blessed him only recently.

“Who held your hand?” Rui asked, her head tilted to the side confusedly.

“Kagome.”

Rui blinked. “Who’s Kagome?”

Lowering his hand to his side, he looked at the two girls beside him, his face flushing a bright red before looking away shyly. “This pretty girl who came to our village and stayed overnight.” He explained, his lips quirking into a smile.
“Oh really?” Chiyoko asked, arching a delicate brow before smiling amusedly.

He nodded. “She didn’t have a place to stay, so she stayed with me and my parents…”

Rui smirked. “What’s she like?” It seemed the little boy had developed a crush on a passing woman. How cute.

Faintly recalling her image, he smiled brightly. “She has long raven hair and the brightest blue eyes I ever saw.”

“Blue eyes?” They asked curiously. How strange. In all their travels, they’d never come upon anyone with such eyes, other than the usual brown. Was it possible this girl came from overseas?

Ψ

After knocking softly on the outside door of the hut, Itsuko stepped inside, taking in the poorly furnished living quarters of the family. As she looked around, her eyes widened at the side of a Kamado Stove on the far-right side of the hut, it’s exterior greatly resembling that of their own back in their village. The last she visited, the family did not have one, but besides that, it was a great investment made.

“Oh, hello!” Came an older woman’s voice from the other side of the hut. “I didn’t realize we had a visitor,” She exclaimed, sliding the shoji screen door shut behind her as she approached the young woman. “Please come inside. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you,” Itsuko replied, moving further within before looking around the room curiously once more. “Is your husband not here?”

“I’m afraid he’s out in the fields working. But I shall fetch him. I presume you’re here for pick up?”

She nodded. “Yes. My girls and I have just arrived and this will be our last stop before we return back to our village. We’ve got a supply of meat in our cart prepared for you and your family.”

Smiling at this, the woman nodded. “I see. It will only be a moment, but I will fetch my husband. Please, make yourself at home.”

Itsuko shook her head, her smile remaining. “It’s quite alright. I’ll come with you. I’ve been sitting in the cart the remainder of the day and I could stretch my legs a little.”

Understanding, the woman beckoned her after. Exiting the hut, their feet guided them across the path and past Itsuko’s companions, who were caught up in conversation with Kintaro, completely oblivious. As they pressed further, the fields largely coming into view, they found the husband entirely shirtless within the fields, hunched over on one of his shovels before turning at their approach.

It took him a moment to recognize Itsuko, as he received a dry piece of cloth from his wife and wiped the sweat from his face. Sweat dripped from his head and back, his skin somewhat bright red from the intense exposure outside. After drying his face, he smiled at the young girl. “I didn’t expect your arrival for a few more days. I reckon you’re here for the goods?”

Itsuko nodded. “Yes. We’ve made good timing and this is our last stop for the day,” Came her reply. “I hope we haven’t arrived at a terrible time?”

“Not at all,” He exclaimed, handing off his shovel to another man in the fields before leading her
back towards the huts. “Come with me. I’ve stored everything in the shed behind our hut.”

Distancing themselves from the fields, Itsuko followed the older man and his wife back towards the huts, and along the way, she paused briefly, her eyes turning towards her two female companions near the road. “Hey slackers, we have a cart to unload. Move along.”

Jumping at her voice, Rui and Chiyoko nodded, waving to the child before quickly running towards the cart, hefting large bundles of supplies in their arms before following after their leader. They rounded the hut, following the couple as the older man unlocked a somewhat large building, before sliding open the doors.

As they waited for the older man to go inside, they watched as he pulled out five large bundles and one large crate from the shed, handing half of the assortment to Itsuko before reaching out for the bundles of meat from the two girls appreciatively. Once the items were secured within and away from the smoldering heat shining down upon them, he secured the shed once more, locking it before following the girls around the other side of the hut and towards their cart.

While Rui and Chiyoko placed their bundles into the back of the cart, along with other necessities they traded with other villagers during the course of their two-week journey, Itsuko bowed respectively to the older couple and their son, Kintaro. “We would like to thank you for trading with us.”

“Not at all,” The father replied, smiling merrily at the young woman, as her two companions bowed beside her. “Our voyage to Edo Village has certainly been worth it, especially for our village. You’ve supplied us with enough meat to last us for weeks, not to mention the amount of leather and goods you’ve given to us before.”

“It was nothing, really,” Itsuko replied smiling.

These three girls often traded with villages near their home within the province, traveling the lands southeast, southwest and northwest. Since Edo Village was closest to Hitomi Village, it’s distance much farther than the young girls’ village, it made sense to trade with Hitomi Village. This family in particular, they met with the following year, both have helped each other out, and in return, both villages have prospered from the trades. Because Edo Village was well beyond their own territory, having only visited a couple times in the past, Hitomi Village made up the lost time for them, using their money they offered to buy the necessary equipment and items needed back home, in return for savory meat and any other essentials the village might need.

Satisfied with their newly acquired items, Itsuko bowed once more appreciatively towards the family before handing them a sack filled with silver and a small piece of parchment with many letters scribbled within; it was a list for the items needed next time when they made their travels, and the money which the family would use to purchase said items from Edo Village. “I threw in a little extra silver for you and your village. Use it to buy as much rice as you like.”

Smiles graced their faces and they bowed to the young girls. “Your generosity is too much. Thank you!”

“Our Lord is very appreciative of your services. We hope we can continue to rely on you in the future,” Itsuko replied. “Tell me what you will need in three months’ time, and we will do our best to meet your needs,” She asked, pulling out a small tome from her kosode pocket before removing a small container filled with an ink and brush from her necklace.

After writing down a small list of necessities needed for their village, which wasn’t too much, Itsuko decided to throw in meat at the bottom of the parchment. Pleased with everything, she
smiled at the family, bowing once more and returned to the driver’s seat of the cart, her two companions quickly jumping into the back. With everything ready and prepared to make the voyage back home, they waved to the family, urging their horse forward and out of the village.

ψ

A shrilling bleat escaped Clover, it’s entire form lying upon the grassy terrain before Kagome and Shippo. Its gray fur was matted against its skin, the harsh rays of the sun shining down upon it as it laid beneath the shade of a tree. Its pink tongue stuck out from its mouth, its body heaving as it struggled for breath.

Kagome frowned at the poor creature, sweat perspiring against her brow and cheeks as she stood within the clearing near the road. “I feel your pain, Clover. It’s way too hot…” She felt the top of her head burning, her cheeks likely reddened from the exposure, and she couldn’t help but saunter towards the shade of one of the trees near Clover. Seating herself against the trunk of the tree, the leaves sheltering her from the blinding sun, she cradled Shippo against her, his face contorted with uneasiness.

Despite only traveling for an hour and a half, they had no other choice but to stop and rest, their supply of water suddenly low. Since they hadn’t crossed any streams, or any other travelers on the road, Kagome and Shippo took shelter beneath the trees while Yuuta searched the terrain and woods for any signs of water. So far, he’d been absent for well over forty minutes.

“It’s too hot…” Kagome voiced, wiping her head free of sweat.

If only she’d had the common sense to pack sunscreen or at least a hat or pair of sunglasses. Although they’d only just left Hitomi Village a short while ago that afternoon, she was exhausted, thirsty and overall fed up with the unbearable heat. She half wanted the clouds to block the sun and pour an onslaught of cold rain upon them, but judging by the weather, it likely wouldn’t rain today.

“So tired…” Noticing strange hexagonal shapes appearing in her vision, the outer brims of her vision darkening slowly, she realized she was on the verge of passing out. Where was Yuuta? Did he find any lakes or streams yet?

ψ

Chiyoko sorted through the bundles in the cart, opening a few of them briefly as she surveyed the quality of their trades. There was cloth, materials needed for their weapons and armor, leather and there were also bundles filled with seeds and ingredients needed for salves, potions and medicines. A particular crate caught her eye, but before she could open it and inspect its wares, Itsuko, who had noticed her curiosity towards their goods, snapped back in warning.

“Don’t open all of those. I had the family order us a great deal of nitrate powder. The last thing we need is a fatal accident on this journey,” She warned, watching as Chiyoko quickly closed the lid, her eyes wide with worry before pushing it back against the water barrel beside her.

“So, what did the family request for next time?” Chiyoko asked, leaning her back against the cart as it continued further down the road North.

Itsuko removed the parchment from her kosode and briefly glanced over it, her free hand holding onto the reins. “Nothing really outstanding, besides seeds and cloth. I’ll throw in more meat for them, since it’s rather easy for us to attain.”

Rui was leaned up against the rails of the cart, her arms hanging off the sides as she groaned. “I
can’t wait to get back. I’m looking forward to taking a dip in the stream…”

Chiyoko nodded from beside her, straightening her straw hat over her head. “I just want to lay down in my own futon. We’ve been traveling for two weeks, going from village to village trading…”

Pulling away from the railing and leaning her back against the cart, Rui pulled out her Uchiwa and fanned herself. “That sounds nice too…”

“I’m glad we made this deal with the villagers of Hitomi Village. Just think, now we don’t have to make the distance to Edo,” Itsuko replied from the front of the cart, hoping to ease her companions in the back. “We should be thankful our Lord has thought of this idea. It’s cut off three days of time for all of us.”

Chiyoko agreed. “Yeah. We’ve supplied ourselves with over hundreds of goods. I’m sure our village will be more than satisfied. We’re doing so well as it is, I couldn’t imagine it getting any better.”

Rui couldn’t help but glance at Itsuko before leaning into Chiyoko beside her. “I bet she’s disappointed we won’t be going to Edo Village anymore…”

“What do you mean?” Chiyoko softly asked.

Rui smirked. “If I remember correctly, that soldier took a liking to her during our last visit,” She explained, recalling their visit to the prosperous village many months back.

Understanding crossed her face, and as she and Rui looked back at Itsuko in the driver’s seat, they couldn’t help but giggle at the thought. As much as Itsuko revealed an expressionless side when it came to her emotions, she was after all, a hopeless romantic. “Oh, I remember now. It was love at first sight, wasn’t it?”

“I wonder if she’s still sending letters to him,” Rui asked, falling into a fit of giggles.

Hearing their muffled voices and laughter behind her, Itsuko glanced back curiously. “What are you two whispering about?”

“Nothing!” Came their reply, followed after by another fit of giggling.

Eyeing them suspiciously, she shrugged, turning back toward the road in front of them. Unexpectedly, the wheel of their cart hit a small hole in the road, jostling the cart suddenly and causing the two girls in the back to shriek in surprise. “Oh, that was a big one…” She laughed, sweat dropping suddenly as she felt the glares of her companions in the back.

“Watch where you’re driving, Itsuko!” Rui complained, the unexpected bumps churning her stomach.

“Sorry about that.”

Both Rui and Chiyoko moved away from each other in the cart, their backs pressed against the opposite rails as they slouched down, both waving the straw fans against them in hopes of acquiring a flow of cool wind; unfortunately, only hot air greeted them.

“I don’t know how much longer I can take being in this heat!”

Chiyoko only blinked at Rui across from her, the young girl’s cheeks as red as a cherry tomato; she
was sure her face look similar as well. “Well we did volunteer for this job.”

Rui frowned. “Tell me again why we did that?”

“We volunteered so that we could show that we can take up more responsibility and receive recognition for our hard effort,” came Itsuko’s reply. “This was your idea Rui, so I don’t want to hear your complaints.”

“And how has that been holding up for us?” Rui asked, lowering her uchiwa upon her lap. “We’ve been doing this for months, and we still haven’t gotten promoted.”

Despite her complaints, they realized their friend wasn’t wrong in her thinking. Despite leaving at first night every morning and traveling the lands of the Province, they had yet to receive any summons to their Lord, despite the occasional thank you here and there.

“We’re not good enough…” Rui sighed.

“Don’t start thinking that way,” Itsuko replied, looking back once more. “We work just as hard as everyone else does. The Lord appreciates all that we do, and we help the village more than you think. Even the smallest help can really impact us.”

Picking up her uchiwa once more, Rui waved it mercilessly in front of her face, and sadly, only received hot air against her face. “Well this fan isn’t helping me in the slightest!”

Itsuko and Chiyoko only laughed at their youngest companion.

“Well, we should be fortunate that the heat is only coming down on us on our way home and not throughout our travels,” Chiyoko replied.

“We’re half a day away from our village. It won’t be long before we cross the mountains just ahead,” Itsuko replied, pointing North West of the road. “Could you imagine sitting in the back of this wagon, in this heat, every single day?”

Rui shuddered at the thought. The last thing she wanted was for her ivory skin to roast under the harsh rays. As she inspected her arms and legs carefully, she couldn’t help but notice a slight redness appear upon them. “Where’s the blankets? We’re going to need them…”

“If you pull out the blanket, you’ll only make yourself more uncomfortable,” Chiyoko exclaimed with a shake of her head.

Rui sighed. “The moment we come across a stream, we have to at least take a dip. My skin can’t handle any more of this.”

As Itsuko held onto the reins, she pulled on the ropes, guiding the horse off the road and North West towards the mountains ahead. Since there was a likely stream in this direction, not to mention a secret route which led through a valley through the mountains, it was the quickest path back to their village.

Leading the cart further across the terrain, her companions falling into comfortable conversation behind her, Itsuko couldn’t help but turn her head suddenly, a strange noise filling her ears. What was that? It sounded close. She suddenly pulled on the reins, causing the cart to jostle once more, much to her friends’ confusion.

“Now what?” Rui complained, glancing back at Itsuko in confusion. “Why did we stop?”
Itsuko held a hand up, her ears listening in to the distinct sounds of something crying nearby. “Do you hear that?”

They blinked, turning their heads curiously at their surroundings. After a moment of silence, they heard the noise Itsuko referred to. It didn’t sound like a demon, or that of an animal. In fact, it sounded human, surprisingly.

“It sounds like a baby,” Came Chiyoko’s reply.

“All the way out here?” Rui asked worryingly. “There’s no other villages around…”

Itsuko narrowed her gaze, her eyes traveling back towards the roads they just turned off. “It sounds like it coming down the path over there.” Without another word, she turned the horse back onto the path, following the noise until they arrived upon an open area where numerous trees and a large forest greeted them.

Rui and Chiyoko peered out from the wagon, standing on its jostling platform as they searched the surroundings. If there was a baby nearby, then there must have been others as well. “I don’t see anything.”

“It’s close,” Itsuko explained, urging the horse further down the road. After following the path North, some short ways, they suddenly pulled the horse to a complete stop, their gazes sighting someone just ahead. “Look!”

Rui squinted, noticing the faint outline of a woman seated just beneath a tree, the sounds of wailing from a child much louder than before. “I see her. Do you think she’s okay? She’s not moving…”

Realizing something was wrong, Itsuko leaped from the cart, the other two girls quickly following behind before approaching the woman. Bending down to inspect her for injuries, they realized she was unharmed, her baby wrapped in a cloth carrier against her crying incessantly. “She’s fainted!”

Rui gasped, and knelt beside her, touching her forehead worryingly. “What is she doing all the way out here and by herself?” It was dangerous enough traveling alone, but with a baby? It was almost unheard of.

Itsuko didn’t know the reason, but right now, this woman’s life was in danger. Fortunately, she was still breathing, but any longer out in this heat, she was sure the affects would suffocate her child and their lives would fall in danger. “Grab the water barrel from the back of the cart quickly!” She ordered.

Doing as they were instructed, the girls leaped to their feet and ran towards the cart, hefting the barrel with both their strengths combined before returning to the fainted woman’s side. Placing it down carefully, Rui pulled open the wooden lid, before dipping a small wooden bowl within.

Noticing a furry animal laying down near them, its tongue sticking out and its body entirely matted against its skin, Chiyoko called out to the girls. “Looks like this goat isn’t going to make it…”

“Forget the goat. This is more important,” Rui exclaimed, holding the bowl up to the young woman’s mouth in hopes the contents of the water would slip past her lips.

Yet as they hoped to arouse the young girl, Itsuko trying her best to untie the baby from the cloth carrier, the sudden sounds of grass crunching beneath boots was immediately heard. All at once, they reached for their blades, jumping to their feet before turning with their blades pointed at a suspicious individual, his entire countenance looming dangerously close to them, resembling nothing more than a bandit.
“Stay where you are,” Yuuta threatened, his sword drawn and his eyes glowering at the three suspicious females.
Revelation

Chapter Summary

Yuuta seems convinced these girls are suspicious, but when they offer to help them on their travels, he decides Kagome’s health is more important. Yet, no sooner after their introductions, there is a sense of deceit in the air and the girls becomes distrusting of Kagome and Yuuta.

Somehow, this suspicious individual managed to sneak up behind them without their noticing, and as they held their ground, their blades held up and prepared to strike, they couldn’t help but notice how barbaric his outer appearance seemed. Was he a bandit?

Despite his shoulder-length raven hair and scruffy chin, there were numerous scars across his sleeveless arms, scars which told them he often in battled. As they looked into his tanned complexion, they noticed his left eye was more faded than his right, a long-jagged scar traced from his eyebrow to his upper cheek; he was half blind it seemed, but he still looked intimidating.

“Who are you?!” Itsuko inquired. “Are you a bandit?”

Yuuta scoffed, eyeing the three suspiciously. “Regardless or not, I could be asking you three the same. Who are you?” Noticing a familiar woman seated behind the three girls, her entire body slumped against the tree, and Shippo crying against her chest, Yuuta’s eyes widened. “Kagome?!”

At his voice, they flinched.

“What the hell did you do to her?!”

Rui was flabbergasted by his remark. “What? We didn’t do anything!”

Realizing this man must have known the woman behind them, Itsuko held up a hand and moved away, motioning for the girls to do the same. It seemed there was a bit of misunderstanding between them, and as she and her girls watched this man kneel before the unconscious girl, they realized he wasn’t a threat after all. “You know this woman?” She asked, curious of their relationship.

As his calloused hands gently caressed her cheeks, smoothing back her raven bangs from her eyes, he stared distrustfully at the girls. “She’s my wife.”

A collection of gasps resounded at his remark, the girls looking between themselves in slight confusion and embarrassment. They hadn’t realized this man and woman were together, then again, it did seem strange finding her by herself with her baby.

“Who are you?” He questioned, eyeing their strange attire in quiet scrutiny. They were not dressed like normal civilians, and if he had to guess, their clothes were quite similar to that of men. Not only that, but they wielded blades and carried themselves less modestly than others. How strange.

Despite his confusion, Itsuko knelt down and reached into the barrel, lowering a small wooden bowl they’d dropped previously from his unexpected surprise within. “We’re simply travelers, no one of importance,” She explained, bringing the bowl up to the young woman’s mouth.
Grasping her wrist, he stopped her efforts to feed Kagome before taking it from her hand and lifting it to his nose. It didn’t smell strange, and taking a sip of it, he realized it was water. Ignoring the other two girls’ rueful stares, he held the bowl up to Kagome’s mouth, carefully allowing the cold liquid to slip past her lips.

Dipping a rag into the water, Itsuko held it out for Yuuta, and he took it without a word, pressing the rag against Kagome’s forehead and cheeks. “We were passing by when we heard your child wailing.”

Chiyoko nodded before approaching the goat nearby, a second bowl of water held in her hands as she carefully fed the creature. To her relief, the goat’s head perked up, and it lapped at the water hungrily. “I think the goat will live. It was really thirsty.”

Itsuko shook her head. “The goat is the least of our concerns…” She sweat dropped.

Unwrapping Shippo from Kagome’s carrier against her chest, but careful not to reveal his demon characteristics, Yuuta held the child close to him, wrapping the remainder of the light blue material around the child. When he felt these girls weren’t a threat and were perhaps simply travelers, he allowed Itsuko and Rui to pat Kagome down with damp rags while he soothed Shippo’s cries.

Feeling something cool pressed against her skin, the feeling of someone touching her and running water around her face and arms, Kagome awoke. Her long lashes fluttered open slowly, her blue eyes staring bewildered at the women tending to her. “Who…”

Realizing she was awake, Yuuta breathed a sigh of relief, and placed a gentle hand upon her shoulder. “Are you alright?”

Kagome nodded, noticing Yuuta immediately beside her. Did she pass out? For how long? Lifting herself up into a better seated position, she looked at the three girls before her, their expressions curious and in awe as they stared back. Who were these girls?

“Blue eyes…” Itsuko fell in wonder at the mesmerizing sight.

Chiyoko and Rue nodded. Never in their life had they ever seen a person with such eyes. They were truly as blue as the sky above them. Remembering their conversation, a short while ago with Kintaro, they suddenly pieced it all together. “Wait, are you Kagome?” They asked in unison, stirring confusion between both Yuuta and Kagome.

The woman nodded, canting her head confusedly between the girls. Who were these girls? How did they know her name? “Do I know you?”

Rui shook her head, sweat dropping suddenly. “Were you the folks who were in Hitomi Village earlier today?”

Kagome nodded. “Yes, but how…”

Chiyoko smiled. “We thought so. Kintaro mentioned you. He said you had eyes the same color as the sky. You and your husband must have stayed the night in the village, I take it?”

Yuuta frowned, his gaze hardening at the girls. “Do you live in Hitomi Village?”

Rui shook her head at this. “Actually, we passed through the village a bit ago and dropped by to trade some materials to the family.”

Traders? Yuuta had never heard of such a thing among women. He thought there was something
different about them, but it still didn’t quite add up. Where did these three come from and where was their village located? Despite wanting to ask them, he turned his attention towards Kagome, whose complexion seemed a bit better now that she was awake. “You should drink a bit more and regain your strength.”

While Chiyoko tended to the goat, who was already on her second bowl of water, lapping it up as if it was the only thing she’d drunk all day, Itsuko offered another bowl of water to Kagome, and she drank it slowly, smiling appreciatively at the girls.

“Thank you,” She replied, before turning towards Shippo who had finally calmed down a bit, his green eyes staring curiously at her and the girls. “Is he alright?”

Yuuta nodded, handing the child to her, watching as Kagome cuddled the baby against her chest. Satisfied she was alright, he looked appreciatively at he girls. “You have our thanks. We ran out of water on our travels and I was searching for a stream for close to an hour but I didn’t find anything.”

“You were lucky we were passing through when we did,” Itsuko replied, regaining her standing before brushing her knees free of dirt. “Though, I am quite curious; why are the two of you traveling and so far?”

“We’re headed North West,” Came Yuuta’s reply.

“I see.” So, they were headed in the same general direction as them? How interesting. Itsuko smiled at this, looking back briefly at their wagon before turning back to Yuuta and Kagome. “Well, you’re both in luck. We’re actually headed in the same direction. Why don’t we give you a lift?”

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“Really?” Kagome asked, her eyes widening at the invitation. “We wouldn’t want to be any trouble…”

Rui waved it off. “It won’t be any trouble. There’s plenty of room in the back. Leaving you three here wouldn’t settle right with us, and with the weather being as it is, it’s not safe for your child either.”

Realizing they were right, Kagome turned to Yuuta. “Is it alright?” As much as she didn’t want to admit it, she was exhausted, her feet killing her, and she really didn’t want to continue walking in this heat for the remainder of the day.

He considered it, eyeing the wagon which was slightly filled with barrels, crates and other bundles, which he assumed were related to the women’s trading. With a nod, he allowed it, helping Kagome to her feet. “We would like that. Thank you.”

Ψ

After agreeing to travel with the three young women, whose names they learned were Itsuko, Rui and Chiyoko, Yuuta and Kagome took their respective places in the wagon. Yuuta sat in the back of the wagon, his back pressed up against the rails with Rui and Chiyoko on either side of him. Kagome, on the other hand, was offered a seat beside Itsuko in the front of the wagon, where the constant jostling wouldn’t disturb her or her child, and with the sun blazing down upon them, Itsuko offered her straw hat to shield the harsh rays.

“It’s a good thing we came along when we did,” Rue commented, smiling elatedly at the couple. “If we hadn’t heard the baby crying, we would have passed you up.”
Looking down at her child nestled against her chest, Kagome frowned. “I can’t believe I passed out. Who knows how long Shippo has been crying…” She lamented, caressing his reddened cheeks softly. Despite the weather, and the jostling of the cart, the child had once again fallen asleep, possibly tired out from his crying earlier.

Noticing the raven-haired girl’s distraught countenance, Itsuko forced a smile. “Hey, it’s okay. It could have happened to any of us in this heat. If you think about it, your son actually saved you.”

“Really?” Surprised by her words, Kagome caught her smile.

Itsuko nodded. “Yeah. We really would have passed you up if we hadn’t heard him. So, you got lucky.”

Recalling a conversation, she shared briefly with Kaede, after bringing Shippo into the village, the older woman revealed that demons had the uncanny ability to sense when another was in distress. ‘I guess what Lady Kaede said was true. With the two of us growing closer, he must have sensed something was wrong when I passed out. His … instincts must have kicked in.’

Even so, somehow, she felt it was still a bit too early for the baby’s instincts to appear, but then again, maybe it was different for his species; after all, Shippo wasn’t human. Despite this, Kagome simply smiled and placed a soft kiss upon his forehead. “Mommy’s little hero.”

Itsuko smiled at this, noticing the sleeping child smile in its slumber, quite possibly feeling it’s mother’s love emitted from her sweet kiss. How sweet; it was adorable, their connection as son and mother, something she didn’t often see among many villagers.

While Kagome and Itsuko fell into conversation in the front of the wagon, Rui and Chiyoko couldn’t help but chatter up Yuuta, their curious attention fixated upon the bandit.

“You were really brave back there,” Chiyoko explained with a small smile. “You just came out of nowhere. Not going to lie, but you gave us quite the scare.”

Rui nodded, eyeing the older man closely, his robust figure barely slipping past her close scrutiny. “We weren’t sure if you were a bandit, but looking at you and your wife, it’s quite unlikely.”

“We’re sorry for assuming that,” Chiyoko apologized, sweat dropping suddenly.

Yuuta arched a brow, his arms crossed at his chest as he eyed the two girls on either side of him. Despite their first impression, he couldn’t help but scrutinize their appearance as well. Earlier, they admitted they were simple travelers who traded with villages but judging by their attire and the way in which they handled themselves to surprise attacks, not to mention their blades strapped at their waists, there was more to them than they let on. These girls were not ordinary by any means. “Do I really have the appearance of a bandit?” At their nods, he sweat dropped.

“You have all those scars on your arms and the one over your eye,” Rui commented, pointing with curious interest. Looking closer, she noticed he was blind in one eye, but she didn’t bother asking how that happened. “They must have really hurt.”

“How did you get those scars? Were you in a war? Did you fight against demons?” Chiyoko inquired, leaning in closer to him.

Yuuta further sweat dropped. Somehow, he didn’t know how to answer without revealing too much of himself. Were he to admit he was indeed a bandit, he was sure to bring trouble upon himself and to Kagome. “These scars aren’t as great as you might think. I’ve been in a few battles in my
lifetime, a few farming accidents, a recent scuffle with a wolf and some rather unpleasant people.”

“You fought a wolf?!” They exclaimed in surprise, their eyes as wide as saucers.

Itsuko and Kagome heard this, both looking back in confusion at the girls and Yuuta; it seemed they were asking about himself and at the mentioning of wolf, Kagome couldn’t help but remember the troubles the village faced when trying to find enough meat to feed everyone.

“With your bare hands?” Rue asked, staring at his hands intently. How was that even possible? How big was the wolf?

“It must have made a really nice pelt!” Chiyoko exclaimed, clasping her hands with admiration sparkling in her eyes. Such a strong man managed to tussle and overwhelm a wolf! Certainly, he was admired within his village!

He mused. “It probably would have. I never thought much on that idea. We skinned the wolf and…” Yuuta paused and glanced over his shoulder, catching Kagome’s curious stare from the front seat behind him. “Kagome turned it into a very interesting stew.”

The blinked. “Wolf stew?”

Itsuko couldn’t help but make a face at this, her nose scrunched up in slight displeasure. Wolf stew? “I’ve never had that before. Wouldn’t it taste mangey?”

Yuuta shook his head. “She is very good at cooking. She managed to rid the smell and taste from the meat entirely and it became a delectable meal for the entire village. There was more than enough meat to go around.”

“You really liked it that much?” Kagome beamed, smiling at this revelation. “I know the boys enjoyed it, but I didn’t know you enjoyed it so much.”

Despite his indifferent attitude at times and inability to express his emotions, he truly enjoyed her cooking; it was something fresh and appetizing, and he remembered the stew’s flavor brimming with an interesting and beefy flavor. “It was good.”

Kagome’s cheeks warmed at his compliment. While he never admitted to liking much of anything, it was nice to now he enjoyed her cooking. If there was one thing she was proud of, it was her mother’s wonderful lessons in the kitchen and her home economics class in school.

Chiyoko mused, a finger pressed upon her bottom lip. Wolf stew. Somehow, that didn’t sound too bad. “I want to try that. If you say it’s as good as it is, it must be pretty tasty.”

A devilish smirk crossed Rui’s face, and she leaned closer to Yuuta, touching his arm softly, surprising Yuuta. “Maybe you can catch us a wolf sometime, Yuuta?”

Chiyoko also moved closer, nodding her head eagerly at the idea. “We’re used to eating deer and bear meat, but never wolf. There’s a large pack of demons which inhabit the lands West of our village, so surely we might be able to hunt a few down.”

Baffled by their sudden touch upon his arms, he eyed the girls, watching them carefully. There was certain admiration in their gazes, their eyes suddenly traveling his body in curious wonder. Somehow, he felt uncomfortable, reading the situation easily enough. They were interested in him and in a romantic sense.

“Wow, you’re so strong,” Rui commented, noticing his muscles and veins in his arms. “What do
you do to stay so fit?” She asked, before looking down at the sword strapped to his waist. “Are you a Ronin?”

“Carpentry,” he answered. As of late, he’d been helping the village cut down trees in order to erect huts for them, which he was sure Kosuke was handling with the other men of the village back home. “I also do a bit of hunting, but nothing too strenuous…”

“Nothing too strenuous? If you can tussle with a wolf, then how is that not strenuous. You said it was enough meat to feed your village. It must have been a big wolf,” Rui replied, not believing his words for a second.

Chiyoko’s eyes brightened. “If you say you are a carpenter, then you must do a lot of traveling. Surely you must get paid a lot for your hard work.”

“Not necessarily. I only recently took up carpentry, and it’s not something I focus much of my time on,” He bluntly admitted, feeling a shiver creep up his back as Rui’s hand fell upon his upper thigh.

“Not only are you strong, but you are also humble. We’re used to men boasting of their talents, but you certainly are different. You’re also pretty quiet,” Rui replied, her eyes falling onto his chest, her hand lifting suddenly to touch the spot. “Your chest is so hard. I’m not going to lie, but you must have left a lot of girls crying back in your village,” She joked.

“If only I had a husband like that,” Chiyoko dreamily sighed.

Seeing the entire interaction between the girls and Yuuta, Kagome couldn’t help but sweat drop, her eyebrow twitching suddenly in irritation. What the… They were practically throwing themselves onto him, and why were they touching him like that? Somehow, they reminded her of her three friends back home in the future, always ogling the popular boys when they were in school.

The two girls giggled suddenly, and noticing Rui’s arm intertwined around Yuuta’s, the other girl leaning in too close for her liking, Kagome coughed. At the noise, the girls suddenly flinched and quickly separated from him, both completely mortified by their indecent actions; they’d forgotten he was married for a brief moment.

Itsuko held back a smile. “Please, do not mind them. They were completely innocent.”

Kagome looked at Itsuko for a moment, her face contorted into a displeased expression. “But their hands weren’t…” Why was she irritated all of a sudden? It wasn’t like she liked Yuuta, at least, not in a romantic sense. Maybe it was because they were playing the role of a married couple; somehow, she figured this was the possibility, after all, they were quite foolish to act in such a way, especially considering the situation.

Relieved they pulled away from him, Yuuta relaxed against the wagon, his eyes staring elsewhere besides the two girls who had fallen into silence. Obviously, judging by their expressions, they seemed embarrassed, doing their best to avoid eye contact with him and Kagome. As he sneaked a glance over his shoulder, he couldn’t help but notice Kagome glaring at the girls, a fierce fire burning in her gaze.

Feeling the awkward tension surrounding everyone, Itsuko suddenly turned to Kagome, smiling as she sweat dropped. “So, you and your husband, how did you meet?”

Besides being genuinely afraid of Kagome’s wrath, Rui and Chiyoko looked up at this, also curious of the two’s relationship and how they managed to get together and raise their child. Yuuta
on the other hand, remained passive during the trip, his eyes not once straying from the conversation.

‘Since we’re playing the role of a married couple, I might as well play along,’ She thought, musing slightly. Somehow, this little lie was kind of fun. “Well,” Kagome began, glancing back at Yuuta briefly. “To be honest, our first meeting wasn’t romantic at all. My husband,” Kagome’s eyes shifted towards the two girls in the back, causing them to gulp uncomfortably from her intimidating stare. “was actually a brute. He was demanding and entirely full of himself. He was like woman this and woman that when I first met him!”

Yuuta met her stare, his brow arched a bit, but he otherwise remained silent as he listened.

Kagome continued. “He literally barged through our village, snatched me up and threw me over his horse and stole me away, claiming me as his prize!”

The girls gasped at this revelation. The Yuuta they briefly acquainted themselves with was actually that kind of person? He didn’t display such dominance and brutality. He seemed so quiet and indifferent, then again, he did seem pretty strong.

Itsuko couldn’t help but squint her eyes suspiciously, but hearing Kagome laugh softly, her countenance softened. “if you ask me, it sounds like you were kidnapped.”

Yuuta suddenly interrupted. “Woman, what are you talking about?” Was she actually going to reveal his and his men’s escapade through the village? It was the same day, a month back when he burned the village and trampled their crops, instructing the men to take all the young women.

Kagome pointed at him. “See? He still calls me that sometimes. But, I’ll admit, he’s getting better at calling me by my name. Isn’t that right, sweetie?” She teased Yuuta, but he only grunted and turned away from her disinterestedly.

While the other girls nodded at this, trying to imagine the situation realistically, Itsuko finally smiled. “How long have the two of you been married?”

“About a year,” Kagome lied.

Yuuta scoffed. The girl wasn’t even denying any of it, furthering the lie every minute at a time. It was strange, how easily she managed to fit into the role, despite it’s awkwardness.

“Shippo has brought nothing but happiness to our village, ever since he was born,” Kagome softly replied, watching her child sleep peacefully in her arms.

Satisfied in learning their relationship and getting to know them as acquaintances, Itsuko guided the horse further off the path, the sight of the mountains drawing closer. “So, where about North West are you headed?”

“We’re headed towards the mountains to the Demon Slayer Village,” Yuuta admitted, removing his map from his shirt pocket and opening it. As he looked onto the parchment, he couldn’t tell exactly where the village was located, but one thing was certain, Kaede instructed them that the only way to reach their destination was to cross through the mountainous territory.

Silence greeted Kagome and Yuuta after, neither uttering a word as their eyes widened with sudden suspicion. Demon Slayer Village? How did they know about that? Why were they headed there? And most importantly, who exactly were these people? The exchange of looks between Chiyoko and Rui didn’t go unnoticed to Yuuta.
Itsuko’s eyes narrowed suddenly but she remained silently indifferent to the response. “The Demon Slayer Village? Why on earth would you want to go there?”

Oblivious to the quiet stares, Kagome simply smiled, her eyes looking out across the scenery with interest. “Oh, well we have business there.”

Rui frowned, shifting her gaze away from Chiyoko towards the woman seated in the passenger seat of the wagon. “Business?”

“Is there something wrong with that?” Yuuta asked, eyeing the short haired woman curiously. When he noticed her flinch, his eyes narrowed. ‘They’re hiding something from us…’

Another exchange of stares crossed Chiyoko and Rui, the girls looking worryingly and suspiciously towards Itsuko, but they couldn’t seem to meet her gaze at all.

Itsuko’s countenance stiffened, her eyes shifting towards Kagome carefully, eyeing her from the head down. “Not only is it strange you are making the trip there, but to say you have business with them … is quite strange,” She replied without hesitation.

“Strange?” Kagome and Yuuta simultaneously asked.

Rui’s face darkened, her eyes blazing into Yuuta’s suddenly, and he caught her stare curiously. “Just how much do you know about the Demon Slayers?”

Chiyoko nodded. “Judging by the looks of you, and I’m not trying to be rude, but you seem like ordinary people. How do you know about them in the first place?”

Kagome blinked. What? Why was there suddenly hostility in their voices, and why was there an odd silence falling between them at each question? Somehow, it seemed the mere mentioning of the Demon Slayers upset them. “Our village priestess mentioned them…” She replied somewhat hesitantly.

“Your priestess?” Itsuko inquired disbelievingly, meeting Kagome’s wide-eyed stare. “You wouldn’t happen to be acquainted with…” She trailed off, her dark eyes trailing Kagome’s form once more, as if trying to find some kind of confirmation for her thoughts, but there was nothing there.

“Acquainted with who?” She asked, canting her head to the side.

Chiyoko suddenly scooted away from Yuuta, moving her body closer to Rui before leaning into her, her words barely above a whisper. “I don’t think they know who they are…” She replied before meeting Yuuta’s suspicious stare. “Don’t worry about it. We were just a bit concerned is all. Sorry if we scared you.”

“And what would you be concerned about?” Yuuta asked. Why did the mere mentioning of traveling to the Demon Village emit such an air of hostility towards them?

They didn’t answer right away.

Kagome only nodded slowly. She was so confused. “It’s alright. We’re headed there because our village has recently suffered a couple attacks and our food supply has run very low,” She admitted, trying to turn the situation around. “Our priestess is friends with the leader residing in the village, so we were urged to deliver a message to him of our concerns, that’s all.”

“Your priestess?” Itsuko asked.
Kagome nodded. “Yes. High Priestess Kaede.”

Rui and Chiyoko shared a confused glance. A High Priestess? How odd. But even so, why would a High Priestess of a poor village seek out the Demon Slayers?

“So, your High Priestess sent you and your husband on such a dangerous journey, and with your child no less?” Itsuko inquired, arching a delicate brow. Honestly, it seemed rather farfetched. Why send a family when they could send one person? “Wouldn’t it have been wiser for your priestess to go herself? Or perhaps your husband? Climbing those mountains will be no easy feat…”

Kagome mused. Now that she thought about it, she couldn’t help but agree with her. Even after receiving the order from Kaede, Kagome still thought it was strange she had to embark on this journey, but since it involved herself and Shippo, she sort of understood. From another person’s perspective, it must have seemed foolish, and she didn’t blame Itsuko’s confusion. “Well it’s actually a long story, but to make it short, the letter entails all of the hardships our village has endured, and it also concerns myself. I was asked to personally make the trip and meet with them,” Kagome sweat dropped. “Besides that, our priestess is very old and she doesn’t have the strength these days to make the journey.”

Itsuko nodded. Her story started to make sense. So, their elderly priestess wanted the girl to make the journey, and with her husband no less to meet with the Demon Slayers and perhaps request help. Still, why bring the baby? “I see…”

After remaining quiet all this time, Yuuta suddenly spoke up, his curiosity regarding these three girls suddenly getting the best of him. “You seem to know quite a lot about the Demon Slayers from our understanding. Have you been acquainted with them before?” He asked.

Chiyoko sweat dropped and quickly nodded. “Oh … well once we have. It was a terrifying experience…” She stressed the word terrifying as she wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly feeling a chill pass through her.

Kagome blinked at this and turned halfway in her seat to look at the girl. “Terrifying?” From what she heard from Kaede, the older woman never portrayed them as such.

Rui nodded, her frown more apparent than before. “Yes. Just remembering the experience left my blood cold. You could say their clan runs in large groups. They possess such inhumane abilities similar to demons.”

Chiyoko agreed. “I thought for sure they would kill us during one of our many travels. You see, some time back we got held up by a large bear demon which was attacking a small family on the road. Although we carry weapons, we are not very skilled when it comes to combat; it’s more of a self-defense should we encounter bandits and such…” She explained, pointing at the swords at their hips.

“We tried to save the family, but the demon turned its sights on us. We were overwhelmed and almost lost our lives,” Rui explaining, waving her hands in the air as she demonstrated the terrifying ordeal, as if it only happened recently. “Then, out of the woods emerged a number of people cloaked in black clothing, their faces half concealed. Within moments, the bear demon was nothing but a carcass lying on the road. Our lives were spared.”

“The family who was also saved called those people Demon Slayers. And they certainly did slay the demon within a heartbeat,” Rui replied. “It happened so fast, and before we knew it, they were gone, as if they’d never appeared at all.”
Kagome marveled at the story. So, they were briefly acquainted with the clan? It was a wonder they were still alive to talk about the story. How frightening. “I’m glad you’re alright. Was that the last you saw of them?”

Rui nodded. “Yes.”

“And they seemed terrifying?” Yuuta asked.

Again, Rui nodded. “Yes. Although we do not have much information on the clan, we have heard rumors from many on the roads and villages to steer clear of the territory over the mountains just ahead,” She pointed. “The rumor is, their village lies there, guarded by fierce warriors. I’ve heard, those who have passed through their territory were never seen from again, and those who managed to venture to and back, spoke of terrors.”

Kagome gasped. Terrors?

“We were informed the clan were compassionate towards others and often aided in demon attacks,” Came Yuuta’s reply. Somehow, he wasn’t sure what to believe. Were they a good clan or a bad clan?

Kagome frowned. “Even so, they saved you and that family from the bear. So, as terrifying as they might appear, they must have compassion.” However, judging by the girls’ story, it seemed the clan was more secretive than they first imagined, and here she thought they were well known across the lands.

“Are you certain you want to climb those mountains?” Itsuko asked after a while, staring intently at the mountains just ahead. “It might be wise to turn back around and return to your village. After all, we would hate to see something bad befall to you and your husband. Once you’ve crossed through the mountains and into their territory beyond, there might not be any coming back…”

Even if the rumors were true, they traveled too far already to turn back. Kagome had to do something for the village; people were starving and without homes, and she certainly needed to ask questions concerning the Sacred Jewel within her. “We can’t do that. At all costs, we must deliver this letter. No matter if they are somewhat hostile. I’m sure they won’t turn us away.”

Surprised by her determination, Itsuko blinked at the woman. How interesting. As she guided the horse further ahead, she suddenly caught Kagome’s curious stare, and bemused, she smiled.

“Yes?”

“It’s just, I noticed something. You mentioned earlier your village was also in this direction, right?”

Itsuko shook her head. “Actually, our village is further North. Before we head towards the village, my girls and I are headed up the mountains to collect herbs for our people. You see, only a certain kind of herb grows on the mountains, one which can heal a variety of poisons.”

Kagome’s eyes widened at this. “Really? What kind of herb is that?”

“Remulia,” Itsuko answered. “It’s a rare plant which only grows on these mountains, and although we have tried growing it back home, it’s seeds do not survive. Even the most potent of poisons are easily quelled by this species of plant, and not only that, it also fetches quite the price in certain markets.”

Remulia? Yuuta never heard of such an herb, but judging by its effects, it sounded quite interesting. If such a thing truly existed, then even the nobility would be quick to ask for such. “How much
“Does the herb go for?”

Rui grinned. “Well, depending on the seller, it goes for exactly twenty mon. We’ve sold it in other provinces before, but many ask for cheaper prices. When we found out Edo Village valued the herb and were willing to pay a hefty price, we started doing business there.”

Chiyoko nodded. “But traveling out to Edo Village is too far of a distance, even if it a two-day journey to reach. Our village lies more towards the west than the North, unfortunately. So that’s why we do business with Hitomi Village, since it’s closer and they make the trip for us.”

Kagome finally understood their trading business. It made sense, and it also saved them a lot of time on their travels. “I see. What other herbs are on the mountains? And do they also sell well?”

Itsuko mused. “Yes. There is a small abundance of vegetation in the mountains, such as wild mushrooms, radishes, Aralia and many scented herbs which we also collect. But I’d say they garner roughly around three to five mon each, depending on where you sell it.”

A rush of wind swept past them, enough which caused the wrappings covering Shippo’s head to fall loose around his neck, his small fox ears twitching at the invasion. Itsuko’s eyes immediately locked with the child’s, her eyes widening at the sight of its fox appendages. A demon!

Brushing her hair out of her face and suddenly noticing the wrapping had fallen from Shippo’s head, Kagome quickly pulled it over his ears, her eyes flashing towards Itsuko, but to her relief, it seemed the woman hadn’t noticed, her eyes staring intently on the road ahead.

Itsuko’s eyes narrowed. Why did the woman have a demon child? Who exactly were these people? “We should reach the mountains close to evening…” She replied, shifting her gaze suspiciously between the child and Kagome.

With a sigh, she smiled at the child, it’s emerald green eyes staring curiously up at her; it seemed the wind had woken Shippo. Unaware of Itsuko’s suspicious stare, Kagome smiled brightly. “In that case, thank you for the ride. Traveling together like this would certainly make it easier for me and Yuuta.”

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An hour into their travels, they stopped beside a stream, both Yuuta and Kagome resting a bit before they continued on ahead. After milking Clover and feeding the milk to the distressed child, which Kagome attempted to soothe with a soft lullaby, Itsuko and the girls stuck close to the wagon, their attention focused on the road and their bundles in the back.

Rui, who was wiping the sweat from her forehead and adjusting her straw hat, suddenly noticed Itsuko’s serious expression beside her, her eyes glaring towards the young couple a short distance away. “Hey, what’s up? Are you feeling alright?”

Chiyoko who was lying within the back of the wagon on her back, her hat lying atop her face to shield the sun’s rays from view, suddenly heard Rui’s voice. Curious, she partially lowered the hat from her face, turning her body until she was lying on her side before staring at the back of Itsuko’s head as she leaned against the wagon. “What’s going on?”

Itsuko suddenly turned towards them, her eyes briefly glancing at Kagome and Yuuta. “I don’t think we should trust them. They know too much.”

Rui blinked. “They seem like an ordinary family traveling,” She explained, looking back at Yuuta and Kagome briefly. “But, I can see why you would be worried. The fact that they know about the
Demon Slayers is odd in itself. No one for miles should know of our existence.”

“No one except the Daimyo and the lords of distant provinces,” Came Chiyoko’s response.

“It’s not just that,” Itsuko replied suddenly glaring. “That’s no ordinary family. Not only is their letter suspicious, but so was the child.”

Rui gasped. “What do you mean? What’s wrong with it?”

“The child is a demon.”

Chiyoko and Rui shared a surprised stare, their eyes staring disbelieving at Itsuko. A demon? How was that possible? Why were those people traveling with a demon child? Such a thing was unheard of and morbid.

Itsuko continued. “If what they said about their priestess is true, they must plan to meet with our leader. Somehow, I doubt their honesty.” Not only had they lied about the child belonging to them, but she also doubted the sincerity within the letter they supposedly carried. What did these people really want?

Rui’s eyes widened, and she shook Itsuko’s shoulder suddenly, staring frighteningly at the couple. “What if they are spies trying to infiltrate our village?” After all, it wouldn’t be the first it’s happened.

“It’s hard to say…”

“What do we do? It might be dangerous bringing them back with us…” Rui worriedly expressed. “Itsuko?”

“We’ll keep an eye on them,” Itsuko replied, arms crossed. “One thing is certain, they won’t be passing over the mountains safely. After all, rumor has it, the Demon Slayers are a terrifying clan…”

Evening descended upon them, the sounds of crickets stridulating in the night resounded as the wagon traveled a path through the mountain. A quietness fell upon the group, the only sounds heard in the area were the horse’s hooves clip-clopping over the rocky terrain and the sounds of the wagon jostling at every turn.

Minutes strode by as Itsuko ushered the horse further and further up the mountain, the sight of fireflies dancing in the night distracting Kagome. It was a bumpy ride, more so and one which certainly roused Shippo from his slumber. The child cried at the unexpected movement within the wagon, and all Kagome could do was soothe his worries with her embrace.

Half an hour during their climb, they eventually reached smooth terrain, the remaining path up the mountain towards their left spiraling around and up a steeper incline in which the path disappeared. At this point marked on the map, Itsuko pulled on the reins and the wagon came to a sudden halt.

Bemused, Kagome looked around, noticing Itsuko and the other girls jump from the wagon. “What’s going on? Why did we stop?”

Itsuko smiled slightly. “There’s no possible way to climb the remaining slope by wagon. The path ends here.” She suddenly waved to Yuuta and Kagome, beckoning them to follow her and the girls.
Seeing this, Yuuta and Kagome stepped off the wagon, and sauntered around it, following the girls as Rui guided the horse behind them. They didn’t travel far on the smooth terrain in front of them and suddenly stood at the edge of a cliff, their eyes looking out across a bountiful forest just below the base of the hill, a forest which would have taken days to reach had they tried traveling around the mountain.

“The view from here is amazing!” Kagome exclaimed with wonder.

“I take it that’s the territory belonging to the Demon Slayers?” Yuuta inquired, receiving a nod from Itsuko and the other two. From this view, he could not locate a village beneath the mountain or any for great distances, then again, with darkness pressed upon them, it was different perceiving anything. “How exactly do we get down without plummeting to our death?” From what he noticed, there was not a decent path leading down the mountain besides the one behind them, and it seemed impassible.

Itsuko nodded. “Indeed, it is,” She replied. “Over the years, many attempted to scale this mountain in search of the secretive clan, many harboring sinister ambitions,” She began, capturing Yuuta and Kagome’s attention worryingly. “And yet, no one has ever crossed this mountain alive.

“What about a path leading around the mountain? Surely passing through that way would seem much simpler,” Kagome asked.

Itsuko shook her head. “If one were wise to infiltrate the territory of the Demon Slayers, the mountain is the only possible entrance. You see, were you to try and take the easy route, well, I do not believe you would like to know what would happen then…”

“How…” Kagome trailed off, her eyes staring curiously at Itsuko before glancing over her shoulder at Rui and Chiyoko behind them. “How do you know so much? Even if you say these were rumors, how could someone know these things?”

“Unless—” Yuuta turned at this, but before he could draw his weapon, a blade was suddenly pointed at his neck, the sharp edges of the weapon prodding against his skin.

Within seconds, Itsuko brandished her blade, her countenance stark and eerily distrusting. “Well, it seems you’ve finally caught on. We weren’t sure how long to keep up the charade, especially considering what we learned back on the road.”

Yuuta immediately backed up, pushing Kagome further behind him. From the start, he knew there was something odd about them; this entire time, they were actually Demon Slayers in disguise. It finally made sense, but this was not how he envisioned their first encounter. “Is this customary among your tribe? You treat outsiders as enemies?”

Itsuko approached slowly, standing within a few short feet of the pair, her eyes suddenly dark and intimidating. “You’ve much to learn about the Demon Slayers. Did you honestly believe you could infiltrate our village without fear or worry? Do you take us for fools?”

“W-what are you talking about?” Kagome asked, holding Shippo close against her while eyeing the blade pointed towards them. All this time, she thought they were simple travelers, but they were Demon Slayers? “We don’t want trouble…”

“And neither do we,” Came Rui’s reply, her own sword suddenly brandished. “We thought there was something suspicious about you two from the start. Reveal yourselves! Are you spies?”

“Spies?” Kagome blinked. “No! What are you talking about?”
Chiyoko glowered at her reply. “Don’t try to play coy! If you hadn’t mentioned you were headed towards the Demon Slayer Village, we wouldn’t have become distrustful! No one except a few Daimyo and Lords know of our existence! There’s no possible way mere peasants would have such knowledge, unless you are spies!”

“We’re not spies!” Kagome cried out, her voice startling Shippo, the child fussing in her grasp as he read her fearful emotions. “And we’re not peasants!” She exclaimed before second guessing herself. “Well … okay our village might not be as prosperous as others, but we are far from peasants!”

Yuuta merely sweat dropped at her reply. “I don’t think that’s the point right now, Kagome…”

Rui scoffed at the reply, her stance prepared to strike, but she held back beside Itsuko and Chiyoko, all three watching Yuuta and Kagome closely. “We’re not buying that story about your village! Your supposed priestess reaching out for help, just seems like an excuse to win our clan’s sympathy!” That last thing they wanted was their clan to fall into an unexpected trap. They weren’t a reckless tribe.

Itsuko nodded at her companion’s words. “Pretending to be weary travelers on the road, hoping you’d catch a ride with us and lead you into our settlement. It’s obvious you’ve been tracking our movements, and so you hoped to cloak yourselves among us to sneak in. You shouldn’t take us so lightly!”

Chiyoko nodded fiercely. “You’ve made a fatal mistake.”

“This is a misundersta—”

“And what’s more,” Rui interrupted Kagome, her sword pointed threateningly at Shippo held tightly in her embrace. “It would seem you’ve taken a liking to demons. Are you raising an army now?”

She gasped, her eyes widening at the word demon. No. How did they find out about Shippo? “How…”

Itsuko scoffed. “The child is a demon. Don’t try to hide it.”

“So, what if he is?” Kagome questioned, concealing herself further behind Yuuta. “Shippo hasn’t done anything wrong!”

“What proof do you have that we are spies? If you kill us, then you’re no better than murderers!” Yuuta growled, his hands clenched at his sides. If only he could reach for his sword, but if he made any sudden movement, he was sure they would attack. They were outnumbered, and he wasn’t certain of their fighting capabilities. However, if what Kaede said was true, they were a powerful clan, not one to reckon with.

Rui seethed. “What? Show us the proof then! If you’re telling the truth, then we might consider letting you go!”

At her words, Yuuta glanced over his shoulder, eyeing the young girl hidden slightly behind him. She was frightened, but it was more towards Shippo’s safety than herself. “Your letter. Give it to me. It has Kaede’s seal on it.”

“But I can’t…” The letter was meant only for the eyes of only the leader of the Demon Slayer Village.
Itsuko scoffed at the hesitance emanating off the raven-haired woman. So, she was fearful of showing their proof? Perhaps this was all a decoy, to distract them. “I’ve heard enough. Rui!”

Suddenly, the short-haired woman charged for Yuuta, her sword prepared to strike. At her quick approach, Yuuta quickly seized his own blade, pushing Kagome further behind him before raising his sword. Unfortunately, before he could swing, she vanished in seconds. Where did she disappear to?

It happened all too fast. One moment she was in front of him and the next Yuuta heard Kagome’s scream, and turning abruptly, he saw Kagome, wide-eyed, caught in Rui’s grasp, her blade inching against her neck threateningly. A thin line of blood dribbled along her porcelain skin, a slight wound which fell from the blade’s sharp edge.

Shippo’s distressed cries did not let up, his mother’s emotions emanating anything but elation and comfort. He cried loudly, the sounds alone enough to rouse even the most frightening of demons sleeping within miles.

Before he could move and remove Kagome from the life-threateningly situation, he felt the cold edge of a blade pressed against the back of his neck, Chiyoko’s form standing directly behind him cautiously.

“Let this be an example to spies!” Rui exclaimed angrily, one hand stilling Kagome’s wrist behind her back, her other hand preparing to slit her throat in one fluid motion, a slow death which would choke the victim on their own blood.

“Kagome!”

“That’s enough!” A feminine voice shouted from the mountain tops.

In an instant, the three girls stilled, their eyes widening at the voice before searching their surroundings warily. There was someone else in the vicinity, someone who’d been watching the confrontation for some time now, but they couldn’t identify the person’s location.

A figure, clad entirely in black with a purple sash wrapped around her waist securing a long sword, purple armguards upon her legs and arms, nose and mouth shrouded by a scarf, and head concealed by a hood, leaped from the rocks nearest them. The person’s lean and womanly form unexpectedly landed behind Rui, snatching her arm easily enough before pinning the girl to the ground, her arm held tightly behind her back; the result caused Rui to cry out painfully.

At this unexpected turn of events, Chiyoko immediately backed away from Yuuta, rejoining Itsuko as they looked on warily in the direction of their fallen friend. As Kagome ran into Yuuta’s open arms, free from the rogue’s grasp, she clung to him, her eyes staring at their rescuer as Yuuta backed them away from the scene slightly.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” Rui cried, kicking her feet as her chin achingly throbbed from it’s unexpected impact with the ground. Upon her back, she felt her assailant’s knee pressing into her, the very weight enough to pain the girl. “What’s the meaning of this!? Get off me!”

Her assailant scoffed, her voice muffled behind her scarf. “What is the meaning of this? We do not attack innocents!” She replied, immediately causing the girl to still beneath her.

“Milady!” Itsuko and Chiyoko replied together, both falling onto their knees quickly and respectively, their heads lowered before the shrouded woman.

“They were trying to sneak into the village!” Itsuko replied.
Surprised by her words, the woman’s caramel eyes blazed upon Yuuta and Kagome briefly, regarding them from head to toe in close scrutiny before releasing Rui and regaining her standing. Passing Chiyoko and Itsuko, she approached the two suspicious individuals, pausing a few feet away, eyes narrowed. “Is that true?” She asked, her voice slightly husky and intimidating.

Just hearing her voice and seeing the glare within her gaze was enough to frighten Kagome and worry Yuuta. This person wasn’t like the other three girls; she held herself with higher authority, and her aura seemed intimidating. Who was this person?

Pushing herself up from the ground and regaining her standing, Rui pointed at the pair, her anger heightening with each step. “It’s true! At first, we thought they were an ordinary couple but they gave us an excuse saying they were on their way to the Demon Slayer Village!”

Hearing Rui’s words, the woman’s eyes shifted among each person, from Yuuta’s robust figure to his protective stance in front of a young woman, much shorter in comparison with a small baby wrapped in a light blue blanket. For a brief moment, she stared at the child, sensing a demonic aura emanating from it. So, it was a demon? Interesting. “What do you want of our village? Who exactly are you?”

Deciding against any further misunderstandings, Yuuta turned to Kagome once more. “Kagome give her the letter, otherwise, we may not live to see our village again.”

Deciding not to risk anything, Kagome nodded, her eyes turning hesitantly towards the person clad in black before them. “The letter is in my bag…”

She followed Kagome’s stare, her fingers pointed towards a strange looking sack perched within the back of the wagon, and as if asking for permission to retrieve the letter within. The woman suddenly unsheathed her blade, the blade mere inches away from Kagome’s neck, her eyes staring intently at Yuuta. “Retrieve the letter. Do not try anything foolish,” She warned.

Understanding, he turned away from Kagome and slowly crept towards the back of the wagon. He ignored Clover who was lying in the back sleeping, pulling from the cart the hiking bag before returning back to Kagome’s side.

“It’s in the front pocket on the bottom,” Kagome replied. If she was allowed, she’d point at it’s general location, but she feared the blade pressed against her neck.

Because the strange sack had so many strange pockets, ones which zipped and unzipped, Yuuta followed Kagome’s gaze, pointing to a particular pocket before receiving a nod from the young girl. Unfastening it, the noise urging bemused stares from the four women, he located the rolled-up letter within and regained his standing, holding it out.

Noticing the missive in his outstretched hand, she took it and lowered her blade from Kagome’s neck, sheathing it within its scabbard at her waist. Unraveling the yellowed parchment, she spent a moment skimming over the writing, following every word before lifting her gaze curiously at the young girl standing before her. Looking back at the letter, she noticed a red seal stamped at the bottom of the paper, a seal which she recognized easily enough.

“Milady?” The girls called, looking between her and the two skeptically.

Without a word, she rolled up the parchment and placed it within the side of her violet sash, turning away from Kagome and Yuuta before approaching the three girls behind her. Raising her hand, she slapped each one simultaneously across the cheek, their cries resounding seconds after. “You were fools to draw your blades on these people. They were only following orders from their High
Priestess.”

Rui turned at this. “So, their story was true? No outsiders are welcome into our territory!”

Chiyoko stared confusedly at Kagome and Yuuta. “Milady, who exactly are these people?”

“That may be true, but that does not mean you recklessly unsheathe your blades at them! The proof is within this letter here, one which I’m sure you ignored entirely!” Sango retaliated.

Rui retorted back defiantly. “But she showed hesitance to show us the proof. We were sure it was all an act to infiltrate our village!”

Hearing this, Kagome frowned deeply, not liking the other woman’s temperament and accusations against them. “I already confessed everything while we were on the road earlier today. What I told you was not a lie.”

Annoyed by her words, Rue turned on Kagome and pointed at her child. “That still doesn’t explain the filthy demon in your arms! You say you and your husband reside in a village that is ruled by a High Priestess, so why would she allow such a filthy creature to live among you?!”

“Don’t you dare talk about my son that way!” Kagome’s voice surprised everyone around her, the tone in which she spoke back to Rue heightening with each breath. “High Priestess Kaede is very kind to us. She allowed me to keep Shippo after his mother died. I promised his mother, during her final breaths, that I would care for Shippo as if he were my own son. Lady Kaede allowed me to keep that promise.”

Hearing this explanation, Rue only scoffed, despite her two-companions’ silence behind her. “I can’t believe that. I bet it’s nothing but—”

“That’s enough, Rue. Still your tongue before I remove it,” The woman interrupted suddenly, her caramel gaze narrowing suddenly. Her threat easily silenced the girl, and pleased with her obedience, she turned her attention on Kagome and Yuuta. “As they said earlier, not just anyone can cross our territory … but today you are lucky. We did not anticipate this visit, but you are welcomed into our village. After all, you bear the crest of a priestess who is well-known among us, or so I thought.” She shifted her stare towards Rue, Itsuko and Chiyoko briefly. “If they knew who High Priestess Kaede was, they would have recognized her name immediately. It seems they are lacking in their education,” She replied, sighing suddenly with disappointment. “This woman here,” She pointed towards Kagome. “whom you drew your blades towards, is an apprentice of High Priestess Kaede, a friend of our leader.”

Upon hearing this revelation, they immediately paled. A friend of their leader? Not only that, but she was supposedly a priestess in training under the care of someone called Kaede? Somehow, they couldn’t seem to remember much on their information regarding the older woman, but then again, when it came to names of certain people, most slipped from their memory.

“Because of this incident, you’ve not only shamed our village, but you’ve shamed me as well. Has your training taught you to recklessly raise your blade without understanding the situation?” She asked the three, but they only shook their heads solemnly.

“No milady,” They replied, heads downcast apologetically.

“Be prepared for a thorough lesson once we’ve returned to the village. Your mistake today will not go unpunished. The three of you will think about what you’ve done as you walk the remainder of the way back to the village,” She replied, earning surprised gasps from the girls. It would take
them well close to two hours to return to their village, a reasonable and slight punishment she saw fitting. Turning back to Kagome and Yuuta, she offered a small tilt of her head. “My apologies for this misunderstanding. We better hurry back now. I don’t want to keep father waiting.”

Watching as she approached the front of the wagon, fully intending to drive the cart through the remainder of the way to Demon Slayer Village, Kagome looked on confusedly. “Father?”

Hearing the girl’s confusion in her reply, she turned suddenly beside the front of the wagon. “Yes. The leader of our village is my father,” She replied, suddenly lowering her scarf from around her mouth, her lips curving into a kind smile. “It’s nice to meet you Kagome. My name is Sango.”
Deep Discussions Part One

Chapter Summary

After finally arriving to Demon Slayer Village, Kagome and Yuuta reveal everything. During their discussion regarding the jewel and Kaede's Village, the Chieftain questions Kagome's place of birth, but there is something strange surrounding the jewel inside Kagome.

They ventured through the mountain pass, a secret entrance known only to Demon Slayers, hidden behind a thicket of moss and vines, the path sloping down into a dark cavern within the mountain. Despite it’s dark depths, numerous eyes peering through darkness as the wagon jostled with each turn and bump, torches lit the way, the young woman seated in the front of the cart, Sango, leading them towards the hidden village.

Although Kagome and Yuuta expected a lengthy travel within the caverns, they were surprised when the lustrous stars of the night sky greeted them overhead, numerous thick trees encompassing their vision within the hour. Silence fell between them, a silence which left Yuuta on alert and Kagome slightly concerned; they couldn’t see much of anything, the sounds of the forest morbidly quiet.

Each turn taken through the lofty forest continued for what seemed like half an hour before Sango suddenly pulled on the reins, the horse immediately pausing in its trek. From the back of the wagon, Kagome and Yuuta turned, noticing the Slayer retrieve a small horn from her pocket before pressing its flat end to her lips. A shrill sound emanated from the horn, a sound they were sure would alert her clan of their arrival.

Removing it from her mouth, Sango glanced over her shoulder, smiling softly at their curious and worrisome stares. “Well, we’re here.”

The moment she uttered those words, torches alit within the darkness, revealing two large towers hidden behind an exceedingly tall wooden wall at each corner, it’s gate looming and menacing. The torches glowing embers revealed the wall’s mighty structure, it’s entirety spanning several hundred feet or more, and its height exceeding the normal standards of castle walls; in general, it was like a heavily guarded fortitude.

Two individuals, likely lookouts, peered out from the towers, and recognizing Sango immediately, they disappeared from view. Within moments, the gate slowly opened inward, the weight of it’s immense height enough for two people to open.

Pleased by this, Sango ushered the horse forward, and as they passed through the gate, Sango and Yuuta were greeted by the settlement within, torches lit within every corner. There were few citizens present outside, their eyes staring in their direction, the remainder of the people probably asleep within their homes.

Feeling entirely ostracized and uncomfortable by their stares, Kagome leaned into Yuuta, her hand silently grasping his arm. There was distrust in their gazes, their whispers suddenly filling her ears, and she couldn’t help but recall her first encounter with Kaede’s Village, the first day in which she entered this world from the Goshinboku Tree; the people all but detested her, stoned her and
resorted to name calling and physical abuse. Would this happen once more since she and Yuuta were strangers? As Kaede said months back, villages normally weren’t accepting of outsiders; maybe Demon Slayer Village was similar in that sense.

Yuuta noticed Kagome’s slight touch on his arm, her trembling shoulders, and how her eyes shifted warily towards the people and back towards her son cradled in her arms. “What is it?”

She shook her head; she didn’t want to think about it, and she didn’t want to worry Yuuta. “It’s nothing. I guess I’m just a little nervous…”

As their eyes looked out across the settlement, they realized it was much larger than any village they’d seen, the huts a little larger than those in Hitomi Village, each hut aligned against the walls and almost connected together; what made these huts stand out were their entrances, the hide flaps were replaced with shoji-like doors, the outside appearance more decorative and less shabby. Various potted shrubbery, flower beds and large plants with rounded leaves adorned the sides of the huts. Even the roofs, which they were used to seeing secured with large stones, were crafted with bundles of thick straw, each fastened together with rope and pasted above the huts, which would not only provide warmth for each family, but also protection from the weather.

Everything seemed homey, and it held a more comfortable way of living than Kagome and Yuuta were used to seeing in these warring times. It seemed almost too comfortable for their liking, but it was obvious, despite being a secretive clan, they lived an almost luxurious life, protected by their walls from fierce demons.

The wagon eventually pulled up to a large structure on the far end of the settlement, surrounded by outside gardens, flowers and trees, a building which resembled a huge manor; it left Kagome and Yuuta staring in stupor; it was grand in appearance and also somewhat intimidating in the late evening. Torches blazed amidst the outside entrance, a pathway made of stone which greeted them.

Stepping off the wagon, Sango acknowledged two men stationed just outside the structure, their nods directed at her before observing the strangers stepping off the cart. Looking back, Sango smiled. “We’re here. I do apologize for the rough detour through the mountain pass.”

With Yuuta’s help, Kagome stepped off the wagon, and at Sango’s words, she nodded, her eyes staring past her toward the magnificence of the large house. It must have belonged to Sango and her family; they certainly lived in luxury. “Thank you.”

The shoji door beyond the wooden staircase slid open suddenly, the figure of a young boy, dressed in a mid-thigh deep blue sleeve-less kimono shirt and black trousers stepped out, his short brown hair pulled back into a high ponytail. Upon noticing Sango’s return, a bright smile filled his countenance and he fled down the steps towards her. “Sister!”

She turned at this, smiling just the same and embraced him. “I’ve been away for two days. It’s good to be back.”

Pulling away from her, his smile only widened. “I was beginning to wonder when you would return. Did everything go well?”

“Yes,” She replied, turning suddenly before introducing their guests. “This is Yuuta and his wife Kagome. They are friends of father,” She explained, easing her brother’s immediate confusion upon noticing them. “They have traveled a long way, so please be kind to them.”

“Yes, sister.” Facing the two and their small sleeping child, her offered a short bow of his head to them, his smile easing Kagome and Yuuta’s earlier thoughts. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Sango’s
brother, Kohaku.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Kohaku. Thank you for having us,” Kagome greeted elatedly.

Satisfied with their introductions, Sango glanced back at the house. “Is father still awake?” She asked her brother.

“Yes. I believe he is in his study at this time going over some paperwork. Do you want me to let him know he has visitors?”

“No need. I’ll meet with him. Kohaku, if you will, would you kindly show our guests to the guest rooms? I’m sure they are exhausted from their travels.”

“Of course!” He replied, watching as his sister disappeared into the manor before them. Turning to Yuuta and Kagome, Kohaku couldn’t help but notice in the light of the torches behind him, how pretty the young woman’s semblance appeared; she was unlike other women, somewhat foreign as he noticed her large blue eyes; it was faint, but even in the darkness, he noticed.

The whispers which resounded upon their unexpected visit, perturbed Kagome and Yuuta slightly, the villagers, who were dressed somewhat different than they, continuously watched and pointed at them, very few peeking outside their huts in curiosity.

Kohaku noticed this, and slightly sweat dropping, he offered an apologetic smile. “Please do not mind the others. We don’t often get visitors from outside. They are just a bit wary, is all.” He hoped his words would comfort their troubled thoughts. “If you will, follow me. We have plenty of rooms available, and if you need, I can have someone draw a bath.”

Pleased by the boy’s gentle hospitality, Kagome and Yuuta followed after, the hiking bag hefted over Yuuta’s shoulder without a care. Unfortunately, Clover was left behind by the cart, hopefully she’d find shelter within a barn for the night. Crossing the wooden staircase, Kohaku guided them around the house on the outside terrace which encompassed the entirety of the manor.

Eventually, after passing a series of small ponds on the sides of the structure, bountiful flowerbeds and trees, they arrived before a large shoji screen door. Kohaku slid the door open, and both Yuuta and Kagome marveled at its beautiful interior. Not only were the floors perfectly clean and polished, the color shining amidst the candle lights within, they noticed many detailed black and white paintings aligning the walls. There was a beautifully intricated low rising table in the middle of the floor, soft pale blue cushions at each end. There was also shelving within, lavish pottery and plants settled in the corners of the room and all in all, it seemed warm and comfortable within.

Stepping inside, Kagome and Yuuta made themselves comfortable. It seemed too large for just two people and the amount of space within seemed almost unbelievable; they were sure an army of twenty men could fit within the room.

Kohaku crossed the room and pointed towards another shoji screen door within. “You’ll find your futons inside as well as a basket to lay your child. There’s another building outside this room which you may use to relieve yourselves.”

At this mentioning, Kagome’s head swiveled around, her mouth gaped in surprise. Indoor plumbing? Were they joking? Did they seriously have indoor plumbing, even in this era? “Really?”

Sensing her excitement, Kohaku nodded. “Yes. Let me show you.”

Exiting the large room, he beckoned Yuuta and Kagome behind him, and as they walked along the other side of the terrace, directly behind their room, they noticed an attachment to the structure.
Seeing this filled Kagome with elation. This was perfect. Indoor plumbing. Kagome never thought she’d dream of a day where she didn’t have to relieve herself in the forest.

Pleased their guests were satisfied with the living space, he couldn’t help but feel his face warm upon noticing Kagome’s smile. “I’m sure my sister will return with word from our father shortly. So, in the meantime, please relax and enjoy your stay. The maids will bring you food and refreshments soon. If you need anything, just ask.”

With that said, Kohaku excused himself, disappearing around the side of the manor, leaving Kagome and Yuuta standing before the bathroom. As Yuuta returned back to the guest room, Kagome called out to him before handing him Shippo. “Can you hold him? I need to use the bathroom.”

Yuuta blinked, accepting Shippo into his arms before nodding and turning on his sandaled feet, disappearing around the terrace until he was nowhere in sight.

Once he was gone, and satisfied there were no other occupants around, Kagome slid the door open to the small building and stepped inside. Unfortunately, her hopes to relieve herself in a fancy porcelain basin immediately deflated. Sitting in the center of the small space was a single copper chamber pot, its smooth surface shining; it was no bigger than one of her mom’s cooking pots back home.

“Seriously?” Her shoulders fell and a heavy sigh escaped her. There went her dreams for indoor plumbing. How in the world was she supposed to use this without falling on her butt and making a mess? Not only did she have to go number one, but nature was also calling at the backdoor; she’d been holding it for the remainder of the trip in the mountains. “Am I supposed to squat?” She was used to sitting and she was never a squatter.

Next to the chamber pot sat a stack of what looked like thin white rice paper, and as she knelt down beside it, she held a single sheet in her palm, touching its somewhat soft and rough texture. So, did this act as toilet paper in this era? Was this something the upper-class used to wipe themselves? Would it even sustain the weight without breaking?

“I could really go for some Charmin Ultra right about now…” Looking at the sheets, less was definitely not more in this era.

Now that she thought about it, where was she supposed to dispose of this rice paper? Surely not within the pot itself? It wasn’t even that big, but thankfully, no odor emitted from inside; in fact, it was entirely empty. That was a relief; at least it was regularly emptied.

Kagome paused, her eyes squinting at the pot bemusedly. Was she supposed to empty the pot after using it? She wasn’t sure. If so, then where would she empty it? Tossing it in the beautiful gardens outside was definitely not an option, and there didn’t seem to be any waste bins around either. Maybe the maids regularly visited the room and took it away to clean? That was probably the case; maybe she was overthinking things.

With a hesitant sigh, she looked at the closed door behind her and back at the pot. It was now or never, so she might as well get this over with. Despite all this, she was thankful they had some form of indoor plumbing; at least she wouldn’t have to travel through the entire village, go through the gates and find a bush to squat in. There was no way to hide her shame or bury it underneath leaves; once she was finished, she was sure someone would see it. The thought of Yuuta coming in and seeing a dirty pot filled her thoughts and she flushed in embarrassment.

Sighing, she lifted her pale blue kimono and positioned herself above the pot, bending herself at
the knees slightly before staring intensely at the shoji door a few feet in front of her. Hopefully no
one walked in on her like this, kimono hiked up and legs open. “I should be relieved, but why am I
so tense?”

Ψ

Sango stood outside the room of her father’s study, her eyes staring at the letter grasped within her
hand. After meeting with these people on the mountains, she couldn’t help but wonder if father
would provide them with the help they needed; it was obvious from the writing, the village
suffered great loss, but besides that, her thoughts lingered on the young woman.

“How?”

Hearing her father’s voice on the other side of the shoji door, Sango looked up and slid the door
open, stepping inside before closing the door behind her. Moving in front of him, she knelt before
him, offering him a respective bow.

“You returned early from your mission. How did it go?”

“It was a success. The demons were easily slain, father.”

Pleased by her response, he lowered the scroll onto his desk and stared at his daughter kindly. The
mission would have taken anyone else from their village a full four days to complete, but she
managed in two, arriving just before the morning. He had hopes she would succeed far better than
any other, and he was right. “Very good. I expected nothing less from you. For now, I’m sure
you’re exhausted from your endeavors, so we’ll speak more of this in the morning, Sango.”

“Thank you, father. But I have news that deserves your attention and it seems quite urgent.”

Her words baffled him, but he nodded worryingly. Did something happen? Were there problems
arising in their neighboring villages? Or spies? What urgent news desired their utmost attention?
“Speak freely. What has happened?”

Regaining her standing, she approached his side and offered him a rolled-up sheet of parchment
tied loosely with a piece of straw. As she knelt once more beside him, she watched as he loosened
the straw and unraveled the letter, his eyes staring keenly upon every word. Almost immediately,
he noticed the red seal at the bottom and looked at his daughter somewhat troubled. “Where did
you get this?”

“I received this from a young couple who is now residing in our guest quarters.”

“From Lady Kaede’s Village?” He inquired, his mouth opened in surprise. It’d been years since he
last communicated with the older woman, but to know she and her village were suffering such
extremities left a bitter taste in his mouth. Had he known sooner of this, he would have acted
without delay.

“Father?” She called, noticing his perturbed expression mingled with worry. She recognized the
seal the moment she encountered Kagome and Yuuta up on the mountain. The seal had a faint
resemblance to one of father’s old letters he often received when communicating with particular
villages across the Musashi Province. Despite the letter’s urgency and need to speak with the
leader of the Demon Slayers, she felt it was right bringing the couple here; perhaps her father knew
them, and she was right.

“Are they still awake? Our guests?” He asked.
Sango nodded. “They are resting after their travels. I’ve already asked the maids to bring them food and refreshments.”

“Very well. Once they’ve eaten, bring them to me. There is much to discuss tonight.”

A relieved sigh escaped Kagome as she closed the shoji door and leaned against it. After what seemed like several minutes, she finally felt relief. If there was one thing she wished these people had for their indoor plumbing, it was definitely better rice paper; she swore she used several sheets in order to get the job done. Maybe they could upgrade to cloth instead? Then again, cloth in this era was highly valuable, depending on its material. Even shabby cloth would have been better than rice paper.

Secondly, she wished for Kami’s sake, that there was some kind of lock or latch for the door; anyone could have walked in on her. If someone was using the bathroom, and indoors, she expected to feel an air of ease but instead, the entire ordeal was unfortunately tense.

Besides that, she was sure Yuuta had to use the chamber pot as well, but she was hesitant to step away from the small building. Kagome didn’t feel comfortable with him seeing the dirtied pot.

The sound of soft footsteps resonated around her and expecting someone to appear around the terrace of the manor, she pulled away from the shoji, her face suddenly flushed as if she’d been caught guarding the building. However, no visible person appeared around the manor, and as she looked each way, it was quiet. She was sure she heard someone.

Again, she heard the noise of shuffling feet, coupled with the sound of floorboards creaking, a soft thud here and there, and she turned unexpectedly towards the door behind her. What? Was someone inside? How was that possible? There were no other doors within the bathroom, at least, none she noticed.

Pressing her ear up against the thin paper of the shoji screen door, she listened intently, hearing the sounds of something clinking onto the floor, the shuffling of two different footsteps and then the sounds of something sliding closed after. There was definitely someone inside, but as she waited an extra minute, she heard nothing. What was that?

Curious, she slowly slid the door open, peering inside. Expecting to smell the dirty pot, she instead smelled something sweet, and stepping inside, she realized there was a small clay bowl with incense burning within the room.

Kagome blinked. “Incense? This wasn’t here before…”

Even the chamber pot, which had been dirtied moments before, was suddenly clean, it’s interior and exterior sparkling amidst the candlelight. There was not a speck of filth seen within, and she backed away in surprise. It was definitely clear someone came in, removed the pot and replaced it with another, with the

Kagome’s face flushed a dark scarlet. All this time, the maids must have been watching and listening, hidden behind the walls of a secret door. Realization struck her, and remember what she knew from history, there were usually hidden passageways which allowed maids to come in and clean the quarters without being seen in the halls; then again, that wasn’t necessarily Japanese history. In her case, the walls really did have ears.

Deciding to leave the room, she closed the door behind her and returned across the terrace to the
guest bedroom where Yuuta was likely still waiting. As she entered within, she saw him sitting with Shippo before the low rising table, the futons already laid out for the two of them. The wrappings which had concealed Shippo the entirety of the day, were finally removed, his small ears and tails twitching as he playfully cooed at Yuuta’s hand which rested above his belly.

Yuuta noticed her perturbed expression upon entering, his eyes following her form as she seated herself across from him. “Did something happen?”

“No. they have an interesting bathroom,” She explained.

Despite her air of awkwardness, the doors suddenly slid open, revealing two young maid servants, dressed in long pale pink kimono’s, their hair pulled back into low ponytails, the lengths of their black hair falling to their hips. In each hand, they held flat wooden trays, an assortment of delicious smelling food wafting towards them.

The maids paid Shippo no mind, setting the delicious food upon the table gently and without making any noise. Once it was placed before both Yuuta and Kagome, they offered a respective bow to each person and exited the room.

Kagome and Yuuta marveled at the food; it was more exquisite then they imagined. There was steamed rice, a large ration of beef cooked to perfection sitting amidst the steamed vegetables, there was also baked bread and two, pickled plums and radishes. Their drinks consisted of water and sake, the alcohol being something Kagome was never used to drinking. Set off to the side, there was also two small bowls filled with fresh milk, milk they assumed they brought for Shippo. All in all, the feast looked delicious, and as they delved in, they didn’t realize how hungry they’d been the entire day.

After feeding Shippo and filling their empty stomachs, they sighed in contentment. They were being treated far better than they first imagined. Perhaps, this meeting with the leader of this clan wouldn’t be so bad as they first thought. As they thought this, there was a sudden knock upon the outside door, their heads turning curious when they noticed the figure of a person on the other side.

“Come in,” Kagome replied, turning away from the low rising table.

The door slid open, revealing a familiar face. It was Sango, still dressed in her black attire, a one-piece suit, with violet dyed leather arm guards, leg guards with tabi footwear. A violet sash was wrapped around her petite waist, knotted at the side where the remainder of the sash fell loosely against her upper thigh. There was a golden emblem stitched into the cloth, a small image which displayed a beautifully intricated butterfly.

A ninjato was secured within her sash at her hip, a short sword often seen in Feudal Japan, and was commonly used by a clan of ninjas, or at least that’s what Kagome learned in her history books. Was it possible the Demon Slayers derived from ninjas? Upon closer inspection of Sango’s outfit, it did seem likely, but it was still uncertain.

As for her hood and scarf which concealed her face from view earlier, they were both loosened around her, revealing long chestnut brown hair, pulled high into a ponytail behind her, her lengths falling against her mid back. Her caramel brown eyes sparkled as she looked upon them, her small lips which were surprisingly painted in light pink color, her complexion slightly darker than their own. Over all, she was a very beautiful woman, this they could not deny.

“If you will, my father is ready to speak with the two of you,” Her soft voice replied.

Realizing Shippo was entirely unconcealed before Sango, Kagome quickly reached for the blanket
to shroud his demon characteristics, but upon hearing Sango’s voice call out, she paused, looking back in confusion.

“It’s fine. You do not need to hide him from us. We already know,” She replied, smiling still. “In fact, if you could, bring him with us,” She replied before stepping outside onto the terrace.

Gathering Shippo in her arms and with Yuuta following close beside her, they exited the room and followed behind Sango, her height slightly taller than Kagome by a few inches. As their footsteps resounded within the late evening, the settlement beyond the manor quiet, they eventually arrived before a shoji screen door, a room which housed Sango’s father, the leader of the Demon Slayer Clan.

Without even knocking, she slid the door open, beckoning Kagome and Yuuta within. As they stepped inside, the room well-lit with candle light, intricate paintings aligned the wall, shrubbery at every corner, and in truth, it was no different than their guest bedrooms. They were immediately frozen in place, the sight of his intimidating stare watching them.

The lord was seated upon plush cushions, dressed in simple blue attire, with matching hakamas, a maroon sleeveless haori overtop his shirt and tied at the middle, its length no longer than his hips. A slight beard accentuated his sharp jawline, a well-groomed mustache above his lips with black hair held in a high topknot, a few strays fanning above his thick brows.

For a brief moment, no words were voiced as he scrutinized them, his intimidating stare transfixed upon the small baby cradled in Kagome’s arms. Similar to Yuuta, he was a man of great height with broad shoulders, though there were no signs of battle wounds, but his dark eyes were fixed with a fierceness which could frighten many.

Closing the door behind her, Sango took her place on her father’s left, her hands placed upon her knees as she regarded Kagome and Yuuta, her stare less intimidating.

“So…” His voice drawled somewhat loudly, causing Kagome to stiffen slightly from her place on the floor. “You’ve arrived from Kaede’s Village?”

Yuuta nodded. “Indeed, milord.”

He leaned back, his head canted slightly as he unraveled the letter upon the table before him, his eyes staring blankly upon the parchment. “You traveled all the way out here to meet with me, a lord of a terrifying clan. You must be really brave or perhaps very foolish.”

An air of silence fell between them, the tension so thick, Kagome wasn’t sure if she could find her voice. It was frightening. Never before had she ever acquainted herself with someone of higher power than Lady Kaede, someone who could easily erase her existence with a lift of a finger.

The leader continued. “To think you managed to get this far into my settlement, and by my daughter’s assistance. I’m surprised. I don’t often meet with outsiders or demons for that matter.” He began, his arms suddenly crossed as he narrowed his eyes at Kagome. “You must certainly be foolish to think I would offer my assistance to you, a person I’ve only just met. Tell me, why do you harbor this demon?”

Gulping, Kagome lifted her head, her eyes staring warily at the lord. “I made a promise. I promised Shippo’s mother that I would raise him as my own and that I would protect him with my life,” She answered softly but loud enough in which he could hear her.

Her words surprised him, and hear he thought she simply took pity on the creature out in the
wilderness. “How interesting… Your name is Kagome, correct?”

She nodded. Was he accepting this? He wasn’t planning to harm Shippo, was he? Then again, if he were, he would have likely done it sooner. As her eyes shifted warily towards Sango, she saw that she remained indifferent to the conversation, her eyes watching her and Yuuta closely and somewhat relaxed.

“Tell me then, Kagome, do you know anything about raising a demon?” He questioned, but when he received nothing but a slight shake of her head, he continued. “In fact, do you know what makes up a demon?”

Why was he asking her that? What makes up a demon? Before she transversed into the Feudal Era, she never believed in their existence. To her, they were nothing but mythological beings only found in fictional books. However, after spending almost three months in this Era, she realized they were more than just myths. “They are … terrifying creatures capable of destroying an entire village. They harness terrifying powers…” Maybe that wasn’t the correct way to define them, but she honestly didn’t know anything more about them.

From her answer, he nodded. “And what are those powers called?”

There was a name for such? Kagome froze, trying to understand his meaning, but she failed trying to find an answer. “I … don’t know…”

“A demon is something we also refer to as a yokai, and they can be anything ranging from objects, apparitions and even physical creatures,” Sango suddenly interrupted, answering for Kagome, much to her appreciation. “As to their powers, we typically refer to a demon’s energy as its yoki, and for all demons, it varies. You see, throughout a demon’s lifespan, its yoki remains constant, depending on the species that is, but in certain cases, can easily increase during certain circumstances.”

“Certain circumstances?” Kagome asked.

Sango nodded. “In most cases, their yoki feeds off the malevolent desires we humans often carry in our hearts. It’s that evil which greatly increases their own energy and the results often lead to great massacres. Other instances we’ve have witnessed in our daily travels were of demons consuming those who hold spiritual powers, such as priests, priestesses and monks,” She replied, immediately surprising Kagome. “The child you carry within your arms, Kagome, is no different than any other demon. This is what my father is trying to explain.”

Kagome’s cerulean eyes fell upon the child lying awake in her arms. Shippo wasn’t like that. He was a baby, incapable of harming anyone. She was sure, with the right guidance in life, he would live a fruitful life, devoted to helping others, not harming them. “Shippo won’t hurt anyone. He’s just a baby.”

“And that right there, my dear, is something which will endanger not only your life, but that of your village,” The lord answered, his voice cold and threatening. “The child might seem innocent now, but once it’s grown, it will no doubt stir up a great deal of trouble. Maybe not in your lifetime, but certainly in the years to follow.”

Kaede said these people could help her care for Shippo, but after hearing his comments, it seemed he was unlikely to do so; there was an aggressiveness about him, an anger towards all demons, it seemed. Even if Shippo was the same species of these terrifying creatures, it didn’t mean he’d grow up in the same way. “Lady Kaede said you could help me, but so far, you’re only labeling my child like all other demons. Shippo isn’t like that. He’s just a baby,” She replied, her voice
rising each second. “If you aren’t going to help us, then just say it and don’t waste our time. Because if you try to lay a hand on him, I won’t hesitate to protect him.”

The young woman’s threat surprised everyone, even Yuuta who was nervously sweat dropping beside her, his eyes staring hesitantly between the lord and Kagome.

Unexpectedly, the lord’s eyes softened and he threw his head back with laughter, his entire body trembling by the force. He really didn’t expect the child to come right out and reveal her fiery temperament, but she certainly did amuse him. “That right there is the spirit of a mother, one who fight head to toe to protect her child,” He laughed, throwing Yuuta and Kagome off.

Sango sighed, shaking her head at her father. “Father, you should be ashamed of yourself. Look how scared they were.”

“I was only having a little fun, Sango,” He answered, his laughs receding as he smiled kindly at Kagome. “Forgive me, but the moment was too perfect. I couldn’t help myself. Do not worry, you are both safe here and I will not harm your child; I assure you.”

Thankful it was nothing but a harmless little prank, Kagome sighed in relief. Honestly, she wasn’t sure what she would have done had he continued, but there was a chance she might have walked out on him and Sango.

“Now, with regards to your letter, I can clearly see your village is facing great troubles. When it comes to supplying your village with needed food, that will not be a problem. We will be able to give you enough to last you a few months,” He answered, his eyes skimming through the letter once more.

“Thank you so much!” She beamed. This was great.

“It also seems like a few huts were destroyed during a fire and demon attack,” He suddenly replied before looking solemnly at the two. “First thing in the morning, I will ask for volunteers among my people to travel with you and your husband back to the village and help with repairs. I’m sorry your entire village has faced so many hardships these past couple months. We’ll also check your fields while there, since it seems the recent harvests have been poor.”

“Father, you have yet to introduce yourself.”

He sweat dropped suddenly. Because of his earlier distraction teasing Kagome and Yuuta, he almost forgot to introduce himself. “Ah yes. Forgive me. My name is Shako. It’s a pleasure to meet both of you,” He replied kindly, receiving their nods after. “Now on to your son. As you said before, you adopted the child. In this letter, it says the mother was on her deathbed and you risked your life to deliver the child into this world, regardless of your people’s warnings.”

“You truly possess a kind heart, Kagome. Not many would have done such a thing,” Sango replied shortly after.

Shako continued. “You’ve come here to request information on how to raise Shippo. Unfortunately, I cannot help you with that at all; although we may be a clan of Demon Slayers, our expertise remains solely on eliminating them, not raising them,” He replied. “But, seeing as how you’ve had the child for a short time, you seem to be raising him well.”

“Mainly we’ve relied on feeding him goat’s milk,” Yuuta replied.

Sango smiled at this. “Raising Shippo shouldn’t be any different to raising a human, at least starting off. I can honestly tell you, through my travels across the provinces, I have seen a few half
demons raised no differently than humans.”

“Half demons?” Kagome blinked. “So, we won’t have to worry about feeding him raw meat until he gets older?”

From her words, Shako laughed. “That’s a misjudgment among humans. Not all demons eat raw meat, at least not the ones we’ve encountered.”

“I see…” So, it didn’t matter then? In that case, as soon as Shippo was older, he could probably eat regular human food without a problem. “So, you’ve come across half demons? I’ve heard of half demons before, but I never asked about them…”

Sango nodded. “When a human or demon, regardless of gender, copulate, they have children who are a mix of both species. In some ways, there are half demons who will look scarcely similar to humans and at times, it might be difficult to discern at all. Often enough, you can easily notice a difference in their characteristics. For instances, some may have tails, different variations of ears or marks upon their bodies. Even their eyes might appear a different color as well as their hair, however not all half demons favor humans; there are those with more animalistic appearances, most not pleasing to the eyes.”

“So, they come out as ugly children?” Yuuta asked, raising eyebrows from the father and a nod from Sango.

“Well, in simpler terms, yes,” Sango sweat dropped.

Shako laughed once more at Yuuta’s response. “Such a blunt response, but not entirely wrong. Now, if you would be so kind, I would like to hold your child,” He asked, lifting his hand towards Kagome’s general direction.

Despite the fear of handing her child to the leader earlier, she felt more relaxed than before. With a nod, she passed Shippo over to him, the father carefully cradling the child against his chest, his smile widening as the baby’s green eyes locked with his. “This is the first I’ve held a demon child on my lap. Not very intimidating at all. He looks to be a Red Kitsune.”

“He has a habit of pulling anything in sight,” Kagome laughed, watching as the child made small noises in the lord’s arms.

“He’s no different than how Sango and Kohaku were when they were both babies. Nothing but a bunch of babbling and drool on the side.”

“Father, be careful to hold the child’s head properly,” Sango chided.

“I know how to hold a child. I’ve held you and your brother plenty of times,” He replied back with a laugh. Turning back to Kagome, he continued. “Now I have been informed that the Shikon Jewel has resurfaced and within you, Kagome. Is that true?”

Yuuta blinked. Shikon Jewel? Within Kagome’s body? What was he talking about? This was a first hearing such information. Then again, now that he thought about, he remembered his first encounter with the girl. The reason he and his men attacked the village in the first place was to find a jewel which was rumored to hold incredible powers. Was it possible the lord was referring to the same jewel? “What does he mean by that? Is this the same jewel…”

Looking at Yuuta, Kagome nodded. That’s right; Kaede told her not to reveal anything of the Shikon Jewel to anyone, so not even Yuuta knew of it. Were anyone to find out about it, it would surely bring about great problems. Somehow, she felt a bit bad keeping this a secret. Since they
journeyed all this way, he deserved to know. “Yes. The very jewel that bird demon was after.”

Yuuta accepted this answer. He didn’t fully understand why it was inside her body, but now that he was somewhere on the same page, he didn’t say anything more. He was sure he’d receive answers to his questions very soon in regards to the jewel.

“You see, I was born with this jewel inside me. If I had to point out exactly where in my body, I’d say the middle of my chest, probably; that’s where Kaede saw it when my powers first emerged…”

Yuuta nodded slightly. “Wait. If this jewel truly does house incredible powers, could it be possible the powers which emerged from you weren’t your own but the jewel’s?”

Kagome paused. That was a good question, something she hadn’t thought much about since that day. Supposedly, according to Lady Kaede, there was priestess blood flowing through her veins, blood which derived from her grandfather’s side of the family. “Well, my grandfather is a priest, but anything regarding the jewel and why it’s inside me, I am not certain,” She replied, looking back at the lord and Sango. “I wanted to ask you about the jewel. Lady Kaede told me your clan was responsible for destroying it fifty years ago.”

“And you would be correct. My father found the jewel after defeating a terrifying demon. Mistress Centipede. Back then, the jewel was discolored and tainted, and so he called upon a well-known priestess to purify the jewel. Once the evil within was quelled, my father destroyed the jewel. It was thought the jewel would never resurface again, but apparently, we were wrong to think so,” He replied, puzzled by this mysterious event.

“If you don’t mind me asking. How was the jewel created? There must be a reason why it has so much power, right?” Kagome asked.

Hearing Kagome’s question, Sango reached for a small beige tome beside her; it was thin in weight, it’s spine held together by thin black string at each end, a style normally seen in ancient times. “The origins of the jewel began roughly around 580 years ago in the Heian Era. In that time of warring chaos, the world was plunged into darkness; it was an age which mankind struggled for power against these creatures and many never thought we’d surpass it,” Sango explained, handing Kagome the open book.

Glancing over the fine penmanship, the text clearly written with brush and ink, Kagome noticed a particular date at the beginning of the page followed after by the name Midoriko. “Priestess Midoriko?”

**Priestess Midoriko**

*Heian Era: 890-910*

Sango nodded. “Amidst the chaos, a woman appeared. Her name was Midoriko and many spoke of her great spiritual powers; you see, she was rumored to be a powerful priestess who fought these beasts single handedly and without remorse. Back then, some believe she was the only priestess with such incredible powers to have existed, and she was both loved and feared by many, even her own people.”

Kagome blinked. This was certainly news to her. So, the Shikon Jewel originated as far back as the Heian Era? But, what did it have to do with this priestess? “Are you saying she created the jewel?
Something which houses both good and evil?"

“Indeed, but not because she wanted to. She was attacked one day by hundreds of demons. The battle lasted seven days and nights. It’s said she used the last of her energy to pull the soul of a very powerful demon from its body and merged it with her own, the result expelling both hers and the demons’ soul from her body entirely. In the end, she gave her life to stop the battle and saved many.”

“She forced her own soul out of her body? Wasn’t there any other way to avoid that?” Kagome asked, her eyes widening.

“I’m afraid not. The demon was so powerful, even she couldn’t muster the strength to destroy it physically. If I had to guess, and I might be wrong, it’s possible the demon had a regenerative ability, something which was impossible to fight against at the time. In her last efforts, the Sacred Jewel was born, and housed within are the souls of Midoriko and the demons. A creation of both good and evil.”

“So, in the wrong hands, this jewel could threaten humanity?” Yuuta asked, his arms crossed as he mused over this information.

“Indeed. Unfortunately, I cannot explain why it is the jewel manifested after the battle, but I believe Midoriko’s efforts were slightly in vain. The battle might have stopped centuries ago, but the feud between demons and humans still thrive in this age, just not as tremendous,” Sango answered. “There are books which tell of this legendary priestess, and we even have records dating back to her place of birth.”

“That’s incredible. I feel kind of bad for her though. I’m sure she didn’t enjoy fighting demons. She probably didn’t have much to live for besides battling,” Kagome replied despondently, imagining the cruel life this woman must have endured.

Shako’s eyes fell upon the blue and white beads entwined around Kagome’s wrist, the same beads which Shippo also wore. “Now that you know the origins of the jewel, Kaede mentioned your powers only recently surfaced during a terrible ordeal with a bird demon. The subjugation beads you wear are currently subduing your powers.”

“Yes. I’m not sure if it’s technically spiritual powers or the jewels though…”

“So, I assume this is the first it’s ever happened?” Shako inquired, once more receiving a nod from Kagome. In the young woman’s case, it could likely be either or. Then again, there was also the possibility her spiritual bloodline mingled with the jewel. “This is rather interesting, but it leaves me with a very disturbing feeling. Since the jewel has returned to this world, it doesn’t bode well for anyone, not even yourself…”

“Father?” Sango’s gaze fell upon Shako, her father’s eyes closed as if in deep concentration. It was obvious he was troubled, especially since her grandfather supposedly destroyed the jewel. She didn’t blame him; how did it return and in the body of this young girl? Her caramel eyes swept over Kagome. “If you don’t mind me asking, have you always lived in Kaede’s Village?”

That was a question Kagome was not expecting. Well, she certainly couldn’t reveal the truth; Kaede might have believed her, but she wasn’t sure if the slayers would so easily understand her time travel capabilities. “Well, to answer that, no…”

Shako raised a brow. “Is that so? Where does your village reside?”
“Can I be completely honest?” When she received their nods, she continued. “It wasn’t until I came to Kaede’s Village that I didn’t know what a demon was. All my life, I’ve been sheltered. Grandfather and mother were very strict, and I’ve never seen a demon before or realized their existence until I arrived to Lady Kaede’s Village,” she somewhat lied, hoping they wouldn’t press her for more information.

They merely blinked at her words. Never knew the existence of demons until recently? How was that possible? They weren’t dealing with an ordinary woman, that much was certain, and judging by her hesitance to reveal anything further, there were secrets involved regarding her homeland.

“Since you mentioned your grandfather was a priest, you must live on a shrine,” Shako mused. “You’ve lived a secluded life since the moment you were born; your family truly did their utmost to protect you, Kagome.”

Kagome nodded. “You see, I never took part in priestess training. In fact, I didn’t see a point in it, nor did I realize I had priestess blood in my veins. I only recently found out during that demon attack a couple months back.”

“I’m curious…” Shako began. “Could it be possible the jewel has awakened your spiritual abilities?”

There wasn’t a definite answer to that, at least, none that Kagome knew. Was it possible it was both? “Is there a way to remove it? The jewel?”

Sango mused. “Doing so might be life threatening…”

“We can determine that, but first, are you willing to remove the beads from your wrist?” Shako asked.

Kagome’s eyes widened at his question, her eyes shifting towards the blue and white beads hesitantly. That wouldn’t be a good idea. “I was told never to take it off, otherwise swarms of demons would sense the jewel. Also…” Her gaze fell upon Shippo cradled against the lord’s chest, his small little hands touching the fabric of his attire. “I don’t want to risk putting Shippo in danger. I might accidentally purify him.”

“I don’t believe you would hurt your own child, Kagome. A priestess only uses their powers to protect others. You are in no danger here, so your powers shouldn’t react negatively,” Sango replied, hoping to reassure her.

Noticing Kagome’s discomfort, Yuuta turned his attention to her. “What if I leave the room with Shippo? Would that make you more comfortable?”

“Yes, it would. Thank you Yuuta.”

With that decided, he regained his standing and approached the lord, receiving Shippo easily enough before lowering his head respectively to lord Shako and Sango. Backing away, he slid open the shoji door and exited the room to stand out on the terrace outside.

Sango smiled and nodded reassuringly. Now that Shippo was out of the room, she was sure Kagome would feel a bit calmer. “Will this be fine? If you don’t want to…”

“No. I mean, we came all the way here.” Taking a deep breath, she placed her fingers onto the beads, the soft and rough surfaces chilling her suddenly. No, this was no time to panic. Maybe it would only be a quick removal without any problems. With this thought in mind, she slipped the beads off her wrist, settling them down beside her knees. For a moment, she held her breath, a
heavy silence suddenly falling within the room.

Nothing happened.

Relieved, Kagome released a heavy sigh. Thank god nothing happened. Yet, as she sat there, she suddenly noticed Shako stand up and move around the room past her, approaching a shelf before gathering a collection of herbs and vials. She watched him for a few minutes, tossing the herbs into a clay bowl before pressing it down into a fine powder, emptying the few vials of strange liquids within.

After mixing the ingredients together, he sat down directly in front of her, a lot closer than she was used to and placed the bowl onto the floor at his side. Shako beckoned his daughter closer to Kagome. “Sango, if you will, slather this mixture onto Kagome’s chest. We will see first hand the location of the jewel.”

Kagome grew hesitant at Sango’s approach and the strange mixture seated before her. She remained still, eyes watching as the woman pulled slightly on Kagome’s upper kimono, lowering it until her shoulders were bare, but not exposing it any further than that. “Can I ask what that is?”

As Sango dipped her fingers into the sticky substance, slathering the dark green liquid onto her chest, a pungent smell soon followed after, enough to wrinkle Kagome’s nose. “We often use this to locate certain demonic auras.”

“Demonic? Is the jewel tainted?” She asked.

“It’s only tainted in a sense if it were used improperly. But because you were born with the jewel inside you, we have no idea,” Sango replied. By doing this, the concoction would reveal the jewel and they’d know whether or not it was tainted or pure. “Father, I’ve done as you’ve asked.”

Shako nodded appreciatively, his eyes locking onto Kagome. “Kagome, we are going to need you to concentrate. By doing so, we should be able to easily locate the jewel. Normally, the demons we’ve used this concoction on, their auras were still quite lively, but right now, Kagome, we do not sense any aura coming from you.”

Concentrate? Kagome didn’t know how to really do that besides closing her eyes. “Alright. I’ll try.” As she sat there, on her knees, her eyes closed, a sudden burning sensation spread across her chest, the feeling only subtle and tingling. Perhaps it was the strange salve working its magic? “Is it supposed to burn?”

They didn’t answer, their gazes transfixed on the spherical shape of the Sacred Jewel appearing on the left side of her chest, the color emitting from the salve a dim pink in color.

“That’s the jewel…” Sango breathed.

“The jewel is not placed within the middle of your chest, Kagome, but directly above your heart. One thing is certain, there is absolutely no way I can remove it without risking your life,” Shako replied dismally. “This jewel is your lifeline, Kagome.”

Kagome’s eyes flashed open at this. What? It couldn’t be removed? So, she really had to live her entire life with it stuck inside her. Well, that certainly wasn’t good news, and with it inside her, it would only complicate her time in this Era.

From this disheartening news, her shoulders dropped, her entire countenance displeased. Yet, as her emotions fell, the tingling she felt was replaced by a cooling sensation, one which sent shivers down her spine. Unexpectedly, her vision blurred and hexagonal shapes suddenly appeared, the
outer corners of her eyes darkening. There was a numbing feeling overcoming her senses, she felt it. Why was this happening?

“Kagome, are you alright?” Shako asked, noticing the young woman’s face pale suddenly, her eyes staring at nothing in particular.

The sight of the jewel’s pink aura darkened with each passing second, the spot upon Kagome’s chest growing rapidly. Both Sango and her father were surprised by this, the visage of the jewel becoming much larger and blacker.

What was this feeling? She felt disoriented and dizzy, as if she were on the verge of passing out. Was it the jewel? For some reason, even as Sango and Shako called out to her, she couldn’t hear them properly; it was as if she were submerged in water, their voices only heard above the waves.

Realizing Kagome was on the verge of falling unconscious, Sango worryingly looked to her father beside her. “Father, the jewel has turned black!”
Sango has a long conversation with Kagome about what must be done concerning the jewel, especially when it concerns the entire village and herself. Sango's words encourages Kagome to make a final decision.

The realization that something dreadful was about to occur surfaced within Sango, her caramel eyes widening at the sight of the Shikon Jewel blackening, it’s aura unexpectedly demonic and frightening. It was immense, it’s aura, like nothing she had ever faced in her lifetime; it truly felt as if a demon were mere inches away from her, a terrifying yoki which didn’t belong within the young woman seated before her.

“Father!” Sango cried, hoping to rouse him from his stupor.

Immediately breaking away, as if transfixed by the aura, he nodded to his daughter. This certainly wasn’t the time to space out. The yoki which emanated from Kagome was far too powerful, and he feared it might draw unlikely attention. Reaching for the beads of subjugation, he hoped to put them around Kagome’s wrist, but to his dismay, he was forced back, a strong gust of seemingly dark energy propelling him backwards and into the shelves.

Sango also staggered back, shielding her face from the massive wind which circulated chaotically around the room, knocking over pottery, plants and paintings.

“Kagome! Kagome, snap out of it!” Sango cried through the turbulent winds, the visage of the young girl seated a short distance away, her eyes half closed and pupils large.

Something was happening, something she couldn’t fathom. She saw Sango, through the darkness encompassing her vision, her frantic voice calling out to her, but Kagome couldn’t comprehend. What was she saying? What was happening at this very moment?

“I feel … cold…” Kagome murmured, her body swaying slightly. Something felt wrong. She felt this before, back when the crow demon attacked the village. Suddenly, and without control over her body, her head turned towards the shoji screen door, her eyes staring blankly at the rice paper. “They’re coming…”

Shako and Sango followed her line of sight. As the winds continued circulating within the room, there was a faint demonic aura in the distance, and realizing this had to stop, Sango reached for her sword, pulling it from her violet obi and pushed through the winds until she was close enough.

“Sango!” Her father cried out, raising his hand to stop his daughter.

“Forgive me, Kagome,” She shouted, slamming the hilt of her sword against the back of her neck, the result causing the young girl to collapse onto the floor unconscious. Quickly after, Sango grasped the beads and placed them around her wrist, the demonic aura which surrounded Kagome seconds before diminishing entirely.

The winds within the room vanished and Shako and Sango breathed a sigh of relief. They hadn’t
anticipated something of this magnitude to transpire, but it was clear to them, the jewel within Kagome was indeed corrupt. Whether or not it was because of the evil in the world or within the jewel, it was certain something had to be done, otherwise, Kagome’s very existence, even the entire world, could likely fall into peril once more. The Beads of Subjugation acted as a reliable barrier, suppressing the malevolent aura, but without it, only chaos would follow.

Unexpectedly, a shrill horn bleated through the night, the sound carrying throughout the entire village, enough which turned Sango and her father’s head towards the door. In a panicked state, Sango slid open the door, her eyes catching sight of thunderous clouds in the distance and the visage of hundreds of demons appearing over the mountain tops and woods.

“Demons! Demons are coming!” The villagers cried.

Cerulean eyes slowly fluttered open in the quiet of the night and shifting her gaze around the room from which she laid, she noticed a couple lit candles near her futon, the dancing flames rousing her curiosity. Where was she? Moments ago, wasn’t she in the Lord’s Study?

There was movement from the other side of the shoji screen door, and as she pushed herself up from the blankets, the figure of a woman stepped inside, a small tray in hand with a large ceramic bowl settled atop. “Oh good, you’re awake. You had us pretty worried,” Sango exclaimed as she knelt beside the futon, the tray placed gently beside her. “How are you feeling?”

Kagome blinked, her eyes staring curiously at the bowl of water beside her, a small cloth lying beside it on the tray and back to Sango. “What happened? Why am I here?”

Sango frowned. “Do you not remember?”

“I do … but only faintly,” Came Kagome’s reply, her head canted in confusion. “I remember concentrating for you and your father after you slathered the concoction on my chest and I remember feeling really cold…”

Sango nodded. “I see. Well, perhaps I’m to blame for that. You see, things got a bit out of hand after removing the beads, and I had no other choice but to stop it,” She replied solemnly, immediately lowering herself into an apologetic bow. “Forgive me. I had no other choice but to knock you unconscious…”

The fact that a lord’s daughter was bowing to her was surprising, but hearing the words come out of her mouth about knocking her unconscious certainly worried Kagome. Suddenly, the words spoken by Lady Kaede surfaced within her thoughts, words which served as a warning for her two months back.

“Those are Subjugation Beads, which will serve to protect ye. Because the Sacred Jewel exists within ye, many demons will sense its return, and the result of what transpired yesterday will undoubtedly reoccur. I placed these beads upon ye, and ye must never take it off. Do ye understand?”

Kagome swallowed nervously and turned her body fully towards Sango, her hands shaking as she settled them upon her lap. “Sango, what happened? Did … demons attack?”

Lifting herself up from her bow, Sango nodded slightly, but rather than give Kagome a depressing frown or scowl, she instead smiled. “It was nothing we couldn’t handle. Small demons appeared over the mountains and were guided by the powers of the Shikon Jewel,” She replied, waving her
hand as if the matter weren’t that big of a deal, but it only served to worry Kagome further.
“Luckily I got the beads back on you before anything worse happened.”

Kagome rubbed the back of her neck aching. Sango mentioned she knocked her unconscious, so, perhaps that was the spot where she was struck. “Before things went wrong, the jewel turned black,” She solemnly voiced, her eyes down cast. “Sango, it’s tainted, isn’t it?”

At first, Sango didn’t say a word, her eyes watching the young girl closely. It was obvious she was distressed about the entire situation, and she wanted to ease the tension brewing within her. “I hate to admit this and I don’t want to scare you further, Kagome, but despite the beads subduing the powers of the Shikon Jewel, I believe it would be best never to remove them again. After what father and I witnessed, it seemed as if the jewel was trying to consume you. The powers emitted from it were very ominous, Kagome.”

“What?” Kagome’s eyes widened at this.

“I also believe the jewel may be feeding off your emotions as well.”

“My emotions?”

Sango nodded. “Before it turned black, it was pure, but when you became discouraged after father explained he couldn’t remove the jewel without endangering your life, the jewel must have reacted to that, and … it was malicious.” She answered. “Since you have no control over it, I fear the jewel is dominating your entire being, Kagome, perhaps even your spiritual powers.”

If that was the case, then why only recently, three months in fact, did it start happening? Nothing like this had ever happened to her before, even without the beads. Then again, now that she thought about it, Kaede mentioned that her powers first emerged, but only slightly, during the attack of Mistress Centipede but didn’t fully release from her until the Crow Demon attacked. Maybe the jewel was dormant for so long inside; it sort of made sense. “So, you are saying I do have spiritual powers then? It’s not just the jewel?” Her eyes widened at this.

Again, Sango nodded. “Yes. It was faint, but father and I also sensed it. If I had to guess, I would say your spiritual powers were mingled with the demonic aura of the Sacred Jewel. One thing is certain, Kagome; you have no control over either, and that’s what worries me.”

A moment of silence passed between them as Kagome absorbed this information. At this very moment, she felt vulnerable and anxious. The jewel was not only trying to consume her, but it also fed off her emotions and not only that, could not be removed from her body without killing her; just like the Lord said, it was her lifeline and yet, it was a danger to herself and others.

“Sango, was anyone hurt?” She asked, looking into Sango’s eyes worrying. “I feel just terrible about this. I shouldn’t have removed the beads. I’m so sorry for causing you and your village trouble…”

To her surprise, Sango only shook her head, dismissing her apologies. “Nonsense,” She replied, a reassuring smile gracing her face. “The village is fine. I accompanied our warriors towards the mountains and the battle was short and there were no injuries sustained either,” She explained, hoping to soothe her worries.

“I’m glad no one was hurt, but I caused you and your village great distress…”

“Do not blame yourself. Perhaps we shouldn’t have pressured you into taking it off, but despite all of what’s happened, we were glad we did this,” She explained with a smile. “Father and I saw only
a small portion of what the Sacred Jewel was capable of, and that alone helped us to understand your situation, Kagome. Still, we do not understand why it’s reappeared in this world, even after its destruction; perhaps, we might never know.”

A long sigh escaped Kagome, her shoulders slumping and her hands touching the spot behind her neck aching. After hearing all this, she wasn’t sure if she could rest easy. She had hoped, after journeying to the Demon Slayer Village, they might have helped her, and despite learning this information, it only scared her.

“You’ve had a tiring and stressful day. How would you like to take a bath?” Sango asked. “It might help relax you and your muscles. I also have ointment I can put on your injury afterwards.”

Kagome nodded. “That sounds amazing. Thank you, Sango.” As she stood up, following behind Sango towards the shoji door, she suddenly paused, her eyes wide in worry. “Oh, what about Shippo and Yuuta?” She almost forgot about them, during her conversation with Sango.

“Do not fear. Your husband and child are resting in another room. I separated you so you wouldn’t be disturbed while you slept,” Sango answered, pulling open the door for Kagome step through. “He was worried frantically the past three hours and was a bit loud to our liking. I hope you don’t mind.”

Hearing this, Kagome sweat dropped. Well, she never saw that side of Yuuta before, but she was glad he and Shippo were both alright and unharmed. “That’s a relief. Thank you.”

“This way.”

Exiting the room, Kagome followed Sango across the terrace until they were at the far side of the house, turning the corner until they came upon the backside. Descending the wooden stairs, and passing a few maid servants, Kagome’s eyes glimpsed the gardens, the yellowish glow illuminated from several torches lighting their path across a stone walkway.

Eventually, they arrived towards a separate building, and while it was still late in the evening, Kagome couldn’t discern the difference between it and the main house besides the structure seeming much smaller in comparison. There was no terrace connected to the outside structure, nor even steps, a simple shoji screen door which Sango easily slid open.

Inside, Kagome was greeted to a dimly lit room, the air within warm and inviting. There were a couple wooden cabinets at the far end of the room, situated with many bottles and small ceramic containers. The other side of the room was shielded by a large shoji screen with painted pink cherry blossoms adorning the white rice paper, the image quite lovely and delicate.

As Sango pushed one of the panels of the screen aside, Kagome was immediately greeted by the steaming hot air of large hot spring nestled on the other side, small wooden planks encompassing the entirety of the hot water.

“You have an indoor hot spring?” She exclaimed, suddenly filled with excitement.

The slayer nodded, smiling as she watched the raven-haired woman creep closer towards its edge, kneeling down until her fingers were pressed into the water. “Yes. Do you not have a hot spring near your village?”

“I wish. I haven’t seen any around,” Kagome replied, glancing over her shoulder as Sango gathered two woolen clothes in hand, a couple small bottles in the other. “It would definitely be much better than bathing in a cold lake or river.”
“You may go into the bath. I’ll join you in a moment,” Sango explained, moving away from the hot spring and towards the cabinets nearby.

Delighted about sinking into the hot water, Kagome stripped off juban and underwear, folding them and setting them near the edge of the spring. Satisfied, she removed her hair tie, allowing her long raven tresses to fall over her shoulders and back before stepping into the water.

It was hot, but it also felt very soothing. Lowering herself further into the water until she was seated, she realized the water came up to her neck and no further, the warm steam relaxing her as she leaned against the wooden wall in contentment.

After gathering a couple bottles off the shelves, as well as a couple large cloths to dry off with, Sango slipped off her black slayer garb and joined Kagome. Both the cloths and the bottles were placed behind them on the floor. For a moment, her eyes were closed in relaxation before she opened them and glanced at the young girl beside her.

Feeling Sango’s stare, Kagome flushed, her hands raising to wipe some of the dirt from her face and hair. “It’s been a while since I last bathed. I should have brought my bag with me. I had some soap inside it. I could have washed my hair…” She sighed, running her fingers through her hair, hoping to remove a few tangles.

“Soap?” Sango blinked.

“Oh, well, soap is just a white bar about this big,” She replied, using her hands as an emphasis of how small it was. “Sometimes it comes in different colors. It helps to remove dirt and oil from your body, and it smells really nice and can be moisturizing.”

“Oh, I see. It’s the first time I’ve heard of it before. So, I assume your people have found a way to harden oil?”

Kagome blinked. Harden oil? Did she mean lotion? Wait, they didn’t have lotion in this time period, at least, not to her understanding. Noticing Sango’s curious expression, Kagome weakly laughed, but nodded anyway. “Yes, something like that…”

She smiled. “Well, if that’s the case, I have some oils you may use,” She explained, motioning towards a couple bottles sitting directly behind them. “You are free to use them on both your hair and body.”

Elated by this, Kagome took one of the bottles and uncorked the lid, a sweet smelling and flowery fragrance greeted her. “It smells like Rosemary.”

“It is. We have a small garden in the back that we grow spices and herbs, and we use many for our perfumes and oils,” Sango replied while uncorking one of her bottles, a fragrance of lavender permitting the bath.

Relaxing at the smell, Kagome scooted further into the hot water, her fingers massaging her scalp and cleaning her dark tresses thoroughly. Her eyes closed in contentment as she felt the cool sensation of the oil on her head. After a moment of cleansing her hair, Kagome rinsed out the oil, soaking her hair into the water until her hair was clean and fresh. Honestly, she couldn’t remember the last time she had a decent hot bath. Was it two months ago?

Sinking further into the water, shoulder deep, Kagome sighed in contentment. This was amazing. Who would have thought the people of this world, the lucky ones, would enjoy themselves in such springs? It was surprising, that even those of the past had private hot springs, and indoors.
Noticing the young girl’s eyes close in relaxation, Sango couldn’t help but smile. “Tell me Kagome, is this your first time in a hot spring?”

She nodded. “When I lived back home on the shrine, we used to have a place nearby where all the men, women and children could go sit and relax.”

“All together?” The thought was almost mortifying.

Kagome almost laughed at the absurd thought. “No. There is a wall that divides us. Men on one side and women on the other. I used to go there all the time with my mother, brother and my grandfather. It was a nice bonding moment between family.”

“I see.”

“Back in Kaede’s Village, we only have a river to bathe in, which goes downstream away from our village. Unless you want to take your time and haul river water to your hut and keep the fire going, and also find a big enough tub to soak in, then it’s too much work, at least, for one person.”

“Understandable.” Normally, those within the peasantry class were known to bathe in rivers, and such luxuries as an indoor bath was only commonly seen in those of the upper class. It seemed Kagome wanted more for their village than what most could dream of.

Despite the conversation turning towards hot springs and rivers, Kagome found herself deep in thought over the subject of Kaede’s Village. “I wonder if it’s possible to have the water transported up the hill to the village. That way it’s more efficient and less work.”

Sango blinked. “Well… it’s not completely impossible. Your village lives on the hillside, right?”

“A little bit. We are more like a wide-open valley, but the river is downhill.”

“And the river flows past your village downhill?”

“Yes.”

Sango smiled. “There’s your answer. Since the river is flowing past your village, you could have your men dig a trench into the village from the river, therefore creating a divergence.”

At her explanation, Kagome gasped. That was it! “I get it! Like a waterway!” That was perfect. Creating such a divergence would create two pathways for the river, one through their village and the downstream. Doing this would certainly make it easier to haul water, and not only for the bath but for their drinking water; it would create less distance for everyone.

“Yes. Perhaps your High Priestess might take it into consideration for your people. It would certainly decrease your efforts traveling back and forth.” As Kagome seemed thrilled with the idea of benefiting the village, Sango couldn’t help but change the subject. “Kagome, if you don’t mind me asking, may I ask a personal question?”

“Sure.”

“I mean no disrespect, but your features are quite different from what I’m used to seeing…”

This confused Kagome. “What do you mean?”

“Your skin is much paler, not to mention your eyes are rounder and a peculiar color, much like the sky. Even your speech and mannerisms are different. Could it be, one of your parents is foreign?”
Sango scooted closer to Kagome, noticing her sudden quietness.

Kagome paused at her words. No one, besides Kaede had ever questioned her like this before, except for the mentioning of her eyes, but other than that, no one else thought to question her appearance. It was true. Her eyes were rounder, and it wasn’t surprising her mannerisms were more modern than ancient.

Realizing her words might have offended her, Sango turned away. “I’m sorry. I meant no disrespect, but I was only curious. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s fine. I was thinking how funny it is that no one else has really noticed, no one besides Kaede. Yes, my father was foreign. Sango, can I trust you to keep a secret?”

She nodded. “Of course.” She was surprised her father was foreign, but she was curious of his kind. Surely, he wasn’t a westerner?

Pleased she could slightly trust Sango with this information, she relaxed a bit beside her, their shoulders barely touching in the hot spring. “He lived across the ocean in a large country. He is what you would call a westerner.”

Immediately caught off guard by westerner, Sango’s voice suddenly lowered. “Truly? How? Any foreigner who crosses into our land immediately face execution without question. How is this so Kagome?”

That was exactly what Kaede told her previously, and although she’d been warned not to bring up the topic to anyone, for fear their village and herself would face troubles, Kagome couldn’t help but trust Sango. Her family was helping their village out, and trust was an immediate factor in their relationship, at least, right now. Kagome wasn’t one to keep things hidden, and while it might bring her hardship later on, she couldn’t help but lean into others. “My father was what you would call … a constable. A man who serves the law. He protects the people, no matter their race or blood.”

Sango nodded.

“He was on a hunt for a murderer who crossed over into Japan unknowingly and along the way, he met my mother. It was so funny; my grandfather couldn’t stand him. But all that changed when he saved my mother from the very man he’d been searching for, for years.”

“What an interesting turnabout. So, a westerner traveled into our land to catch a criminal and met your mother … It sounds like fate brought your mother and father together, Kagome,” Sango smiled. “What about your father now? Did he marry your mother? Was he caught?”

“There are so many questions,” Kagome sweat dropped, waving her hands before Sango. “Calm down, calm down. After my mother was returned, my grandfather showered him with affection. He gave his blessings to marry his daughter which he did but because my father was foreign, grandfather refused to take his last name and instead, he took our last name, which is Higurashi.”

So, Kagome was from a Higurashi Family who lives on a shrine; strangely, she has never heard of such a family, at least, not on her travels during her hunts. “I see. So, your father took your mother’s last name. That’s completely understandable; from what I know, foreigners tend to have strange last names, so I can see how that might have been a problem. Was he a good man? How was he able to stay so long in Japan without being discovered?”

Kagome mused. “Well … our shrine is on a very high hill, divided by the forest around our village.
So, my father could freely walk around without being discovered, unless we had visitors. But … he passed away before my brother was born; I was just a little girl then.”

“I’m sorry for asking so much. I’m sure I’ve crossed a boundary…”

“No. It’s alright. After some time, he returned to his country because of his job. Sadly, he didn’t make it back home. A missive was sent home to our shrine explaining that my father had been injured while chasing after a criminal. He was struck down and didn’t make it,” Kagome replied. “Shortly after receiving the letter, we received a small box of his belongings. I can’t tell you how many days my mom would cling to his jacket, crying.”

“I’m sorry,” Sango apologized, looking away from Kagome. “My father was the same way after my mother passed away. He would hold her favorite kimono time after time.”

“How did she pass?”

Sango looked up above the steam of the hot spring, her eyes falling onto the wooden ceiling. “It happened when Kohaku and I were children. Mother grew very ill and wasn’t expected to live much longer. She passed shortly after in the warm season.”

“We’ve lost both our parents, but we’ve grown stronger despite it. And we both have little brothers to look after,” Kagome smiled, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Sango smiled in return. “What of your brother? Is he with Lady Kaede?”

“Actually, he is back home with mother and grandfather.”

“I’m sorry if I keep asking you so many questions, but it’s not every day I get to talk with another female and for long,” She replied, sweat dropping. “I’ve been wanting to ask this for a while, but why is it you are with Lady Kaede? Is it possible your grandfather sensed the Shikon Jewel inside you and sent you to her for training?” The letter didn’t specifically mention anything more about Kagome besides arriving to the village and discovering the jewel within her, and because Kagome mentioned previously that she lived on a shrine away from Lady Kaede’s Village, it only furthered her curiosity.

She threw her head back in laughter. Her grandfather sensing the Shikon Jewel inside her? That was hilarious. Despite Sango’s confusion, Kagome almost doubled over with laughter, but because of the hot water surrounding her, she merely leaned back, wiping her eye free of a tear. “I’m sorry. My grandfather might be a priest, but he does not have any spiritual powers, as much as he seems to believe he does.”

Sango sweat dropped.

“In a way, you could say he is similar to a quack doctor. *Demon begone this, demon begone that.* Every time he says this, there is never a demon in sight.”

Sango canted her head in confusion of the word *quack*. A quack doctor? Was she referring to a noble doctor or one from humble birth?

Kagome continued on. “Mother always told me that demons aren’t real, but they are, from what I’ve witnessed. I’m pretty sure those ‘*sutras*’ of grandfathers wouldn’t work either, even if one attacked our shrine.” She made small quotations with her fingers at the mentioning of sutras, continuously baffling Sango.

“Then, if your grandfather doesn’t have spiritual powers, could it be possible you inherited it from
“No. I don’t believe so. I’m pretty sure it skipped grandfather’s generation and went straight to me. That or he hasn’t tapped into his spiritual ability. Or maybe I got it from my mother; she is pretty amazing. Mother always has this sense that something might happen, and she has the most pleasant aura that just takes all the negativity away from you. So, to answer your question, I’m not sure who; it’s either from my mom or grandfather, or both.”

Sango nodded once more in understanding. Once more, she noticed Kagome fall into deep thought, her eyes narrowed slightly and her eyes staring blankly into the water. It was as if the young girl was trying to see something past the milky water, but instead, she turned to Sango, whipping her head fast with a look of surprise upon her face.

“Oh, the village! You asked me how I ended up at Kaede’s Village,” She sweat dropped. She had completely forgotten to answer that part of the question. “Since I’ve already trusted you not to say anything about my father, I want to trust you with this also. Even Yuuta doesn’t know the full story.”

“Of course. You have my word.”

Kagome smiled and took a deep breath and exhaled it. “I don’t know.”

“What?”

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t know how it happened. The last thing I remembered was playing soccer with my brother when suddenly there was this light.” Well, it wasn’t a light but more of a voice calling out to her, but Kagome didn’t want to be too specific; after all, she didn’t want to mention the whole-time travel scenario to her, at least not yet. “I heard my brother screaming my name and the next thing I know, I blacked out. I woke up shortly after in the Forest of Inuyasha, right outside Kaede’s village.”

Sango’s eyes narrowed slightly at her explaining. A light brought her to the Forest of Inuyasha? Honestly, she didn’t know such a forest existed. “It sounds like it could have been the work of a demon.”

Kagome nodded. Demon tree or not, it was weird without explanation. “I’m not sure what it was but I didn’t see any demon when I woke up. In fact, it was peaceful and quiet. As far as the other villagers know, I’m just a little girl who lost her way and stumbled too close to their village. I ended up captured and brought to the village before Lady Kaede. No one trusted me and for a short time, I was held hostage, forced to work in the fields and sleep outside.”

The slayer frowned. This girl was held hostage for a short time? Anyone would have run away the moment they were released, but instead, she remained and wanted to help the village prosper. How interesting. “I’m sorry that happened. Was there a reason why they held you hostage?”

Kagome nodded. “I was thought to be a spy or a thief, and my eye color confused Kaede. So, they kept me there until they could trust me. Which they eventually did, but it wasn’t easy. Eventually Lady Kaede came around and released me from my confinement. And everything that happened in the letter happened after that. I’ve only been in the village for a little over two months.”

“Does your husband truly not know?” Somehow, she felt it would be wise to be honest and upfront with him, rather than keep this a secret.

Husband? Who, Yuuta? It was still strange people thought they were husband and wife, but
Kagome continued out. “Not yet. As much as I trust him, I cannot tell him the truth. I feel I’m only able to confide in few people. Even though I’ve just met you today, Sango, I feel like I can trust you. Perhaps I take after my mother a bit; I can read the auras of people very easily, and you have a pleasant aura.”

How interesting. Perhaps, Kagome truly inherited the bloodline of priests and priestess from her mother’s side of the family. If she was able to read the auras of people, then that was definitely a start with her powers.

After finishing up their bath, the two fell into comfortable silence, each washing themselves and relaxing for a short time before the steam of the hot bath began its dizzying spell upon them.

“It’s getting late. We should head back to our rooms and get some sleep,” Sango suddenly replied, turning suddenly to leave the bath. “I’ll put some ointment on your neck before you head back.”

Understanding, Kagome followed Sango out, each drying themselves with their towels before redressing into their clothing. Sango donned her slayer garb and Kagome donned her white sleeping kimono. After which, Kagome knelt beside Sango as the young woman applied the medicine to her wound.

“After everything that’s happened, have you considered taking up official priestess training?”

“You are the third person who has brought this up,” Kagome laughed.

“Really?” Sango asked, removing her finger from Kagome’s neck before covering the lid of her medicine jar.

Kagome nodded. “Lady Kaede, Yuuta and now you. At first, I didn’t give it much thought, but after hearing what Yuuta said the other day and having it happen first thing tonight, I’m seriously considering it.” Kagome didn’t want any harm to befall her friends or Shippo. Sooner or later, she might not even have the protection of the Subjugation Beads. Perhaps, her best interest lied with training. There was no telling how long she would be in this world, and since the Goshinboku Tree refused to take her back home, what else could she do but remain helpless to everyone here? How would she even begin training?

“It would be in yours and everyone’s best interest, Kagome. It will help you in the long run, I can assure you of that,” Sango replied, touching her shoulder softly. “I’ve finished putting the medicine on you.”

Touching her neck softly and looking at the strange green substance upon her fingers, Kagome followed after Sango. “What kind of medicine is this?”

“It’s just a collection of healing herbs ground into a fine powder with a bit of water added. It will prevent you from bruising and will dull the pain,” She answered.

“Thank you, Sango. Thank you for the bath and for the medicine.”

“It’s no problem.”

Exiting the hot spring building, they made their way across the path and towards the main house ahead. It wasn’t long before Sango suddenly came to a stop, grasping Kagome’s arm suddenly. “Kagome, I just had a thought. Since you are considering becoming a priestess, why don’t you and your husband see the Daimyo in Edo tomorrow? It will only be a day’s trip by horse.”

Kagome blinked. “It’s really that close? I kept thinking Edo was a few days away.” Then again,
they’ve been walking most of their journey and were lucky enough to catch a ride to Demon Slayer village, thus shortening their trip tremendously.

Sango nodded. “For you to begin your training as an official priestess, you’ll first need recognition from the Daimyo himself and permission to undergo this training. Also, you can explain the situation happening in your village, such as the attacks and lack of food. Our Daimyo is in charge of all the villages in this province and to have your village under such strife, he has every right to help you and your people,” Sango explained, catching Kagome by surprise. “It would be in your village’s best interest to see the Daimyo.”

“But, Yuuta was against the idea of seeing him, and besides, he’s such an important person, what if he denies our visit? Something could go wrong, or I could make more trouble for my village, at least, that’s what Yuuta warned me about…”

“Well, there is always the possibility with nobles that something might go wrong, however, you have every right to visit the Daimyo. Regardless of what your husband said, I do understand his concerns, but you must look for the best interest for your village. Even though our people will do our best to help you, we can only do so much.”

Sango was right. There was no denying how much they were going out of their way to help them, providing them food and whatever more they could soon. And she was sure Kaede wouldn’t continue to ask for the Demon Slayer’s help, after all, it took a lot out of Kaede to simply reach out for help. “Maybe I can bring up the other problems our village is facing…”

“Other problems?”

Kagome nodded, squinting her eyes at the very thought. “I think there is a snake hiding out in the palace.”

“A snake?”

“It’s a figure of speech, but twice a year, we have village inspectors check our harvests and this particular person, Takeo, has been overcharging out village, which we recently found out from a neighboring village, and because we cannot meet the cost of taxes, many of our young women and children have been taken and sold into Edo to work for the money to help our village, at least, that’s what Takeo told us…”

“By how much?” Sango’s eyes narrowed.

“We were told by those who live in Hitomi Village that the taxes should only be forty mon a year, but our village is being charged eighty mon.”

Sango’s mouth opened at this, her entire expression almost speechless and appalled. Kaede’s situation was even worse than she first imagined. “That’s ridiculous! That is a definite cause for concern, and you should definitely speak with the Daimyo. If this keeps up, you will not only lose money and people, but you will also lose your protection.”

“But proving this is the problem, Sango. Takeo could easily lie and get away with it because he is higher up than us…” Kagome replied. She could already imagine the outcome for revealing such accusations which would possibly put her behind bars or worse, ruin the village entirely.

“Surely it would be recorded in his book,” Sango replied, unless he was lying in ink.

“Not unless he is pocketing the money,” She replied. “So, we have no way or proving this unless the Daimyo personally comes to our village and sees for himself the state it’s in, but I doubt he will
make the trip himself.”

That was completely understandable. The world in which they lived in was not easy. Living was difficult and getting by without being reprimanded by officials or nobles and not losing your lives due to small matters what rare. “If you need a voice in this, then you have our clan behind you. I’ll have my father, in the morning, write out his concerns about your village for you to deliver to the Daimyo. I’m sure, once he’s seen our clan’s seal, he will believe you.”

“Thank you, Sango. I’ll speak to Yuuta about this when I return to the room.” Excited that Sango would more than willing to help her and the village out, she quickly ran ahead, but shortly stopped and turned around. “I don’t know the way back,” She replied, causing Sango to sweat drop.

Chuckling slightly, Sango led the way towards the main house, crossing the wooden steps before following the terrace towards the guest quarters around the house.

Along the way, Kagome fell beside Sango on their walk, completely refreshed from the bath and comfortable. “Can I ask you who the Daimyo is?”

“His name is Takeda Nobutsuna who hails from the Province of Kai. Their territory expands well into our Province of Musashi, and they are a ruthless clan by any means, at least, that’s what my father has said. My father often makes visits to and from Takeda Castle, but this was months back. Unfortunately, I don’t know anything else about him, but just to be safe, you and your husband should be careful and be respectful.”

So, the Daimyo’s name was Takeda Nobutsuna? The mentioning of the Takeda Clan definitely sounded familiar in her history books, and from what she remembered about them, their clan originated as far back as the Heian Era and were spread out all around Japan with many families. Now that she thought about it, she remembered seeing the Takeda Clan mentioned in video games as well.

Ψ

After enjoying her time with Sango and getting acquainted, Kagome finally arrived to her room, the dimly lit candles greeting her as she walked inside. Both Yuuta and Shippo were spread out upon a large futon, both sleeping peacefully.

Careful of not waking Shippo, Kagome quietly tiptoed towards the futon and knelt down beside Yuuta before gently shaking his shoulder. “Yuuta, wake up,” She softly called into his ear, hoping to rouse him from his slumber. To her relief, he awoke without any difficulty and opened his eyes sleepily.

“Kagome?” He asked, staring at her face for a moment before his vision cleared. Realizing she had returned after falling unconscious, he quickly sat up, and put both hands upon her shoulders. “Are you alright? Are you feeling okay?” He asked.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. Yuuta, you are such a good husband to worry about me,” She softly teased. Scoffing at this, he pulled away, but he couldn’t help but notice her kimono had fallen slightly off the shoulder, a small amount of cleavage displayed before him. He looked away, a small blush upon his cheeks. “This is no joking matter.” He replied, crossing his arms and leaning away.

When his voice rose a bit too loudly, Kagome pressed a finger to her lips, scolding him lightly with her eyes. “Not so loud or you’ll wake Shippo.”

Yuuta and Kagome looked at the small child sleeping quietly beside Yuuta before looking back at
each other. Fortunately, the child could sleep through almost anything.

“All joking matters aside, I’m glad you’re okay. You had us pretty scared. Shippo was crying nonstop for hours until he fell asleep. I’m guessing he must have sensed something was wrong but didn’t fully understand,” Yuuta replied.

Smoothing the child’s bangs from his face, Kagome smiled softly before looking at Yuuta. “You did a great job taking care of him. Thank you, Yuuta.”

He merely shrugged, his face unfazed, but there was a hint of relief in his gaze as he watched her. “You should get some rest. We have a long trip back to Kaede’s tomorrow.”

“Before that … there’s something I need to ask you. I need a favor from you,” She replied, suddenly crawling closer to him, her kimono shifting each move.

Yuuta couldn’t help his eyes from straying to her cleavage once more, his cheeks burning as she leaned in closer. What was she doing? “A-alright … what is it?”

“I know you might be against it, but it’s really important to me.”

“Whatever it is, I don’t think you should go any further with it,” He replied, not liking where this was going.

Realizing he was already refusing before she even mentioned anything, she forcibly pushed him down into the sheets, and crawled atop him before he could push her away. Her sudden dominance over him must have startled him, but she wasn’t going to move until he heard her out. “Yuuta, I know this is sudden, but I really need this. I need you to understand and not refuse me. Okay?”

What? His eyes widened a fraction. Not refuse her? What was she getting at? Surely, she wasn’t insinuating intimacy between them, was she? After all, she crawled over top him and was almost pleading to him. The very thought left him almost speechless. “In front of Shippo?” He asked, testing the waters to see if this was certain.

“He’s asleep. If we’re quiet enough, he won’t wake up,” She replied softly, almost sitting in his lap by this point.

She was definitely certain. Yuuta was almost taken aback by this, but it wasn’t as if he never had such thoughts about her. After all, Kagome was an attractive woman, fierce and determined when she wanted to be, but also a compassionate mother. “Kagome, I don’t think we should.”

He must have already figured out that she was intending to ask him for permission to travel to Edo to speak with the Daimyo. “I think we should. There won’t be any harm in it and it could even help us out in the long way,” She replied.

He blinked. “Help us out? What do you mean by that?” His voice rose a little louder than he intended, but he was immediately silenced when Kagome’s hand fell upon his mouth, covering it so he wouldn’t wake Shippo.

“I already talked to Sango about this.”

She what? Kagome and Sango were talking about him behind his back? What the hell was she referring to?

“And she said it was perfectly fine and that you would be okay with it. In fact, I’ve been thinking about this for a while and she only helped me realize that this is what I need to do. Please, can we
do it, Yuuta?"

He grabbed her wrist, removing her hand from his mouth as he looked at her. For a moment, he was silent, as if trying to understand why it was she suddenly wanted this, and to be honest, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t laid with a woman before, but right now, this felt, a bit weird. Too fast. Still, he didn’t refuse her, but instead understood her want. “I didn’t know you were this enthusiastic about it. I mean, I won’t lie and say I didn’t have these thoughts as well…”

Her eyes widened at his words, her smile growing. “So, you’ve been thinking the same thing? That’s great. At first, I thought you might be entirely against it, but maybe I was wrong to assume so…”

His hand fell upon he waist, and pulling himself up into a seated position, he leaned in close, his eyes locking with hers. “Are you sure about this, Kagome? This might change everything and there’s no turning back.”

She nodded, slightly easing away from him. “Yes. I can’t deny this any longer. Can we, please?”

“Understood.” He replied, caressing her cheek before flipping her onto her back gently and moving over top her, which completely took her by surprise.

“Yuuta…” What was he doing? This … this didn’t seem right.

He mistook her murmuring his name for something else, and he leaned in close to her. “Are you absolutely sure about this, Kagome? If this makes you uncomfortable, I can stop.”

What the heck was he talking about? “Wait … so are you agreeing to it?”

He nodded slightly confused. Didn’t he already agree? “Yes. I’m agreeing to it.”

Without warning, she sat up and threw her arms around his neck, and he fell back in surprise. “That’s great. We definitely need to see the Daimyo tomorrow. I think this will help our village out tremendously.”

“Go see the what tomorrow?” He removed her hands from his neck and eased her away gently.

“The Daimyo,” She repeated. Noticing his confusion, she canted her head to the side. “Yuuta, the Daimyo. I know you were against it before, but Sango told me it would be in our best interest to visit, especially after I told her about Takeo scamming our village; she said she would have her father write out a letter proving our truth to him. Not only that, but I’ve decided I want to begin my training. I can’t just sit around and remain a burden to everyone; with both the jewel inside me and these spiritual powers, I have no control over each, and so, Sango believes training would certainly help. She also said that I can get official permission from the Daimyo as well.”

One after the other, words of the Daimyo, Sango and priestess training flew at him, and he had to close his eyes and remain calm. This entire time, she wasn’t referring to anything else but that? He felt foolish for believing so, maybe even a little embarrassed, but he wouldn’t come out and say it. Yuuta rubbed his temples and released a heavy sigh. Here he basically confessed his feelings to her but instead, he felt slightly rejected, even if it was a misunderstanding. Still, how did she not catch on, even after flipping her onto the futon? “I can’t believe I almost thought…”

“Almost thought what Yuuta?”

Opening his eyes, he only waved it off. “Nothing. Let’s continue this conversation in the morning. It’s really late and I can’t think straight,” He replied before standing up and moving away from the
futon, but Kagome’s hand upon his wrist stopped him.

“Where are you going?”

He arched a dark brow at her. “I’m going to sleep on the far side of the room.”

“You don’t have to do that. This futon is big enough for all three of us.”

“I know,” He replied somewhat hesitantly. “But—”

“No buts or ifs about it. I’m tired of seeing you sleeping on the floor. There’s no harm in it and I promise not to bite,” She giggled at the thought and laid down beside Shippo, snuggling under the blankets.

Sighing, he settled himself down on the other side of Shippo, but rather than stare at her, he turned his back, his thoughts weighing heavily on what just happened.

“Good night Yuuta.”

“Night.”

“Good night my sweet Shippo.”

Ψ

August 22nd

“They’ve prepared everything so quickly,” Kagome stood at awe.

Three large carts, pulled by three horses, stood before her. There were many bundles of rice, vegetables and fruits, that would last them weeks if not months. The other wagons were full of many fabrics and blankets, which would be needed for Winter which would fall upon them. There was also furs mixed in with other valuable necessities. It was so much, Kagome felt almost bad for leaving with it all.

Yuuta smiled at the sight of the wagons before shifting his gaze behind them, the sight of the Daimyo and his daughter quickly approaching. As they turned to greet them with respective bows, the Daimyo handed Kagome a rolled-up missive, which she took elatedly.

“My daughter spoke with me this morning about wanting to travel to Edo, and this letter will help against any false accusations should they arise. Our seal will be good enough and I’m sure the Daimyo will put his trust in you just as he does in us,” Shako replied with a smile. His eyes turned towards the wagons and to his many men gathered around it, stocking the wagons with more than enough supplies for their travels. “While you were still in your rooms, I spoke with the village about your circumstances, to a degree, and you will be kindly welcomed back whenever.”

“We appreciate your help and all that you’ve done for us,” Kagome replied happily, Shippo snug in her arms. Her eyes however turned towards two of the wagons, the sight of five slightly older men sitting atop it, with barrels of water sitting behind them. “Are they coming with us?”

Shako nodded. “Of course. When I said I would help, I will,” He laughed. “Winter is fast approaching and, in the letter, it was mentioned some of your huts have been destroyed. Regardless if your people are rebuilding, I would feel better if me and my men saw for ourselves.”
Yuuta blinked. “You are traveling as well?”

Again, he nodded. “Of course. Kaede is an old friend whom I haven’t seen in years. I would like to also meet with her and see how she is doing and also get a sense of your village’s predicament. Do not worry about, I’ve been meaning to do some traveling and I’ll have only the best of my men with me.”

There was a sudden noise from behind, and as Kagome and Yuuta turned incuriosity, they were surprised to see the three girls from yesterday, the very same girls who brought them by cart and who also pulled out their blades upon them.

To their surprise, Rui, Chiyoko and Itsuko both fell to their knees before them, their heads bent apologetically. “Please forgive us!” The replied in unison.

Sango moved beside Kagome, a hand upon her shoulder comfortingly. “Despite the circumstances which happened yesterday, they are truly sorry. A common misunderstanding, though they should have been more resourceful before pulling out their blades.”

Kagome slowly nodded. Honestly, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to forgive them, not to mention bringing up how it was wrong for her to care for Shippo. When they pulled out their swords, threatening to kill them, not to mention calling them spies, it simply hurt. There were so many distrustful people, but still, she supposed she could understand.

“Kagome?” Yuuta called, hoping to know her reaction to the girls. He was able to forgive but not forget, and he only wished Kagome would come to the same conclusion.

After a moment’s pause, Kagome nodded. “Alright. I’ll forgive you, but don’t you ever pull out your swords on strangers again unless they attack you. As for your hate towards demons, I can understand a bit, but it still doesn’t mean you should attack an innocent child, regardless of their race.”

“We’re sorry!” They replied, heads lowered to the grounds.

Looking away from them, Kagome smiled at Sango. “Yuuta and I agreed this morning about traveling out to Edo. It will take two days by foot to reach, so I’m sorry we can’t travel with you the rest of the way south.”

“I’ll be remaining behind to handle the affairs here,” She replied. “Since that’s the case, he can stay here with me until you return,” She replied, but Kagome seemed uncertain. “Do not worry. He will be safe with me, I assure you. You can leave Clover here as
Yuuta, who was holding the rope to Clover, he heard her bleat from beside him and he handed the rope off to Rui and her two friends. “That will certainly help us. Thank you.”

Although she was a bit sad to leave Shippo behind, she realized it would be for the best. Smiling, she kissed his cheek one last time before handing him to Sango. “He might be a handful.”

She nodded. “I think I can handle it. Taking care of him shouldn’t be any different from taking care of Kohaku when he was a baby,” She replied before pointing towards a brown horse standing off to the side. “I’ve prepared a horse for the two of you. It will be much faster traveling, and you should reach Edo by tomorrow morning. We’ve filled up some containers with water and there is food prepared for you in the sack attached the horse.”

“Thank you so much for all your help. We won’t be gone long,” Kagome replied. Looking at Yuuta beside her, she smiled. “Well, let’s go Yuuta. No use standing around and wasting time.”

Author Notice:

I'm thinking about writing an Escaflowne/Inuyasha Crossover sometime in the future. Would that be something you'd be interested in reading? I'm debating on having Kagome take Hitomi’s place and making Escaflowne slightly different than the anime depicted. I'm unsure whether or not I should also add Hitomi since I plan to pair Kagome with Van. What are your thoughts?
Edo

Chapter Summary

Yuuta and Kagome finally arrive to Edo Village, and with their minds set on meeting with the Daimyo, they realize it wasn't going to be easy, not when a certain 'someone' has his say.

August 23rd

Azure and russet eyes marveled upon the magnificent sight of an enormous village, its entirety encompassed by tall mudbrick and wooden walls with two sentry men on duty before them. The sheer size was roughly twenty times or more the size of High Priestess Kaede’s Village, and only hers had a rough estimate of only thirty villagers.

As Kagome and Yuuta stepped through the gates, unperturbed by the guardsman, dressed in their armored attire and straw hats, bearing the crest of the Takeda Clan with long spears in hand, they ventured through the bustling village.

Upon first entering, the huts looked no different than the ones she and Yuuta happened upon during their venture; the huts were average at best, with either hay or wooden roofs held down by large rocks. There were various small markets, the bustling of busy streets, boisterous children playing and helping their families, wives, servants and even husbands routinely going about their day without rest. Fruits and vegetation adorned small wooden tables, weaved straw baskets, crafts made from wood, clay and even straw; there were also many fish hanging up to dry on wooden racks, peasant women selling their goods for a measly price, faces dirtied with sweat and dust from the streets.

With every step and turn around the village, passing through a brief fog of smoke from outdoor cooking and avoiding large holes in the ground, filled with a collection of muddy water, compliments of last night’s rain, Kagome couldn’t help but stop briefly on their trek. Each way she looked, she noticed the similarity between hers and Yuuta’s clothing and theirs.

Women were wearing similar clothes as she was used to, simple and poor-quality kimonos made from hemp or cotton, varying in dull and less bright colors of browns, reds, blues and greens, their hair pulled back in low simple ponytails with white or brown tenugui towels wrapped around their heads and tied in a large bow at their foreheads; it kept their foreheads from accumulating too much perspiration.

As for the men, there were two distinct mixtures with their clothing. Many wore the basic kimonos with dirtied trousers and straw sandals while quite a few wore Hakamas over their kimonos, some with an overcoat and others without; some even preferred wearing tabi footwear.

“They are samurai,” Came Yuuta’s voice from beside her.

Kagome nodded at this. Truthfully, as far as she knew, there were no samurai living in their village, then again, as humble as they were, it was probably no surprise. “It makes sense they
would live closer to their Daimyo. I’m sure it must be very convenient for them, unlike others who must live farther away.”

“It’s not only samurai and farmers who live in this village, but also the Daimyo’s servants and soldiers, ranging from foot soldiers, guardsman and even those who must carry supplies in times of war,” Yuuta answered, continuing their trek forward while pulling the reins of their horse behind them. “There is also a vast array of merchants and wandering Ronin who come in and out of Edo as well as other provincial villages, as well as travelers such as you and I, Kagome.”

“I see. It’s definitely a huge change from what I’m used to seeing these days. It’s kind of nice,” She gleamed.

The further they walked along the dirt path through the throng of people, old and young, their sights gradually changed. The style of huts was more refined looking, with painted structures, roofs adorned in blue or green tiles with intricated curves and angles. Two variations of walls individually surrounded these large houses and were either made with both wood and stone or simply stone with roofed tiles above them. Lofty trees, the leaves a vibrant green, were seen behind these walls, indicating that these houses belonged to well-to-do families, perhaps even respected retainers of their daimyo.

Mouth suddenly agape, Kagome paused, her eyes taking in the grandeur of Edo. There were large huts, people dressed in multilayered silken kimonos of bright and beautiful patterns. Colors of yellows, pinks, reds, oranges, blues, greens and so much more adorned the busy streets.

There were different hairstyles women took to; many wore their hair unbound, long and straight, mostly over their shoulders and lower back. Their brown to black hair gleamed in the sunlight, perhaps a result of rich oils they massaged into each strand early that morning. Some chose to wear painted metal accessories behind their ears, others going without. Whether or not their fringes covered the entirety of their small foreheads, or their hair was parted down the middle with two shortened strands at their cheeks, Kagome couldn’t help but stare speechlessly; they were beautiful. Light makeup was applied to their faces, rouge for their lips and cheeks and dark charcoal aligning their eyes.

And yet, among many of these women, Kagome couldn’t help but stare in slight mortification, her eyes discerning blackened teeth among a couple noble women somewhere in their late forties, caught up in small conversation near a wooden bridge and river. Not only that, but their faces were painted so white, she felt as if she were staring at two ghosts, bickering and tittering to themselves. Even their eyebrows looked oddly out of place, as if they’d been shaven and repainted in black ink further above their foreheads.

“Kagome?” Yuuta called, rousing her from her brief moment of stupor.

“I just saw something I can never unsee…” She softly replied, quickly looking away from the women.

“What’s that?”

“Their teeth,” She replied, visibly grimacing at her response, the very sight of it causing her to shudder.

Looking over in her line of sight, he noticed the older women, talking amongst themselves, laughing. “Oh, you mean ohaguro? It is most common among noble married women, though there are some men who partake in it as well. Could it be your first time seeing this?”
Ohaguro? So that’s what it was. “Actually, yes, it is. Why do they blacken their teeth like that?”

As they paused on their trek briefly, he crossed his arms and mused. “There are two instances why this occurs. When a child becomes eight to ten years of age, they blacken their teeth before marriage, but this is only strictly seen in noble families. They believe anything as black as lacquer to be beautiful.”

Kagome blinked at this. “So … anyone without black teeth are seen as ugly?”

“In simpler terms, yes.”

She frowned at this. “If you ask me, it looks like they have tooth decay…”

He almost laughed at her reply. “Believe it or not, blackening one’s teeth helps prevent tooth decay!”

Kagome smacked him, his joke somewhat funny. “Yeah right! I don’t believe that! What do they use to blacken their teeth?”

“I’ve heard they dissolve iron and vinegar together combined with gallnut powder or tea powder, it becomes black like ink. Drinking it would be poisonous but they would apply it by brush when required.” When he noticed her perturbed face, he laughed again. “Consider this a learning experience, Kagome. It’s about to get more interesting as we continue on.” As normal as noble customs came, he preferred the natural faces of women.

More interesting? What could be more interesting than dying your teeth black? As she looked back once more, following behind Yuuta, she couldn’t help but take one last look. Perhaps shaving their eyebrows was also a sign of being noble. Either way, why waste time and repaint them? “I don’t think it can get more interesting than this…”

They soon crossed the bridge and arrived at another busy street before them. There were men dressed as women wearing different variations of masks upon their faces. One man was playing a peculiar looking drum known as a den den daiko, and it had two strands holding a single bead in each and when rotated on its axis, would create different sounds. One man was speaking to the audience, as if he were an actor giving a monologue, and as Kagome and Yuuta passed by, they heard him telling a story about the love between their Daimyo and a servant woman who later became his concubine. Overall, it was quite interesting, and Kagome wondered if it was true.

“Yuuta?”

Without even asking, he already knew. “Were they to utter rumors and lies in public would certainly be treasonous. I’ve heard the rumors as well. And from what I hear, his lordship does indeed have one concubine.”

Mystified by the story, and although she wanted to stay longer hear more, she knew they didn’t have time to dawdle, at least not yet. The further they traveled through the village, Kagome couldn’t help but realize they were garnering unwanted and curious attention. The wandering eyes of many beautiful women, their faces painted, their long beautifully shining hair billowing behind them past their ankles as well as the pristine dress of noble men, their different variations of hairstyles capturing Kagome’s attention.

In truth, Kagome recognized a few of these hairstyles. One in particular was known as the motodori where men of high class would pull their hair into a high topknot at the back of their heads, normally held together with oil to give it a slim appearance. This type of hairstyle required a
kanmuri, a black cap which spanned the entirety of their foreheads. Although the traditional cap was similar to what priests would wear, this cap was slightly smaller in appearance, the top long and pointed to secure their high topknot while a long gray and slightly translucent cloth would span from behind the cap.

Just like many, these men were dressed in Kariginu, a round collard silk robe with long sleeves, in variations of colors with different patterns etched into the beautiful cloth. White pants, similar to hakamas were worn underneath, bunching just at their feet. If Kagome didn’t know any better, she’d would assume these men were Kuge, but this wasn’t Kyoto where they normally resided. Perhaps, they were merely noble men, maybe even with high positions beside their Daimyo.

There were also a few samurai walking about, and even courtiers here and there dressed in kamishimo, delighting themselves with the view of Edo. From Kagome’s personal appearance, these samurai seemed a lot better off than the ones they passed earlier. Unlike them, these men were dressed in slightly better clothing, the emblem of the Takeda Clan stitched into their kamishimo.

As the stares became more noticeable, Kagome couldn’t help but lean close into Yuuta, matching his pace with hers. They were judging them. Perhaps, this part of Edo was strictly reserved for those of upper class. “Yuuta. Why are they staring?”

He didn’t have to look to realize they were being watched, whispered about and pointed towards. “It is seemed as rude to step into their ‘clean’ world. Yet, it is not out of the ordinary. I’ve passed through this part of Edo several times before, and despite getting spit at and noticed, no one has ever pushed me out. According to the law of Edo, severe discrimination and or neglect is against the Daimyo’s words. It’s no surprise these people feel resentment for us.”

“The Daimyo favors even the poor?”

He nodded. “You could say that. He is a man who sees all his people equally, as strange as it may seem.”

“But you said it wouldn’t be easy to speak with him.”

He looked at her this time, but he only shook his head. “I did say that. And despite knowing this, speaking with the Daimyo in person is not an easy feat. You must first pass through his soldiers and even his many advisors, Kagome. Depending on their views on you, as well as the purpose for the meeting, you may or may not see him. That’s why I told you before this wouldn’t be an easy task.”

Kagome only fumed at this. “But it’s not up to his advisors though. It should be up to him.”

“That’s … not always the case. This is not an easy world where we could simply call out to the daimyo and easily be recognized. You must first go through all the trials to do so. The worse that could happen would be you are sent away, and often, this is what happens. Sometimes … I wonder if the Daimyo even knows his people have called out for his help.”

“But, we have the seal of the Demon Slayers to prove our worth!” She insisted.

He nodded again. “That is true. We will have to see what happens first.”

Kagome sighed, turning to look ahead of them as they continued passing through many areas of Edo. As she squinted her gaze, pulling her hand over her eyes to shield from the sun’s harsh rays, she noticed the faint outline of a large structure in the distance. There it was. Takeda Castle was
just in view before them, and if she had to guess how much further their walk would carry them, perhaps they’d reach the walls within fifteen minutes.

Two samurai men within their late thirties blocked entrance into Takeda Castle. They were each dressed in armor and chainmail, each with a long spear in hand, with thick black brows and shaved heads, their black hair pulled back into a high topknot and a white band around their foreheads.

Kagome was almost at her wits end. For five straight minutes, she pleaded to the guardsman to allow them entrance to see the Daimyo, but they merely refused. “This is really important. I must meet with him. My village needs help!”

“Like we’ve told you before, the Daimyo isn’t seeing anyone today. This is your final warning, otherwise, we’ll be forced to imprison you.” One ordered, his voice loud and demanding.

Before she could retort back, Yuuta pulled her away from the gate. “Kagome. This isn’t going to work. The Daimyo isn’t seeing anyone today. We can try tomorrow.”

“And what if he decides not to see anyone tomorrow? Or the next day, Yuuta? We’d have wasted our time traveling out here!”

At this moment, despite being turned away many times, Yuuta couldn’t help but notice the raven-haired woman’s frustrations, her voice becoming louder with each moment. She was visibly shaken, angry and close to lashing out on anyone who told her otherwise. “Even so, the worse that will happen is imprisonment, and if that happens, Kagome, there’s no telling when you’d be released. It isn’t worth it. Let’s go back.” He replied, trying his best to calm her and lead her away, but to his surprise and disbelief, she only pulled away from his hold.

“I’m not giving up! Lady Kaede and the entire village have been through enough! Being cheated for one which I will not stand, demons attacking, not to mention our people who have been ridiculed, beaten, raped and even taken to Edo as slaves I will not stand for it any longer! This isn’t right! We deserve justice for all of this, Yuuta!”

“Kagome, please quell your anger.” He exclaimed, both hands upon her shoulders, his eyes shifting warily towards the guardsman closely watching.

“What is all this ruckus out here?!” A loud and familiar voice resounded from behind the gate. Kagome and Yuuta paused, their gaze shifting towards the two guardsman who suddenly took hold of the handle of each door to the gate, opening it widely to reveal a tall man dressed in white hakamas, a large buke over his blue haori, the sleeves broad. This middle-aged man’s hair was tied in a high-topknot, the top of his head shaved and his brows thick, dark eyes haughtily gazed at them.

She was practically seething. It was that damned man, the crook Takeo! As much as she wanted to tackle him to the ground and demand him to return all the children he stole from them, she held back, remembering Yuuta’s warning; One wrong move or slip of the tongue would put her in prison.

“Well? Who are you people?! Why are you causing a commotion this early in the afternoon?!” Takeo inquired, eyes squinting between the both of them. When he noticed their state of dress, poor kimonos and trousers, faces slightly dirtied and sweaty, he scoffed. “Commoners? What is it? What do you want?”
Unclenching her fists, Kagome took a deep breath and looked him square in the eye. “I wish to speak with the Daimyo. I have something important to discuss with him.”

Takeo arched a brow at her words. “Something important? You wish to speak with our Daimyo?” His laughed at her words. “I’m afraid your arrival was a waste of time. Our Daimyo is much too busy to meet with mere peasants. Now leave,” He waved his hand, gesturing for them to disappear.

“Just because we’re peasants you’re turning us away? It shouldn’t matter what we look like. We’re all his people, whether we’re poor or rich. I came all this way to speak with him and I will not leave until I do,” She replied, as calmly as she could.

Yet, her calm and demanding voice irritated Takeo, his left eye slightly twitching at the woman’s impertinence. “Such insolence!” He cried, his once calm face becoming stern. “Our Daimyo is busy with more important matters than your trivial wants! Such a disrespectful woman you are!”

Yuuta quickly reached to clasp his hand over Kagome’s mouth before anything worse flew from her lips, but he was too late to reach for her, because she’d already marched closer to Takeo. He felt his heart quicken in anticipation of what would soon come, and he wasn’t sure he could easily save her. ‘Kagome, I warned you…’

Kagome pointed her finger directly at his face, the like which caused him to stagger back in surprise and causing the guards to strain their eye warningly at her. “Trivial? What could be more important than his people starving?!”

His once stoic face became red as he grinded his teeth together. This girl was becoming a headache, and he was so tempted to backhand her, but instead, he turned to the guards beside him. “Get rid of her and if she so much as comes back here again, imprison her!” He suddenly turned and glared at the girl, whose expression did not once faulter. “And you, I don’t want to ever see your face around here again,” He seethed.

Before the guards could approach Kagome, Yuuta quickly took his stance in front of her, and dropped to his knees, lowering his head onto the ground as a sign of respect to the Financial Advisor. “Forgive her, milord! She is not right in her head,” He quickly replied. “She’s been ill since she was flung from our horse weeks ago. I’ll be sure she never comes back.”

As the guards paused in their approach towards Kagome, their eyes shifting towards Takeo, they regained their original positions beside the gate with just a wave of his hand.

“Do so. The last thing we need is some ill-minded girl approaching our Daimyo. Leave, and this is your final warning.”

“Thank you, milord! It will never happen again!” As he quickly regained his standing, the advisor turning to walk back through the open gate, Yuuta wasn’t prepared for Kagome’s angry and slightly hurt expression as she glowered at him.

“Ill-minded? You think I’m crazy?” Her voice rose suddenly, which caused the Takeo to pause and turn in question.

“Wait, Kagome, please calm down,” Yuuta replied.

Kagome scoffed. “I’ll show you ill-minded!”

“Control your woman!” Takeo replied, thoroughly disgusted by the ill-mannered woman.

Without warning, she glowered at Takeo’s scornful stare. “Control your woman? How dare you!
You fucking pompous ass!” She almost screamed, the result causing all jaws to drop, with Takeo stuttering as he pointed angrily at the girl.

Before anything worse could fall from Kagome’s lips, he immediately took her by the waist and threw her over his shoulder, quickly running away, past many onlookers who were either laughing at Takeo’s suspense or scorning Kagome’s ill manners with disappointed stares and or whispers.

“You wretched girl! Don’t you dare come back or else I’ll have you beheaded!” Takeo screeched, his voice cracking near the end. He was practically seething and shaking.

The last thing Kagome shouted back was the word jackass and her middle finger pointed up in front of her face, before Yuuta disappeared around the corner of the furthest wall and out of sight.

Feeling thoroughly embarrassed and ridiculed, Takeo removed his hat and stomped on it, growling in frustration before the two sentry men. Never in his life had he ever been insulted, and by a mere peasant girl with a terrible temper. “If that little wench shows up again, arrest her immediately!” He ordered them. “I’ll personally behead her myself!”

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Half an hour after such an incredibly frustrating scene, Kagome finally managed to release her steam, the result leaving Yuuta slightly uncertain about their trip to Edo. Back and forth, she paced, a hand to her chin and her eyes transfixed upon deep ponderings.

He was leaning against the wall further north of the south gate, and as of now, there were no signs of anyone else in the vicinity.

“I can’t believe him. He wouldn’t even hear me out,” She murmured in front of Yuuta.

He only sighed, rubbing his temples. “I told you it wouldn’t be easy. You’ve let your anger get the best of you.” Honestly, he never saw her so resentful before, and the sight of it half scared him, though he wouldn’t admit it.

“I know, I know. He’s such …” She paused. What the best word for someone like him, besides a pompous ass? “Douche. He’s a bigger douche than he was when I first laid eyes on him two months back!”

Douche? What was that? “Either way, getting inside will likely never happen now, unless me or someone else goes in your steed, Kagome.”

Pausing suddenly in her repetitive walk, her shoulders dropped and she sighed. He was right. Why did she let her anger get the best of her? Normally she was never so quick to anger, but after everything she endured while in this era, it was no wonder. It must have been all that anger that was building within her since the very beginning. After throwing her frustrations at Takeo, she felt slightly relieved, her thoughts slightly cleared. “So, now what?”

“What else? We leave Edo and return to the Demon Slayer Village and ultimately back to Lady Kaede’s Village,” He answered, as if it were obvious.

“No. I’m not giving up.”

He almost growled in frustration. “Kagome…”

“I just need a moment to think…” There had to be a way to get past the guards and meet with the Daimyo, but how? If she so much as got caught, she would be beheaded or spend her life in prison,
she was sure.

As he looked around them, a river flowing before them and tall trees nearby, he couldn’t help but look at the beige and tall wall behind him, the height quite tall. “Too bad we couldn’t just climb the wall,” He replied. The moment he said this, he noticed Kagome’s head turn at this, her eyes suddenly sparkling in realization.

“That’s it, Yuuta! You’re a genius! We can jump the wall!”

Yuuta blinked. What? “You’re joking…” From the sight of her renewed and enthusiastic face, she was serious. Curse his mouth for even uttering such a reply.

“No, it’s the perfect idea! The guards and even Takeo wouldn’t see it coming!”

“Absolutely not. Kagome, there’s no possible way we could even climb this wall without getting caught, not to mention, there isn’t enough rough exterior to hold onto. You’ll no sooner hurt yourself before you get over it.”

Kagome nodded at this. Yuuta was right about that. “There must be a way to get over…” Her eyes shifted towards their horse eating grass beside them and then to the wall. “What if we stood on the horse?”

“No.”

“Why not?” When she notices his stern look, she sighed. “Fine. Then if we can’t use the horse, let me use you. Give me a boost, Yuuta.”

It seemed no matter what he said, she wouldn’t listen to him, and as he turned around and surveyed the wall once more, he sighed. “I don’t know, Kagome. It’s still pretty tall, even if I boosted you.”

“We won’t know unless we try.”

Deciding he didn’t want to waste time arguing with her, he lowered himself on one knee, his foot planted firmly in the ground with his hands cupped before him. “Alright. Put your foot here.”

As she follows his instructions, one foot placed in his hands, he suddenly lifts her, her hands quickly grabbing his head for support. As he moved to stand, her feet suddenly planted firmly on his shoulders, his hands around each of her ankles to hold her steady, she touched the wall curiously. It was a lot higher than she first thought. Stretching her arms upwards, she tried to find a means to get up higher. “So close…”

“Try standing on your toes,” Kagome instructed.

“I already am,” Yuuta replied, struggling to retain this stance, his legs shaking form the amount of weight pressed upon his shoulders.

“Jump then!” She replied.

The sound of voices nearing them caused both Kagome and Yuuta to stiffen worryingly. People were approaching, and by the sounds of it, had not yet noticed them attempting to climb the wall.

Yuuta cursed. “Shit, Kagome, someone’s coming.”

Before he could pull her away from the wall and into his arms to hide, she pressed more weight onto his shoulder. “Wait Yuuta, push me up quickly. I’m barely touching the top.”
“What?”

“Hurry.”

Growling, he suddenly lowered himself into a squat position before jumping with as much strength as he had. To his relief, Kagome managed to grasp the top of the wall. For a moment, she almost lost her grip, but her determination to climb over worked. Kagome managed to push her sandaled feet into the wall and raise her leg over, the result leaving her staring at the other side, Takeda Castle sitting just before her, surrounded by large gardens. Finally, she would meet with the Daimyo.
Chapter Summary

Barely managing to be caught by the guards, Kagome meets with the Daimyo, in a way she never expected.

Kagome marveled at the sight of Takeda Castle before her, her cerulean gaze taking in the grandeur of the structure, its height so high, she felt almost intimidated to approach. There were various flags situated around the garden, the emblem of the Takeda Clan embellished upon the cloth, and as far as she saw, there were no servants loitering in the area.

Despite Yuuta distracting two locals sauntering past the wall, completely unaware of Kagome’s presence just above, she watched quietly as they disappeared in the distance before flashing Yuuta a relieved smile.

“Are you sure about this, Kagome? If you’re caught…” Yuuta began, his expression concerned for the young girl whom he’d come to look after for weeks.

She nodded. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

Turning away from him, she shifted her gaze towards the gardens below her, its entirety spanning around the entire castle. There was a large pond surrounded by many flowers situated a short distance away, a cute wooden bridge which spanned across it. Lofty green trees resided together in a small group of twos or threes in various places while the majority of the garden consisted of a large assortment of colorful flowers such as Asagao and Kiku.

It was breathtaking, seeing such a beautiful garden well-tended to and laid out, and yet, as she smiled at this, she couldn’t help but look directly down. Well, now that she managed to climb the wall and with Yuuta’s help, how was she suppose to drop down without hurting herself?

Kagome mused. Okay. Getting up here wasn’t too bad, so getting down couldn’t be that difficult. Maybe there was a ladder nearby she could use or maybe something she could jump onto. And yet, as she searched the entire gardens, there was nothing in sight. Her eyes flashed towards a large and lofty tree a short distance away, its branches large and perhaps sturdy enough to hold an individual. Maybe, that could work?

Ψ

Nobutora gleamed elatedly as he bounced his kemari ball from knee to knee, the hide shaped ball white with decorate patterns etched into its exterior. He was alone in the manor, practicing so he could one day play the other royals as well and someday best his father whom was well-known in his expertise in the game.

Yet, as he continued bouncing the ball, using his feet to keep it in the air, he lost control, the ball swiveling in another direction and across the room, bouncing before is laid stationary near one of the retainer’s feet. Sighing, she ran over towards the ball, the retainer handing it to him kindly. “I just can’t seem to get it right. Father makes it look so easy.”
The retainer smiled, despite the young boy’s hopes slightly deflating. “In time, I’m sure you will
best your father. You just need a little more practice, Lord Nobutora.”

He nodded. “You’re right. Maybe, once father has finished his meeting, he will play with me.”

A chuckle suddenly resounded, the sound low and husky. As Nobutora turned, he saw his father
leaning up against a wall right next to an open door, smiling at him amusedly.

“Father!” Nobutora excitedly exclaimed, running over to him with the ball held against his chest. “I
thought your meeting wouldn’t end for a few more hours.”

“I ended it early so I could spend time with you,” He replied, patting the child’s head softly.

Nobutora gleamed at this. “So, can we play together out in the gardens?”

His father nodded. “I’m free for the entire day, should anything arise. Come,” He replied, his hand
held out for his son.

As Nobutsuna ushered the retainer away, he led his son out of one of the many rooms within the
manor and into the main halls on the second floor. Beautiful tapestries decorated the walls and
black vases aligned each corner of the halls, there were also porcelain vases imported from China
here and there some with flowers planted within and others without.

“Father, have you seen mother lately?”

He mused. “Your mother is away with her maid servants at this time. I do believe she is visiting her
family.”

Nobutora nodded. “Oh, I see. It’s been a long time since her family last visited. We should invite
them over often, father. It would make mother really happy.”

“Indeed.”

Truthfully, his mother was not born with noble blood. Despite only knowing her as his mother,
who was a concubine to his father, he often heard stories whispered by the servants in the manor.
Apparently, his mother derived from a poor family, miles away from Edo, and was selected as one
of the many candidates suitable to become the Daimyo’s concubine eight years ago. A selective
process took place and there were at least fifty suitable women from across the neighboring
provinces whom the Daimyo would choose from, but in the end, he chose his mother, despite her
humble background. When it came to Daimyo’s owning concubines, it was normal to have as
many as one hundred, but father chose only his mother. He said it was love at first sight, and
although he never married her, they cherished each other dearly.

Knowing all this, Nobutora never uttered a word to his mother. He knew his mother was ashamed
of her humble background and uncomfortable with the constant whisperings within the manor and
outside, and as such, often closed his ears to all of it, for fear he might see his mother differently.
And yet, Nobutora didn’t mind it. He loved his mother, just as much as he loved his father.

Despite being lost in thought, Nobutora’s eyes shifted towards the windows, viewing the majestic
gardens, his eyes turning back to his father elatedly. There was even a little skip to his step, but he
paused, stopping suddenly before swiveling his head back towards the window.

Noticing this, Nobutsuna paused as well, and blinked at his son. “What’s the matter?”

Nobutora blinked. Had he imagined it? While he’d been walking through the halls, hand in hand
with his father, he noticed someone standing on the outer walls of the manor, someone with long black hair dressed in a pale blue kimono. Pulling away, he bounced over towards the large windows and peeked out.

Right there. A girl was balancing on the wall, her hands held out to steady herself. What was she doing. Although this was a first in his life he’d seen such a thing, he couldn’t look away. Somehow, it was fascinating. “Father…”

Although he hadn’t noticed, arching a curious brow at his son, Nobutsuna approached the window, his eyes watching his son curiously. “What has caught your attention?”

Nobutora pointed against the glass. “There is a strange woman on the wall. Look.”

Bewildered by his son’s words, Nobutsuna gazed out the window and to his surprise, there was indeed a woman balancing herself on the walls, walking cautiously across it. He didn’t recognize the woman, and as he accessed her state of dress, she was most likely a commoner, someone who possibly resided in the poor district of Edo. “What in Kami’s name is she doing?” He asked allowed, also mesmerized like his son.

“If you think she is trying to get over the wall?” His son asked curiously, blinking a few times as he pressed his face closer towards the window.

That could very well be a possibility, and yet, he wondered how a small girl could even manage it. “This is certainly something you don’t see every day.” He wondered how long she was out there for and why none of the soldiers had noticed.

“Do you think she is a spy, father?”

He shook his head. “Climbing our wall in broad daylight? I doubt it, my son.”

Not a spy? Nobutora mused. “Then, do you think she came to visit, father?”

He suddenly laughed at this. “Well, I am not sure. Why, do you want to meet with her?”

Nobutora mused. “Do you think she will want to meet with me?”

“And why do you say that? You are my son after all,” He laughed.

Although he found the strange situation humorous, he heard his son intake a deep breath and gasp, both of his small hands against the window.

“Oh no! She almost fell!” He replied.

Nobutsuna turned his head quickly at this. The village girl must have lost her footing for a moment, but she was still holding onto the wall. Despite being a woman, her strength to overcome such a serious fall easily fell away as she leveraged herself back up the wall and onto her feet. “What is she trying to gain by doing this…” He muttered to himself, stroking his chin curiously.

“Maybe we should call for the guards?” He wondered. He was worried the girl might hurt herself if she did fall.

Nobutsuna considered this. “Let’s see where this goes first. I do not see anything suspicious about her yet.”

Nobutora and his father continued watching the strange girl. At one point, she completely stopped
and looked behind her, and although they couldn’t hear what she was saying, it seemed like she was talking to someone. And the next thing they knew, she was looking back into the gardens, unsure of what to do.

“She can’t get down, I think,” His son replied. “Maybe she lost something over the wall?”

The girl’s eyes were focused on a large tree in front of her, the tree just near their window, and yet, she had yet to notice she was being watched. Despite already knowing her intentions, Nobutsuna squinted his eyes. He was expecting her to make the leap across. He wasn’t sure if she was conflicted, since she was still so far away, and before he knew it, her hands went to her obi tied around her waist, untying it slightly so it was much looser on her. What was she doing? Before he could question it, she suddenly jumped.

From beside him, he heard his son gasp, his eyes widened in awe, and as the Daimyo watched the girl, her long raven locks billowing behind her, and her light blue kimono suddenly moving against her petite body. To say she landed beautifully was an understatement. She truly did, but in the process of it all, her kimono was in disarray, one sleeve hanging off her shoulder and the entire front exposed before him and his son, so much so, he quickly covered Nobutora’s eyes.

“Father, why are you covering my eyes? I want to see! Is she okay?”

“Not until you’re older…” He sweat dropped. “Son, I think you should return to your room for now,” He replied, uncovering his son’s eyes and turning him towards him. “Do not speak a word of this to anyone, as this will only be between us.”

Nobutora nodded, and despite wanting to see if the girl was alright, he did as his father instructed and returned to his room. Looking back towards the window, he watched as the girl shimmied her way down the tree, and with that, his eyes narrowed and he turned away.

Ψ

Kagome breathed a sigh of relief, as she quickly fastened her kimono properly. She unfastened it so it’d be easier for her to get some leg room and make the jump. Finally, she managed to get over the wall and down into the gardens with little to no trouble. She was sure no one saw her, except Yuuta who must have been shocked to see her jump, and yet, it was quiet. ‘Alright, I just need to find a way inside to meet with the Daimyo. I just hope he doesn’t have me imprisoned.’

It shouldn’t be that difficult, she was sure. After all, if the gardens were empty, she was pretty sure the manor was mostly empty, at least, she hoped. As she slowly made her way through the gardens, passing the cute little pond, she peeked around the corner, her eyes noticing two soldiers guarding the entrance within the manor. Well, she obviously couldn’t use the front entrance, so now she was left hiding in some bushes.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she mused. There had to be another way into the manor than simply slipping past the guards. Maybe she could cause a distraction, but she was sure that wouldn’t work. This was a wealthy house, and there were no doubt servants loitering to and from. Maybe, there was a back entrance behind the house the servants used.

Breaking off a stick from the bush she hid behind, she drew into the dirt at her feet. “If this is the front entrance, I came all the way from this side…” She drew the wall, the position in which she climbed the wall, the location in which she jumped into the tree to where she was now. “The guards are stationed at the front…” Kagome drew a circle behind a huge box labeled manor, and squinted her eyes. That’s where she needed to go and from there, she would make her final judgement.
Unexpectedly, another stick came into view behind her, and despite being caught up in her musings, Kagome watched as another circle was made to her drawing and it was on the furthest left side of the manor. Kagome blinked at it.

“Actually, the servant’s quarters would be here beside the well,” Came a husky voice behind her ear.

Kagome blinked again. So, if the servants’ quarters were there, then she just passed it up. “How did I miss that?” She replied, sighing suddenly. As her eyes looked at the location marked on her drawing, her eyes shifted towards the second stick, one which was attached to a hand that wasn’t her own. Wait a minute… Realization finally struck her, and she turned suddenly, her back pressed against the wall of the manor.

A man was knelt down beside her, both hidden behind a large hedge enclosed around the entire manor. He was slightly smiling at her, his eyes shifting towards the dirt drawing and her face in curious wonder.

“Where did you come from?” Was he a noble? Was he servant? Was he going to rat her out to the guards?

He chuckled at her startled reaction. “I should be asking that myself. I’ve never seen you before.”

Kagome nervously swallowed. “Well … I’ve never seen you before…”

Judging by his unexpected smile, he didn’t seem angry, so that was good, so far. As she continued looking at him, her gaze sweeping his features up and down curiously, she couldn’t help but feel hesitant. This man was probably in his late twenties, dressed in a dark maroon kamishimo, with a black long-sleeved kosode worn beneath his hakama pants.

The Takeda emblem was embellished into each part of his broad sleeves, and she couldn’t help but remember Yuuta’s words. He must be a noble, judging by how he was dressed. Even his hair was pulled back into a high topknot, but surprisingly, the sides of his head wasn’t shaved. He had kind dark eyes, somewhat pale skin, a sharp jawline and yet, she couldn’t help but notice how handsome he looked.

Now that he was face to face with this mysterious woman, Nobutsuna couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she was. From her face to her hands and feet, she was entirely fair, unlike other villagers who held darker complexions. Yet, as he looked upon her, perhaps a bit too closely, he noticed her large blue eyes; it was something he’d never seen before in anyone. Who was she?

Kagome blushed under his gaze, a hand moving beneath the nape of her neck to be sure her kimono hadn’t moved. Why was he looking at her like that? “Um…”

He snapped out of it quickly, shaking his head as he chuckled. “I presume you’re trying to sneak into the manor. Might I ask why that is?”

Again, she hesitated. Who was he and why was he acting friendly? What was his motive? “Listen … I…”

Kagome wasn’t sure how to explain herself. Likely, this man was playing a game with her just for his own amusement, and after he grew bored, she was sure he would turn her in. Everything inside her told her to run away, but even so, she didn’t have a ladder to get back up the wall, something else she failed to realize before it was too late. Should she play into his game and get onto his good side? If so, what would happen after?
He must have noticed her hesitance, and realizing she was extremely uncomfortable, he sat back, awkwardly laughing. “I didn’t mean to make you nervous. Actually, I couldn’t help but notice you were climbing the wall…”

Again, she blushed. “Oh gosh … did you see that?” He must have seen her kimono fly open, if that was the case. He must have gotten a good look at her undergarments.

His face slightly reddened in recollection and he nodded. “Yes. I was afraid you might fall, so I ran out here quickly, but I see you are just fine.”

“I hope … you aren’t angry…”

He mused. “Well, you haven’t done anything to warrant any aggression, at least, not as of yet. Why did you do it?”

She paused. “It’s … personal…”

He noted her flushed expression as she said this, and couldn’t help but arch a dark brow as he leaned in slightly closer to her. “Could it be … you’ve fallen in love with the Daimyo and have come to see him?”

Kagome wasn’t sure how much redder her face would get, but she quickly shook her head at his reply. Fallen in love? He had to be kidding. “No. It’s nothing like that, but I won’t deny you’re correct on your last statement.”

He smiled at this. “I thought so. I thought perhaps there must have been a motive to climbing the wall, despite risking your life. You wish to meet with the Daimyo. Although this is rather strange, you must have your reasons?”

She nodded. “You don’t have to worry about any hidden motives,” She replied, causing him to arch another brow. “I just need to speak with him about something important,” She replied, suddenly catching his knowing look. “And no, it has nothing to do with any feelings involved,” she sputtered embarrassedly.

He suddenly laughed at this. “I’m only teasing you. Rest assured, I will not speak a word to anyone of this matter.”

Kagome was taken aback. What? This man, whom was obviously a noble and a stranger to boot, was willing to keep this all a secret? But why? He didn’t know her. How could he trust someone who climbed a wall and was obviously making plans in the dirt to get inside? It didn’t make sense. Maybe he was slightly weird and overly friendly? Kagome couldn’t be sure.

“If you need help getting inside, I can help you meet with the Daimyo.”

Kagome narrowed her eyes at him. “But why? Why are you doing this for me, for someone who is a stranger? How do you know I’m telling the truth?” Could it be he was the brother of the Daimyo? Did the Daimyo have a brother? She wasn’t sure; after all, she wasn’t that good at history.

“Reading people’s true intentions comes quite easily for me. I can tell just by looking at you. I don’t see someone willing to hold a dagger to this household, and you must have a reason to be here. Why don’t you tell me first what that reasoning truly is?”

So that was it? Her gut was telling her to trust him, but her mind was telling her to run back to Yuuta. Still, he didn’t seem like a liar to her, and he honestly seem genuine in his words. “Alright.
Well … I’ve traveled many days to get to Edo to speak with the Daimyo. You see, my village is not doing too well, in fact, we’re facing starvation.”

Nobutsuna’s eyes narrowed at this. What? Starvation? How was that possible when he’s been told by his advisors that his people were well taken care of in his lands? “Could you elaborate?”

Kagome sighed. “That’s just it. We’re suffered many things over these past few months, ranging from droughts, a demon attack, bandits, losing our harvest and going days with little to no food. I couldn’t just stand back and watch this any longer, despite reaching out to people who were willing to help us, but I was pointed towards reaching out to the Daimyo to explain our situation. I tried to meet with him, but I was turned away and threatened, saying the Daimyo was too busy to meet with a mere commoner…”

Hearing her words, and seeing the expression of sadness and worry on her countenance angered him. She wasn’t lying, that much he noted, but why had this happened? He was always willing to meet with his people, no matter their status, and yet, she was turned away. “I see. That’s why you climbed the wall. I understand now. I’m sorry you and your village have suffered.”

Kagome nodded. “I just need to meet with him and maybe he can help us. I fear, once winter arrives, our village…”

He shook his head. “Say no more. I’ll help you inside.” He replied before looking through the leaves of the hedge to be sure no one was nearby. To his relief, the garden was still empty. Standing up, he reached out a hand to the young girl. “Come.”

Blinking, she couldn’t help but smile back as she took his hand, allowing him to guide her through the gardens. There were a couple instances where a few servants were walking to and from the garden, until they managed to sneak within the manor, passing through without being seen until they arrived upstairs. The entire manor was mainly empty, no guards here or there, and it made getting to one room to another that much easier.

Eventually, it wasn’t long before this handsome noble led her to a large shoji door, with beautifully painted leaves decorating its exterior. As he closed the door behind him, Kagome made her way into the simple and yet slightly decorated room, sunlight peering in from high windows. A simple and polished wooden table greeted her, with a small black vase with blue and pink orchids placed within. It was a flower she loved very much, simple and yet, it held a certain elegance within its stem.

As she made her way across the room, she couldn’t help but notice a petite figure of a woman standing before her, a tray in hand and dressed in a dark green kimono, her long raven hair pulled back behind her in a white ribbon, her blunt bangs framing her oval face. There was a look of surprise from the young woman, but her eyes softened on account of the man behind Kagome, and she offered a small bow of her head.

“Good timing. This is my guest, so do not feel alarmed,” He explained, hoping to soothe the maid’s worries and confusion. “Fetch us refreshments, if you will.”

She obliged, nodding her head once more before stepping out of the room with her tray. The maid only turned once to look back before opening the door and sliding it shut behind her.

“If you will, have a seat there,” He explained, guiding Kagome towards a large gray pillow; it was flat and quite wide, and yet, its cushioning soothed Kagome’s aching knees.

“Thank you.”
Pleased, he took a seat across from her, on a slight pedestal with a large cushioned chair behind him, with embellishments of banners behind him, with spears and swords hanging from the walls in a fashionable manner. There was even armor sitting off to the side of the room, glinting in the sunlight beside her.

For a moment, they sat there, both looking at one another. At first, it felt comfortable, and Kagome couldn’t deny her anxiousness to meet with the Daimyo. Yet, this man had yet to fetch the servants to bring him. Then again, maybe the Daimyo was busy still, so he was buying some time. “Thank you again for doing this. It means a lot.”

He merely nodded, his eyes glimpsing her briefly more before smiling. “You’re welcome. I don’t even know your name yet?”

“Kagome.”

His eyes scanned her a moment longer. “You wouldn’t happen to have a surname, would you?” He asked, and at his inquiry, she blinked. “These days, many peasants have taken on surnames, though it is simply a small majority as of now, with the exception of samurai families.”

“Higurashi…”

He blinked. So, she did indeed have a surname. Higurashi? How interesting; he’d never heard of such a last name. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Higurashi. I am Nobutsuna. Takeda Nobutsuna.”

Kagome’s eyes widened at this. Wait, he was the Daimyo? Immediately upon hearing this, she lowered her head to the floor, much to his surprise. “Forgive me. I didn’t know you were the Daimyo.” This entire time, he must have humored himself without telling her, and for that, she felt embarrassed.

A chuckle resounded within the room, the Daimyo finding the woman quite amusing. Pulling out a small book from his sleeve pocket, he reached for a brush at his table and slathered its bristles in wet ink beside him before jotting down some kind of note into the book. “Please sit comfortably, Higurashi. It is just us here, so you may relax.”

She pulled her face away from the floor and sat up, though she couldn’t help the fact that her body was trembling, her knees shaking beneath her. Kagome felt nervous, and yet, there was no reason to be. Sure, she’d been told to respect nobles during her stay in the Sengoku Era, especially by the villagers, Kaede and especially Yuuta. Still, this was her time kneeling before someone of great power, and in her history books no doubt. His ranking was higher than even Sango’s father; and yet, despite his status, he treated her with kindness.

“Forgive me for keeping this from you until now,” He apologized, placing his book open on the table beside him, his paint brush beside his ink slab. “Now then, why don’t you tell me in full detail exactly what happened?”

Nodding, she reached into her kimono sleeve and withdrew two rolled up parchments before standing up and approaching his table, offering them to him with both hands, her head down, eyes staring at the floor. “One is from our High Priestess and the other is from Lord Shako of the Demon Slayers,” Kagome replied before returning to her cushion to kneel before him.

He took both letters and looked at her with surprise. Even the Demon Slayers? If this young girl’s village even concerned them, then this was surely something to look into with deep scrutiny. “I see. Give me a moment.”
As he looked over the parchment given to him by her High Priestess, Kaede, his eyes skimed each word carefully; the letter spoke of great detriments the village endured the past month, beginning with a serious drought, bandits raiding their village, burning their huts and capturing their women, all while destroying their poor harvests. Such a situation led to a misunderstanding with a demon which had housed itself into the body of one of the bandits, the leader to be more precise; in the end, it was this woman here who helped vanquish the demon.

His eyes looked up at her once more, searching her petite form up and down for answers as to why and how it was possible she could vanquish a demon. She seemed no more than an average peasant, despite her beauty.

The door slid open during his reading, the maid servant from before sauntering in with a familiar tray in hand, a steaming pot, two cups and two plates of what appeared to be cookies, colorful in appearance. As she set down the tray upon a small table, she reached for a small surface and pulled it close towards the two, before fetching the tray once more. After filling each ceramic cup with sweet smelling tea, and setting a tray of delectable beside Kagome and the Daimyo, she exited the room once more.

Kagome’s eyes shifted towards the tea and cookies, but she held back from eating, not wanting to show any disrespect. As her eyes looked over to the Daimyo, she noticed his serious expression, his eyes following every word. Did he believe what Kaede wrote? Would he really be willing to help the village?

Nobutsuna continued reading, his mouth slightly in awe at what he was reading. So, it seemed Kagome Higurashi discovered her spiritual powers after destroying the demon, and the High Priestess soon learned the woman was of Priest and priestess descent. He noticed the seal of the High Priestess at the end of the letter, confirming her signature, and he placed it down upon the table. So, all of this happened, despite hearing how well his people were doing in the lands?

Despite casting the girl, a saddened look, he reached for the other letter, this one written by Lord Shako, and unraveled the parchment. His eyes skimmed the end, noticing the familiar seal of the Demon Slayers, and it was then, he read through the letter.

Similar to Kagome’s letter, it explained Kagome’s visit, her discussion with the Lord and his daughter concerning her village and reaching out for help. Lord Shako explained he was more than willing to offer support to the impoverished and suffering village all before Winter. He also explained that there was something aloof with regards to the taxes placed upon Kaede’s Village, their sum coming to eighty mon yearly, despite the tax collectors accepting only forty mon half of each year, and how it was difficult for the village to meet ends meet, especially with little to no food surrounding their infertile lands. The letter also mentioned how Lord Shako did a bit of investigating on the matter, sending out several of his men to check with the village leaders of several villages in the area concerning the matter of their taxes, and similar to Kaede’s village, two of out eight were also suffering from the same.

All in all, this left Nobutsuna stricken with guilt and anger, and he lowered his head apologetically to Kagome, his hand clenched upon his lap. “Again, I apologize for all you and your people have suffered, Higurashi. I had no knowledge of any of this, but I’m glad you’ve visited to speak with me on this matter.”

Kagome lowered her head. “Thank you.”

“I’ve finished reading both letters. It would appear Lord Shako had several of his men investigate upon the issue with taxes in the nearby villages, and similar to your village, Higurashi, there are others facing hardships.”
She looked up at this. So, she and everyone else weren’t alone? Something had to be done. “Milord … I must be frank about this.”

He nodded, allowing her to speak freely.

“Although I was fairly new to the village starting out, I noticed their struggles. Day in and day out, the villagers put in so much effort in their fields, despite the drought, but when it came time for the fields to be inspected, I could only look on from a distance as the men berated our people, disregarded our wares and their disappointment with the harvests. I heard from Lady Kaede how the tax increased considerably, but because they could not manage to pay such a large sum, the collector said something along the lines of ‘if you want the continued protection of your Daimyo, you should do all you can to pay back the taxes, or else, you’re on your own.’”

His eyes narrowed at this. “And so, he took with him several young women and children to work for the money in Edo.”

Kagome nodded. “Yes. Milord … the inspector who visited our village and took from us—”

“Was Takeo,” He replied, sighing and shaking his head irritably. “Yes, he is the Financial Advisor of my household, as well as our lead inspector. I’ll surely investigate this matter myself. With this letter, Higurashi,” He held up the one from Lord Shako, “I’ll certainly get to the bottom of this, and I’ll do what I can to help you and your village regain all that you’ve lost. You have my word.”

Her eyes alit at this. “Thank you!” She quickly bowed before him. Maybe now, good things will finally return to the village. She hoped so.

“That reminds me, Higurashi, did you travel all this way on your own?” He couldn’t help but ask out of curiosity. He wasn’t sure it was possible for a young woman, such as herself to travel without being burdened by roaming bandits, wolves or demons, but then again, her High Priestess mentioned something about her spiritual abilities surfacing.

Hearing this, she softly smiled. “Oh no, I traveled with—” Kagome couldn’t help but gasp suddenly, her eyes widening in realization. “Oh, I almost forgot about Yuuta.”

“Yuuta?”

Kagome nodded, bowing her head once more. “He is the man I traveled with from our village. He must still be outside waiting. I’m afraid he must be worried…”

The Daimyo nodded at this. So, she did indeed travel with another. It made sense, after all, how could she guarantee protection for herself and those letters? “I see. Himari,” He loudly called.

At his voice, the shoji screen door opened, and the maid from earlier stepped inside, bowing her head respectively. “Yes, Milord?”

“Go out and fetch the man named Yuuta. He should be outside the walls. Bring him in through the front gate.” Since there was no point in using the servants’ door to sneak Yuuta in, he’d simply have his maid bring him in through the front entrance. Should there be any problem with that, he would intervene.

“Of course, Milord.” With that said, she left once more.

“You can blame me, Higurashi,” He suddenly said, his smile faltering suddenly, which earned confusion from Kagome. “This is my fault, after all. I should have been more aware of my people and their welfare, but instead, I relied on the words of my advisors. I honestly thought my people
were doing well, both financially and substantially, but I see now I was misled.”

Kagome didn’t say anything to this; in fact, she wasn’t sure what to say. Partly, he was correct in thinking so, but he was also being lied to and manipulated by his people who were supposedly closest to him. She was sure he was feeling much guilt, as she could read from his perturbed expression. “I’m sorry…”

Nobutsuna shook his head. “Don’t be. I should be the one apologizing.” He sighed once more. “I’ll handle this matter and I’ll do what I can to release your people from forced slavery. It may take a matter of days and maybe even months. I only ask that you and your people remain patient,” He replied, earning an understanding nod from the young girl. “Lord Shako will ensure the safety of your village for a time, as well as its reconstruction. You will rely on him while I sort things out here.”

Kagome nodded once more. “Aside from that, there is also something else I wanted to discuss with you, Milord…”

Pushing such depressing and irritable thoughts in the back of his head, he gave Kagome his utmost attention. “And what would that be?”

“Well … while on our journey to meet with Lord Shako and yourself, I’ve thought a lot about all that’s happened to the village, as well as the encounter with the demon.”

He nodded. “Ah, it was mentioned in the letter from your High Priestess your spiritual powers awakened and you saved your people from a terrifying ordeal.”

Kagome nodded. “Yes. Lady Kaede spoke with me on the matter and that it would be wise to train myself. Even Yuuta and Lord Shako agreed with what Lady Kaede had to say. And, I’ve given this matter much thought, and I would like to give it a try. I want to be helpful to everyone, and help them.”

Although she despised the village long ago, after being held captive for a time, she couldn’t help but feel sympathy for them, as well as compassion. She was ignorant to this time period, and she was ignorant as to why Kaede and her village treated her like a threat in the beginning, but she understood now.

“I would like to become an official priestess.”
The Lecherous Swindler

Chapter Summary

After speaking with the Daimyo justice is finally served, and Kagome and Yuuta realize the village's troubles will soon be over. Before leaving Edo Village, the Daimyo bestows a free pass to visit Edo's infamous Inn, but Kagome didn't expect her night's stay to be ruined after a lecherous creep follows her into the bathhouse.

Author Notice

Warning, this chapter contains mature content! This chapter is not intended to upset anyone!

Please read our Author Notice at the end of this chapter. With that, please enjoy!

Ψ

“I would like to become an official priestess.”

Nobutsuna’s eyes widened at her reply. This young girl, who’d only appeared before him earlier, despite the circumstances surrounding her village, was knelt before him, her heart wanting nothing more but to help those in need, and her eyes filled with a fiery determination. To say he was at a loss for words was an understatement; in fact, the very thought didn’t seem like a bad idea, but then again, as stated in the letter, Higurashi’s powers only recently surfaced.

“For you to begin your training as an official priestess, you’ll first need recognition from the Daimyo himself and permission to undergo this training.”

Remembering Sango’s words, the other night, Kagome only hoped she could gain recognition from the Daimyo before taking up her training, which she was sure Lady Kaede would be more than willing to help. “Sango informed me, should I wish to take up training, I should first be recognized by you, Milord.”

Higurashi did the right thing, by asking his permission first, however, it was also not something he was not used to hearing. “I understand. You are a compassionate woman to want to help your people strive on, despite the misunderstandings in the beginning. However, where you lack, you must surely spend many days training. Although I’m not an expert in such fields, I do know many priestesses spend a number of years in training, and since you’ve only recently discovered your spiritual powers, it may also be the same. Then again, there are those who excel far more than others.”

Years? Kagome felt her shoulders slightly drop at this. How many years, she wondered, would it take for her to finish her training? Kagome was honestly hoping no more than one year, if she was lucky. Since the Goshinboku tree no longer allowed her freedom to transverse through time and return home, she knew she had to make the most out of her stay in this time period. If it meant training to control these foreign powers within her, then so be it, but years? “I see…”

“Do not feel discouraged. I have faith in you, Higurashi. In fact, I would like to see you become a priestess who can help others. Although it seems your High Priestess is quite old, I’m sure she will
certainly be capable of teaching you, however…” He paused for a moment. “You’ll likely also train under another priestess. There is a large shrine ground here in Edo where many priestesses and those in training reside. Perhaps, Higurashi, you’ll consider visiting and seeing it in person?”

Kagome’s eyes widened at this. There was a shrine here in Edo where they trained priestesses? She couldn’t help but smile at this; that was great! Honestly, she would love to take a look before she and Yuuta left and returned to Kaede’s Village. “Is it open to the public?”

He mused, somewhat unsure. Was it open to the public? It’d been some time since he last reviewed any current information of the temple. “I don’t see why it would be a problem, especially for those who wish to take up training.”

Before the Daimyo could continue, the shoji screen door slid open, and as they turned their attention away from each other, they noticed the tall and robust form of Yuuta step inside, his eyes slightly widened, shifting from the Daimyo to Kagome before approaching and kneeling beside his female companion.

Kagome smiled appreciatively at the maid and kept her hands placed upon her lap, her head slightly bent. As Yuuta greeted the Daimyo, she couldn’t help but notice his nervousness, his head lowered to the floor and a slight tremble in his body; perhaps, this was his first-time meeting with him as well? Then again, it made sense; after all, Yuuta lived a great portion of his life away from settlements as a bandit.

Nobutsuna was pleased by the rough man’s manners before lifting his hand towards Yuuta. “You may lift your head, young man. Please be comfortable.”

Because he wasn’t expecting to hear such a gentle voice from the intimidating stature of the Daimyo, Yuuta hesitantly lifted his head, his eyes shifting to look him in the eyes, before relaxing just the same as Kagome beside him. “I thank you, Milord.”

He nodded. “So, you are Yuuta? I must thank you for escorting Higurashi here. You’ve journeyed a far distance and have endured many hardships in your village. I deeply apologize and will do what I can to assist your village’s detriments. Higurashi has explained everything that’s happened over the course of two months, as well as in regards to the tax issue. It will take time to bring those forced into slavery back,” He explained reassuringly, much to Yuuta’s relief.

Hearing this, Yuuta exchanged a glance with Kagome, and she smiled back, flashing him a victory sign with her index and middle finger, though he couldn’t seem to understand its meaning. Perhaps, it meant good luck for them, and he smiled back.

Nobutsuna mused. “Higurashi,” He said suddenly, immediately earning hers and Yuuta’s attention. “Since you wish to take up training, for the sake of your village as well as to control your awakening spiritual powers, it would benefit you greatly to visit the temple in Edo,” He explained before reaching into his drawer. After retrieving a flat and smooth wooden slab with Japanese characters carved into its surface, he held it out to Himari, who approached and took it gently into her hands before handing it to Kagome.

“What’s this?” Kagome couldn’t help but ask.

“This will allow you free passage anywhere within Edo, such as the temple,” He explained, smiling as an elated grin swept Kagome’s countenance, as well as Yuuta’s widening stare.

“Thank you so much, Milord!” Kagome replied, bowing once more before him.
He nodded, his own smile stretching across his face. “Since you’ve both journeyed so far already, I’m sure you must be tired and famished. You are more than welcome to use this pass to stay the night, or even three nights at our luxury Inn here in Edo.”

Yuuta and Kagome’s heads turned at this. They could even stay a matter of days at a luxurious Inn? Seriously? It was great, and yet, it seemed too good to be real. He really was a kind Daimyo, but then again, it was likely he felt sorry for their village and wanted to find some way to make their stay more comfortable.

Kagome smiled appreciatively. “Thank you, Milord.”

Yet, before the Daimyo could reply back, the shoji screen door slid open almost violently, the noise startling all occupants within the room when one of the royal advisors quickly stepped inside. In fact, it wasn’t just any advisor, it was the Financial Advisor, Takeo. His steps were quick and loud, his eyes wide and somewhat frantic as he approached the Daimyo.

“Milord, I must report something urgent! A roguish man has snuck into the manor! I apologize, but you should not leave this room until we’ve thoroughly searc—” His loud and obnoxious voice suddenly paused, his eyes suddenly noticing the Daimyo’s visitors, and a familiar raven-haired crazed woman with a fiery temperament glowering at him from beside the rogue looking man which whom he’d been searching. He stepped back, alarmed at the sight and was especially concerned about the safety of the Daimyo. “Guards!” His cracked voice hollered within the room, so loud, that Yuuta cursed irritably and Kagome regained her standing, her eyes flashing at Takeo angrily.

As the Daimyo stood up from the comforts of his pillowed seating, numerous footsteps resounded in the halls, and before anyone knew what to expect, several guards stood behind Takeo and his pointed finger, their spears drawn.

“Arrest these criminals!” He scowled, his finger shaking.

But before the guards moved to arrest his visitors, The Daimyo raised a hand and stood between him and his visitors. “That will not be necessary. I believe you must be mistaken, Lord Takeo. I see no criminals here, but visitors who have come to beseech my help in regards to their suffering village.” Nobutsuna retorted, his head firmly held high and his demeanor stiff with annoyance. The look caused Takeo to shrivel back, his face paling when he realized his mistake. “Milord, only but an hour ago did these troublemakers try to force their way into the manor!” He exclaimed, causing the Daimyo to arch a curious brow, before side glancing Kagome, briefly recalling her small adventure climbing the manor walls. “That woman there,” He pointed at Kagome. “Verbally assaulted me near the entrance. She is not right in the head, Milord!”

Kagome side glanced Yuuta, still somewhat annoyed he lied about her being ill in the head because she apparently was flung from their horse weeks ago, a simple lie which saved her from imprisonment earlier, still, she couldn’t help but feel irritated when Takeo outright called her crazy. She wanted so badly to tell Takeo to fuck himself, as well as give him the middle finger, but she held back, not wanting to seem disrespectful in front of the Daimyo. Still, she couldn’t quell her hatred of that man, and decided upon glowering at him alongside Yuuta.

“Not right in the head? You must be mistaken. She seems quite intelligent, Lord Takeo, and has treated me with only the utmost respect, something you have failed to do even now,” Nobutsuna retorted calmly, his eyes accusing Takeo for his disrespectfulness, especially in regards to barging in the room. “I’m in the middle of an important meeting, so I advise you to leave.”
Paling at his words, Takeo quickly lowered himself to his knees and bowed his head, fearing the wrath of the Daimyo. “I-forgive the intrusion. I was merely looking out for your safety. I was not informed you would be meeting with them…”

“And since when have I ever needed to inform the Financial Advisors of my meetings with the villagers?” Nobutsuna inquired.

Takeo stiffened again. “I-it will not happen again, Milord!” He replied before quickly regaining his standing, but before he could usher the guards out and retreat, the Daimyo’s voice caused him to pause mid-step near the shoji screen door.

“Since you are here, why don’t you explain something for me.”

Takeo turned ever so slowly, bemused by his Lord’s words, his eyes once again flashing towards Kagome and Yuuta concernedly. “Yes?”

Nobutsuna took an intimidating step towards the Financial Advisor, his eyes narrowing distrustfully. “It’s come to my attention that several villages within the Province have been cheated out of their tax, and Higurashi and Yuuta’s village is no exception. What was it again … oh yes, eighty mon per year?” He inquired.

Takeo visibly paled, his hands and legs trembling in realization. His eyes flashed at the crazed woman and her companion, realizing they must have come from one of the poor villages to accuse him of his wrongdoings. Now that the Daimyo knew, he was uncertain of how to proceed. However, it was their word against his. “That’s … ridiculous, Milord! You know better than I that the tax rate is only forty mon,” He exclaimed, trying to calm his nerves. How could the Daimyo believe such commoners than his trusted advisors? “I-if you check the reports, you’ll see there are no errors whatsoever, Milord,” He replied confidently.

“Is that so?” He questioned back. “Himari,” He called suddenly, and the young servant who’d been standing off to the side approached the Daimyo, bowing slightly before him. “Fetch the reports of last years and this year.”

“Yes, Milord.”

As she disappeared from the room, Nobutsuna’s eyes shifted to Takeo once more. “I know how meticulous you are in your duties, Lord Takeo, and despite my busy schedule, I have put my trust in you and the other advisors to look out for the well-being of my people, especially those in farther distances from Edo; that goes for the most provincial villages to the less provincial. Should my people be suffering, I’m to be notified, above all else.”

Although he was the Daimyo of the Musashi Province, he did not have the freedom to leave his manor to see with his own eyes how his people were doing, so, he relied on his advisors, trusting them, but now, he realized he was wrong to believe so.

Lord Takeo fell to his knees, his head suddenly lowered. “Milord…” This wasn’t looking good. He was already being accused and he had yet to look through the reports. How could the Daimyo accuse him simply by the words of these commoners?

“Higurashi has voiced her concerns for her village, the drought, the attack from bandits, a demon attack and the loss of loved ones,” He continued. “There’s also the mentioning of the harvest inspection, and despite the village yielding a poor harvest, I was informed by the Head Priestess regarding your behavior, bullying the villagers and forcing them to give up their children to help pay for what they could not afford in return for safety,” He accused, his voice rising every second.
“Under no circumstances have I ever allowed this.”

Takeo was trembling, that much Kagome and Yuuta noticed as they exchanged glances from behind the Daimyo. Just where did Takeo take Kaede’s people? They were somewhere within Edo, working as slaves. Maybe, she and Yuuta wouldn’t have to wait as long as they hoped since the Daimyo was already on Takeo’s case.

The sound of soft footsteps resounded within the room, and it was Himari. As fast as her pale pink kimono would allow her to freely move from room to room, she returned in half the time expected and with two books in hand, before offering them to the Daimyo.

As he accepted these, he skimmed through the pages, acknowledging the writings and numbers within before turning his irritable glance in Takeo’s direction. “Since I’m in the presence of visitors, I will take my time to read through these reports. Not only that, but I’ll be sure to have my men thoroughly search your chambers and your belongings. As for those who accompanied you on these inspections, they will also be interrogated. In the meantime, Lord Takeo, you will await further questioning behind bars. Guards.”

Within seconds, Lord Takeo was apprehended by two guards, spears pointed towards his back before being roughly pulled from the room. “No, wait! I’ve done nothing wrong, Milord!” His voice cried as he fought against the guards, his voice muffled as Himari closed the shoji screen door.

Feeling the oncoming’s of a headache, Nobutsuna’s sighed and turned to his guests, before smiling kindly and apologetically. “I’m sorry about that. Please, make yourselves comfortable,” He replied, before passing them and seating himself in his cushioned chair, the reports laid out before him in a stack. “This matter will be dealt with soon. I plan to hold a meeting with my Council about this, and in the meantime, Lord Takeo will spend his time thinking about his mistakes. I can guarantee your village, you will no longer be wronged. You were fortunate to have received recognition from the Demon Slayers and to have delivered a letter from their Chieftain. It’s all the proof needed to solve this issue at hand.”

Pleased by this, Kagome breathed a sigh of relief. “If he is found guilty, what will happen?” Kagome asked, her hands wringing nervously in her lap. She heard Yuuta make a noise in his throat, and turning her head slightly to look at him, she noticed his stare at her, his head turning from side to side. When she realized her words probably sounded disrespectful, she quickly lowered her head. “Forgive me, Milord.”

Nobutsuna merely shook his head, a faint smile placed upon his lips. “It’s alright. I cannot be sure what his fate will be, I will leave the decision to the Council.”

“I see.”

Despite feeling slightly displeased Takeo visibly lied to him, he took a deep breath and exhaled, his eyes shifting towards the wooden slab in Kagome’s grasp. “Now then … as we were discussing previously, you may use this to go anywhere in Edo during your stay. I’ll have my servant’s escort you and your companion to our Inn here in Edo, especially considering it’s somewhat far from my manor,” He explained. “From there, you may enjoy your stay in Edo. If you should wish to visit the temple, my servants will be more than happy to escort you there, Higurashi.”

Again, she bowed her head. “Thank you so much, Milord.”
The sweet smell of burning incense filled the room, its scent eliciting a pleasant moan from one of the many servant women within, bantering amongst themselves in a well-furnished and extravagant room playing cards; they were slightly undressed, their dark hair partly unkempt, lying over their shoulders messily, their unblemished or freckled skin exposed.

The sounds of sheets rustling against skin resounded quietly within the dim candle lit room, the silhouette of two bodies, male and female, molded against the other behind a thin and sheer white curtain surrounding a large silken futon. Sweat glistened from their skin, the rhythmic sounds of thrusting true and easily heard, accompanied by throaty moans.

Indigo eyes took in the beauty beneath him, his hands wandering her small bouncing breasts, squeezing and massaging while his fingers pinched and teased her pert pink buds. His hips moved fast, his erect and large member squeezing and thrusting into her hot and dripping core, the very motion building up his release.

“More … master…” She breathed, her body moving beneath her with each thrust, hands on either side of her head as she moaned.

He paused slightly in his love making, breathing somewhat exhaustedly, his eyes glazed in the moment. Another powerful thrust almost threw him over the edge, and he steadied himself, his member throbbing and his precum likely brimming his head. So close, he could feel it, and without even thinking, he allowed himself a few more hard and fast thrusts before quickly pulling out, his semen immediately seeping out and into his moving hands, his head held back in his orgasm.

Despite feeling slightly displeased he didn’t fill her, she sat up and crawled towards him, her head bent as she took his entire member into her mouth, her tongue lapping hungrily at their combined juices.

He fell back onto his elbows, a content grin spread across his face as he allowed the servant woman to delight herself in his cum. Lazily, he slid his fingers through her messy hair, his eyes watching the motion of her breasts jiggle.

Yet, before he could stand up and dress himself, she surprised him by immediately climbing into his lap, arms wrapped around his shoulders before she slid his swelled member into her dripping and hot folds, the very motion urging a moan from his throat. The woman bounced upon him, riding his member until she fell into a rhythmic dance, her pants short and her eyes focused intently on him.

Beneath her, she felt his hips buck against her, his swelled and girthy member throbbing inside her tight walls.

“Master … I’m … going to,” The servant’s body trembled, her thighs squeezing around him as her hips grinded faster and faster, bucking as she felt her release. A throaty groan escaped her as she fell into his chest, her breathing fast and her heart drumming loudly in her chest. For a few moments, she leaned against him, her arms entwined around him as she smiled softly. “Mm that felt so good…”

He couldn’t help but chuckle, his hand cupping her firm and small ass. “I’m pleased you’ve enjoyed yourself. I couldn’t ask for more.”

“But … I want more…” She murmured, her dark eyes meeting his. “How about later this evening?”

Yet, before he could reply back to her sensual remark, the sheer curtain encompassing them flew
open, and they were both greeted with the faces of the other women in the room, two of which approached the futon closer.

“Hey, we’ve been waiting over twenty minutes,” One replied, her face flushed as she eyed his body, the juices coated between their legs, and his member still sheathed within the naked girl.

“Yeah. We were each supposed to get a turn!”

He sweat dropped, his hand still resting on the young woman’s ass. “Now, now ladies, there’s plenty of me to go around.”

The youngest of the five maidens quickly crawled over the futon, her hand interlaced with the young man. “Master Miroku, do me next. Okay?”

“What about me?” Another girl asked. “Toki is the only one among us who got her release!”

Again, Miroku sweat dropped, and pulling away from the warm body of his partner, he stood up and reached for his white kosode, draping it over his body before tying it securely at his waist. As he slipped on his sandals, he cracked his neck and back, a satisfied groan escaping him.

Miroku Miyatsu was referred to as the lover of all women across Japan, and was noted for his charming looks and physique, who had an undeniably and remarkable charm for attracting women of all ages, no matter their status. He made his earnings simply by means of his practice, a practice which he regarded through the use of cleansing and spiritual elimination under the disguise of a traveling and honorable monk. Yet, under such a guise, he was nothing more than a swindler of sorts, easily fooling the eyes of many in need, and, in the end, rewarded his earnings through deep pockets.

The Inn was his home, temporary for a time, and yet, as he felt around his purple robes, lying upon one of the cushioned chairs near the futon, he realized his change sack was short. How unfortunate, but it only meant he’d have to fill his pockets again, which wasn’t that difficult.

“Lord Miroku?”

“Master?”

“Oh, handsome monk?”

Yes, he liked the sound of that. Handsome, master and lord, but in no way, was he truly a monk of great virtue. And yet, the women seemed drawn to this lie he conjured years prior, perhaps, the very thought sensual and forbidden.

“Are you leaving us so soon?” One asked, her expression forlorn and slightly displeased.

“I’ll return shortly. I just need to take a breather and freshen up,” He replied, straightening his lose raven tresses into a low ponytail once more and approaching the shoji screen door.

One of them jumped at this, her eyes alit excitedly. “Oh, are you going to freshen up in the bath?” She asked, and at his nod, she moved closer, her arms wrapped around his waist. “Would you like us to join you? We could scrub your back and your chest and your…” She trailed off, biting her lips as her eyes slid downward.

He gently pushed her away, and shook his head, the very action causing her to frown with disappointment. “That won’t be necessary. I won’t be long. Why don’t you keep the bed warm while I’m gone?” He teased, smirking as they giggled excitedly.
“Don’t be too long, Lord Miroku.”

“We’ll be right here until you get back!”

The view of Edo, in a sense, was breathtaking; the people were dressed in beautiful silken kimonos and accessories, the houses were luxurious, and the streets were filled with many entertainers and dancers, street vendors of sorts, and Kagome’s stomach practically growled when she smelled the tantalizing scents in the area.

Yet, as hungry as she was, she felt queasy, the jostling of the sedan chair doing little to quell her sudden motion sickness. Was it a sedan chair? Kagome wasn’t entirely sure, her eyes noticing the thin pieces of wood assembled into a large rectangular box which she sat within, interlaced with white fabric with the emblem of the Takeda Clan embroidered on the back. A velvety soft cushion was placed beneath her, easing her discomfort with each step the two servants made through the streets. At least with this mode of transportation, it saved her and Yuuta the hassle of walking.

Kagome and Yuuta were in two separate palanquins, and although she couldn’t see him, since he was behind her, she couldn’t help but giggle to herself. In a way, this seemed entirely ridiculous, sitting on richly ornate cushions and being carried around the town by servants; it just seemed so strange and hilarious. She was sure if her family was here, they would have a field day.

Yet, the only thing that worried her, being carried through the streets in a fancy palanquin, despite receiving questionable stares from onlookers, was the possibility of falling completely out of it. Yes, she was completely supported by a slightly thick slab of wood beneath her, covered with intricate cloth, but should one or both of these servants miss a step while carrying her, she was sure she’d fall out, palanquin and all. Somehow, she was sure these accidents happened from time to time, and without anything to hold on for leverage, it was just an accident ready to happen.

Unexpectedly, the palanquin’s incessant jostling stopped, and pulling away from her thoughts, Kagome leaned forward slightly and peered out, her blue eyes mesmerized by the sheer height of the ornate Inn before her and Yuuta. The building’s architect was indeed mesmerizing, with several blue arched tiled roofs, its entrance tall and wide with a large emblem of the Takeda Clan embroidered into the shoji screen door, and an abundance of red and yellow paper lanterns decorating its external walls. Kagome never expected the famous Inn of Edo was so large and beautiful, and she couldn’t help but wonder if its interior was just as breathtaking.

“Allow me to take your horse to the stables behind the Inn,” One of the Daimyo’s servants replied, grasping the offered reigns of the horse before disappearing into the back of the building.

“Are you sure it’s alright for us to be here, Yuuta?” Kagome asked, standing just outside the main entrance.

Yuuta merely nodded. “I didn’t expect the Daimyo’s leniency to go so far. As long as you have the pass he gave you, we’ll be fine,” He reassured.

As the two climbed the wooden stairs towards the entrance, they stepped through the open door and found themselves overwhelmed by the interior. The wooden floors were pristine and polished, vibrant painted tapestries decorated the walls, shrubberies almost at every corner, and in all honesty, it reminded Kagome of an actual Inn in the modern era, only without a service desk and technology.

Upon entering, they were immediately approached by a tall figure of a man, his mustache long and
upturned on the sides, his eyes small and narrowed, and he was dressed from head to toe in only the finest of silks. “And what may I ask are you doing here? Shoo now, you’re dirtying our floors with that wretched stench,” He exclaimed, covering his nose with his sleeve and waving his free hand at them.

Kagome blinked. “Excuse me? What a way to treat your customers!” She chastised, hands on her hips and her expression haughty.

“Customer? You?” He inquired, eyeing her and her companion from head to toe, an expression of disgust crossing his countenance. “You do realize you’ve entered into only the finest Inn of Edo. Only those with money can pay. You, my poor child, are dressed in nothing but rags. We do not offer charity. If you’re looking for a night’s stay, ask the stable hand, I’m sure he can allow you room in the stables.”

Despite being completely humiliated by this host or manager of sorts, and receiving strange stares from paying customers within, dressed in only the finest of clothes, their hair and makeup done beautifully, Kagome couldn’t help the flush which appeared upon her cheeks. “I’ll have you know that—” Kagome was about to retort back, but before she could give this man a piece of her mind, Yuuta suddenly extended his hand in front of her, blocking her approach.

Reaching for the wooden slab in her grasp, he held it out in front of the man, his brow twitching slightly. “This should suffice, will it not?”

He peered at it faintly, eyeing the curvature of the Japanese characters closely before suddenly paling, his hands suddenly grasped around it. “This is…” It couldn’t be possible. How did these commoners get their hands on this? “These are only bestowed upon those of higher ranks and only the favored of the Daimyo!”

Yuuta caught his curious stare, and as the manager’s eyes swept his and Kagome’s form quite thoroughly, he hesitantly offered a bow to both of them. Judging by the scars upon this tall robust man, he could only assume he was a warrior of high rank, and yet, as his eyes fell upon the woman, many thoughts entered his head. Who was she of such importance?

“She is my wife,” Yuuta explained, as if to answer his thoughts.

He quickly nodded though he couldn’t be sure if the young man was being entirely honest. Although they seemed quite filthy and dressed as commoners, he couldn’t help but wonder if there was some hidden message behind the Daimyo’s seal. “Oh, I see…”

Yuuta noticed his hesitance, his quirked brow and distrusting stare. “If there is a problem, you can verify our honesty with the servants just outside,” He explained, arms crossed.

Again, he staggered back, and quickly crossed the room and peered outside. True to his words, there were indeed servants outside, four of them and there were also two beautifully decorated palanquins. His jaw completely fell and he turned to his guests, bowing suddenly in mere surprise, his heart drumming loudly. Guests of the Daimyo were staying the night! “Forgive me for my insolence! I was not made aware of your arrival so soon! Please, allow me to have one of our servants guide you to your room!”

“Much appreciated,” Yuuta replied, grasping the pass from his open hand.

“Yui!” The manager suddenly called, smiling as he rubbed the palms of his hands in front of him nervously. “Rest assured, we have a wonderful room available for both of you. May I have your names?”
Yuuta narrowed his eyes suddenly, the likes of which startled the host, who immediately flinched and bowed repetitively. Yet, he said not another word to both Kagome and Yuuta, and before long, a young servant woman, dressed in a pale blue kimono, with long brown hair, bangs framing her face and light brown eyes greeted them.

“Hello honored guests!” She greeted kindly.

“Yui, give them only the best room available,” He replied earnestly, bowing once more to Kagome and Yuuta. “They are special guests of the Daimyo,” He leaned into her suddenly, whispering the titles ‘lord’ and ‘lady’ to the young woman, whose eyes widened a fraction of their size. “See to it they receive only the best. They are not to be disturbed under any circumstances.”

Yui nodded, smiling once more to their customers. “Of course. Please follow me and I’ll show you to your room.”

As they made their way further inside the luxurious Inn, they found themselves in awe at the interior, the finely built and painted archways within, a beautiful dining area with several decorated oval shaped tables and cushioned stools, banners and tapestries decorating the walls, and several servants cleaning and serving mouthwatering food to their guests. From their perspective, it seemed only women worked here, and though they were dressed in less expensive kimono’s their quality was much better compared to Kagome’s pale blue kimono. The servants wore two layered kimonos, some in pale blues, pinks, greens, oranges and yellows, and like the majority, wore their hair neatly combed back in a low ponytail with light makeup applied to their small faces.

They eventually arrived to a large wooden staircase, their eyes looking up at the three-story structure in awe. There were balconies above them with wooden railings, and as they followed after Yui, they eventually found themselves at the top floor, their straw sandaled feet carrying across an intricate and colorful rug past a series of many corridors.

It wasn’t long after that Yui came to a complete stop, pausing before a particular shoji screen door with cherry blossoms painted upon its exterior in colors of pinks and whites. “Here we are, our luxury suite,” She exclaimed, opening the door for them. “We hope this room is to your liking.”

Kagome stepped in, her cerulean gaze taking in the grandeur of the room from the ornate windows, to the tapestries, black and white vases filled with a collection of beautiful and colorful orchids nestled in the far corners of the room. The wooden floors were especially cleaned, smooth and somewhat glossy as her bare feet pressed upon it, and her eyes noticed a beautiful mahogany table and lavender colored cushions placed entirely around. There was also a built-in hearth just at the far side of the room, well-lit and warming the room nicely, with a small collection of split firewood beside it, and a large wooden basin, which she didn’t know the use of sitting off to the side.

As she crossed the room, inspecting everything in full detail, the strange basin as well, she was surprised when the young servant approached her, touching the basin gently.

“This is where you are free to bathe in the comforts of the suite, should you desire,” She explained kindly.

Kagome’s eyes widened. So, it was a makeshift bathtub? A wide grin spread upon her lips, her eyes marveling as she touched the inside. It was smooth to the top, and the likely hood of getting a splinter seemed impossible. Pulling away from the basin, she turned to Yuuta. “Look Yuuta. It’s like a modern tub!”

Modern tub? He didn’t understand the meaning of either, but simply nodded, dropping their
belongings onto the floor before seating himself down at the table, cracking his aching back and arms.

“Is the room to your liking?” Yui asked, somewhat relieved the young woman was smiling from ear to ear. The last thing she wanted was to be told it wasn’t what they expected or demanded to see her manager.

“It’s beautiful, thank you, Yui!” Kagome replied, bowing to the young girl.

Yui flushed at this, not used to someone of high ranking bowing to her, and she quickly bowed back. “Oh no, thank you Milady! I’m glad this room pleases you.” She exclaimed before suddenly moving past the basin and towards another screen door, sliding it open to reveal a built-in closet. “You can find your futon within as well as some clean clothes,” She explained, smiling brightly.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a hot spring here, would you? I’ve heard this Inn was well known for their springs,” Yuuta suddenly asked, remembering earlier conversations he heard before entering into the Inn with Kagome.

Yui nodded. “Of course! Our springs are located on the first floor at the very back of the Inn! It’s completely free of charge, and should you desire, you may also request any kind of service, whether it be a thorough cleansing, or any delicacies such as sweets or refreshments!”

Kagome’s eyes sparkled. They even had a hot spring? How lucky could they get? “That’s amazing. I would love to take a nice soak there. How about it, Yuuta?”

He mused for a moment. It didn’t sound like a bad idea, and considering their appearance, it would be for the best. “I see no reason why not. You can go on ahead first.”

Yui suddenly clapped her hands, her smile wider than before. “Wonderful! Please follow me!”

Ψ

A contented sigh escaped him, a low whistle forming upon his lips as he glimpsed one of the servants bending over before him, trying to pick up the tray she dropped moments ago, broken pieces of fine bowls and cups shattered upon the wooden floor at her feet. He’d only gotten as far as the second floor before hearing the noise, and of course, found himself admiring the curvature of the woman’s back, her thin waist and her round and likely succulent buttock.

“Oh dear,” She pouted as she carefully reached for the shards, placing them onto her tray one by one. “Now I’ve done it…” She sighed before gasping suddenly, a trail of blood seeping from her finger.

Hearing the noise, Miroku pulled his eyes from her delightful features and quickly approached, bending down before grabbing her by her arms and pulling her up gently to her feet. “Are you alright?” He inquired, his eyes noticing her sudden flushed expression.

“Oh, Lord Miroku. I’m fine, I merely pricked my finger,” She replied, suddenly smiling in embarrassment. “Clumsy me dropped the tray again.”

He noticed her finger, and taking her hand into his, he examined the wound, pushing away a small shard from her finger before bringing it into his lips, enclosing his mouth around her injury to cleanse it.

She gasped at this, her face reddening suddenly at the feel of his tongue gliding over her finger. “Oh, but you mustn’t…”
Pulling his mouth away, he removed from the sleeve of his white kosode a white handkerchief before tying it gently around her finger, despite her feeble protest. “I can’t very well leave you bleeding here,” He replied softly before tying the Band-Aid of sorts in a knot and placing his hand atop hers. “There. You have such beautiful hands, it would be a shame if you were to injure them,” He expressed, smiling kindly.

Her blush darkened and she nodded. “My thanks, Milord…”

He bent down suddenly and with the rag she dropped previously, wiped the remainder of the broken shards onto the tray before picking it up just as quickly and handing it to her. “Here you are, but please be careful next time.”

“I will. Thank you, Lord Miroku. I’m sorry for the trouble,” She replied, taking the tray before bowing, the very action causing her green kimono to move and reveal a small portion of her cleavage.

His eyes noticed this, but as she regained her posture, he locked his gaze with hers, smiling once more before allowing her to walk ahead of him. As she did, his eyes fell to her swaying hips and rounded ass, and yet, as he followed somewhat close behind, he couldn’t help but raise his hand, the inclination to touch and squeeze her backside prompting him forward.

Despite finishing a mere ten minutes ago with his slew of girls, his regulars which he handpicked from the servants some time back, he felt a tightness in his loins, the familiar feeling of his hardening member throbbing against his fundoshi beneath his kosode, and he bit his lip with anticipation. The servant woman was timid, that much he understood, her height smaller than his, and although he’d never tasted her and laid claim to her body, he couldn’t help but imagine how it would feel to push her up against a table and ride her from behind.

The mere thought excited him, and he wondered if it was possible he’d ever manage to make his way to the hot springs at the very back of the Inn. Yet, he didn’t get far with his thoughts or his extended hands before he noticed a commotion near the staircase. Realizing others were present, he regained his natural composure, his eyes glimpsing a group of servant women huddled near the railings, conversing loudly about something of interest.

“It must be true then! To think the Daimyo’s special guest is staying here for the night…”

Hearing this curious information, Miroku leaned in behind one of the girls, his breath fanning her exposed neck slightly. “Excuse me ladies,”

The woman gasped, and turned, the other girls smiling from ear to ear at his unexpected arrival. “Oh, Lord Miroku!” She gasped, her eyes taking in his form slightly before smiling. “We were just talking.”

He nodded, greeting the other girls as well who seemed just as thrilled to see him as she was. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but I couldn’t help but hear something about the Daimyo’s special guest staying with us?”

One of the girls nodded her head vigorously. “Yes, you heard right, Monk!”

“Turns out, she is staying in the top suite on the third floor in one of the best rooms available!” Another replied, sighing in awe.

How interesting. “Oh really? Do you know anything more about this?”

Another girl nodded. “Well, a few of us overheard our manager talking with the head chefs and
according to them, it’s the newly selected concubine of the Daimyo!” She explained, both hands clasped together.

A newly selected concubine? For Miroku, he didn’t really keep up with anything associated with the Daimyo in all honesty, but from what he knew, there was only one woman in his harem, won which bared a son. “So, he is finally expanding his harem. I see. That’s good news,” He replied, nodding at his own thoughts. So, this new girl was staying on the same floor as him and in the most luxurious suite? He couldn’t help but wonder about her appearance, or if it was possible he could meet with her.

The girls nodded. “If you ask me, it’s a bit strange the Daimyo would allow her to stay at the Inn and not at the Harem, especially on her first day!” One replied somewhat snobbishly.

“Well, she did come from a poor background though. You could tell just from her clothes, at least, that’s what I heard … Yui is assisting the girl and the guard who came with her. So, maybe the Daimyo allowed her a little freedom to enjoy herself before she is sent back to the harem tomorrow?”

“That does make a little sense. It could be he is getting everything ready for her during her absence. Our Daimyo is truly a kind man,” Another replied.

As Miroku absorbed this information, although he was curious of the same, why it was she was staying at the Inn in particular, it was understandable she would have a guard to protect her.

“I heard she isn’t from Edo…”

The girls turned at this, noticing the freckled faced maid behind Miroku carrying a tray of broken clay cups and bowls. “What?” They replied in unison.

She stepped closer and nodded slowly. “Well … my cousin works in the palace and said she saw the girl go in and out of the Daimyo’s room and she left on one of his palanquins. I didn’t get many details of her but that’s what I heard.”

They nodded at this.

“Oh,” She replied, as if suddenly remembering. “There was one more thing!”

Once more, they gave the girl their undivided attention, especially Miroku who couldn’t help but lean in close to hear, his interest in the new concubine stirring his curiosity.

“I also heard that she specifically came to the manor herself to meet with the Daimyo but the guards wouldn’t let her in since she was a commoner.”

Miroku blinked at this, as well as the other girls. “That’s odd. Wasn’t she specifically chosen to be the second concubine? Why would they refuse her entrance?” He asked, the other girls nodding in agreement.

“Well, apparently it had something to do with her village. I didn’t get many details about it, only that her village wasn’t doing so well and the Financial Advisor wouldn’t let her in to meet with the Daimyo. She must have journeyed all the way here to Edo to speak with him.”

“Wait, are you saying this happened before she was chosen as a concubine?”

The girl nodded.
“What else happened? How did she get inside?” Another asked. “You don’t think she climbed the walls, do you?”

Hearing this, they couldn’t help but laugh. “No way. How could she when the walls are so high? She’d likely hurt herself doing that!”

“How was she chosen?”

“Was it love at first sight?”

The servant woman backed away slightly, leaning in further to Miroku while sweat dropping. “Well, I’m not really sure about that part, but somehow she managed to get inside and meet with the Daimyo,” She answered. “And there’s a bit more.”

“Did he sweep her off her feet and take her to his bed chamber?” One of the girls squealed at the thought.

The other servants couldn’t help but sweat drop, but they were also curious as well, even if most of them didn’t ask directly.

“Apparently, Lord Takeo cheated her village and took a huge sum of money from her than was required for the yearly taxes. The Daimyo found out about this and imprisoned him for further questioning with the council.” She explained.

Everyone’s jaw dropped at this, their eyes as wide as saucers. So, if they were getting this information correct, the girl who was staying in their suite right now met with the Daimyo about her concerns for her village, had Takeo imprisoned and ultimately won the heart of the Daimyo. Somehow, it was all piecing together, but not in a way they expected.

“It makes sense now.”

“So that’s what happened…”

Miroku mused. So that’s what happened? Somehow, he couldn’t help but wonder how it was her word against the Financial Advisor. Either she had assistance in the matter to prove Takeo was guilty or she used a different means. All this talk about this mysterious woman, without even seeing a single glimpse of her, was somewhat unnerving. He had to see her and meet with her. After all, there weren’t many women in Edo he hadn’t already met.

Before he could ask about the woman’s appearance, there was another stir among the women surrounding him near the balcony of the staircase. One of the girl’s stood straight up, bending over the railing suddenly, her finger suddenly pointed downstairs. “Oh, speak of the devil, there she is!”

“Where?”

“I want to see!”

Before Miroku even had a chance to look for himself, the servant girls all leaned over, looking towards their friends’ outstretched finger, and as he came up closer behind them, his body pressed against their backsides, his eyes followed the sight of the servant woman Yui leading a young commoner towards the back end of the Inn before pausing briefly on their trek to converse.

A chorus of displeased sighs escaped the girls, that much, Miroku noted. Here they were expecting a beautiful woman dressed in only the finest of kimonos, but they were sadly mistaken, and were instead greeted with the appearance of rags and a girl covered with dirt, her hair messily pulled
back.

“That’s her?” Someone asked.

“She … looks dirty…”

“And plain,” Another answered.

“Well what did you expect? She is a commoner after all.”

“Pretty ordinary if you ask me. I wonder why the Daimyo fell for her…”

Miroku couldn’t help but whistle low, his eyes still examining the young woman just several feet below the balcony. His indigo eyes took in her womanly form, the curve of her body beneath her rags, and her porcelain skin. Such fair skin was not common in mere commoners, that much he knew and he wondered if it was possible she lost her noble status recently.

Realizing Miroku must have been displeased by the girl’s appearance, one of the girls turned to him apologetically, followed after by the others. “Are you disappointed too, Lord Miroku?”

“Of course, he is. We also had our hopes up, but it seems the girl is no different than the rest of us…”

“Hey, that wasn’t very nice…”

“Well I’m not a nice person. I’m just saying it like it is.”

“I think we’re judging her too soon. If she caught the Daimyo’s eye, then there must be something we aren’t seeing…”

Miroku merely shook his head, pressing himself against the railing of the balcony before resting his elbows upon it, his eyes taking in the young woman still. “You may see rags and filth, but I see beyond that,” He replied, earning curious interest from the girls who followed his line of sight. “Look at her again and more closely,” He instructed.

They did as they were commanded, and they took in the girl’s features more closely than before. The woman seemed about five foot and three inches, with long black messy hair, yet, as much as they tried, they couldn’t see what Miroku was seeing.

Miroku continued. “Take notice of the way she carries herself. The woman’s back is straight and not hunched over,” He began, suddenly noticing the women’s nods as they also took notice. “Despite her kimono’s unsightly appearance, her figure is also desirable. A small waist, ample breasts and voluptuous hips,” He started, portraying his hands in the form of an hourglass shape.

One of the girls looked down in awe. “You’re right. We normally see those of poor status hunched over and walking strangely, but she walks with purpose and grace, and her back is also straight.”

Another nodded. “And her figure is quite nice. She’s not too skinny and she’s not too fat either…”

Miroku continued, pointing towards her messy hair pulled back in bun and out of her face. “Despite her hair being up and matted against her scalp, you can tell her hair is quite thick and long. Once it’s been thoroughly cleansed, I’m sure one’s hand would slide through like fine silk,” He explained. “And lastly, take a look at her face, if you will,” He replied, smirking as the women leaned even further over the balcony to get a better look. “Her milky white skin, as fine as rich porcelain. You can tell she’s never worked a day in the exposure of the sun. I believe she must live
a lavish lifestyle but only dresses as a commoner.”

Again, they did just that. It was difficult for them to get a good angle of her face, but when they saw the woman turn slightly as Yui was showing her around on the first floor, they noticed immediately. Beneath the dirt and sweat, was a small face, her skin as white as alabaster snow, long lashes, big blue eyes, a small nose and red lips. The woman was the epiphany of beauty and desire, and they soon found themselves fawning over her.

“She’s beautiful…”

“I only saw filth before, but I see now what Lord Miroku means…”

“You know, if she washed up, she would look like a completely different person!”

At this, they all imagined the woman dressed in many layers of beautifully colored silk kimonos, her hair donned in richly scented oils, spanning well past her waist with exquisite makeup applied to her face lightly, and a touch of color to her lips. Painted accessories could possibly adorn her hair, and the overall picture they conjured reminded them of a princess. If done properly, she would definitely be the most beautiful woman in all of Japan.

“My thoughts exactly!”

“Hey, do you think she’d going to the Hot Spring?”

“Maybe if she favors us she can take us back to the palace and we can be her personal servants!”

They practically squealed at the idea.

“I could ask to wash her hair!”

“Maybe she’ll let me wash her back?”

“I want to wash her feet!”

Yet, as they conversed and gossiped about the beautiful woman staying within the suite, hoping to get a chance to meet with her personally, they didn’t expect a shadow to loom behind them, the person’s aura menacing as it suddenly sent chills through the servant girls.

“What are you doing loitering in the halls? Get back to work!” The manager’s voice suddenly resounded, causing the girls beside Miroku to jump in fright and quickly disperse from the second floor. Slightly irritated his servants were being lazy, he flashed an apologetic smile to Miroku, one of his usual at the Inn. “My apologies, Lord Miroku. They have much to learn, I’m afraid. I hope your afternoon has been well.”

He nodded. “Do not worry, they were just informing me of some interesting gossip. It’s my fault.”

The manager quickly bowed to him. “Should you need anything, I’ll have one of my girls serve you.”

“No need, but I do appreciate it,” Miroku replied before turning suddenly to look over the balcony, his eyes following the retreating steps of the curious woman as she and Yui disappeared towards the back of the building. He turned back to the manager, smiling briefly. “Well then, if you’ll excuse me.”
After leaving Yuuta behind in the suite, Kagome followed Yui all the way to the first floor, carrying with her a small wooden container of sweet smelling oils Sango had given her to wash with, and two layers of kimonos, compliments of Yui. It wasn’t long before Kagome was greeted with a large shoji screen door, and on the other side, a veil of warm air greeted her. As Yui led the way, Kagome was immediately immersed within a spacious room filled with nature itself, large rocks, pebbles at her feet and thick shrubberies surrounding her. And yet, what amazed her the most, was the breathtaking view of the hot spring; it was massive and it was nothing compared to the hot spring back in the Demon Slayer village.

Her fascination must have urged a giggle from Yui, and excited, Kagome turned to the servant woman, who was standing a few feet away from her smiling. “It’s amazing, Yui. This is only my second time viewing a hot spring, especially one so big,”

“I see. Well, miss, you are free to relax here for as long as you like.”

“I wanted to ask, there is separation between men and women, right?” Kagome couldn’t help but ask, a bit worried someone might walk in on her, but she was surprised when Yui shook her head.

“Oh no. Both men and women bathe here, and more frequently than not,” She exclaimed, as if it were practically normal. When she noticed Kagome’s expression sour, she suddenly sweat dropped. “Oh, but if you are worried someone will walk in on you, then do not worry. The manager made it clear, that since you are a special guest of ours, that you should not be disturbed no matter what. No one else will be approaching the spring, so you have nothing to fear, Milady.”

That relieved her, but still, Kagome didn’t want to take up too much time, then again, it wasn’t like she had the opportunity to bathe in a hot spring every day like those with money. “Thank you Yui. And please, call me Kagome.”

“That’s right, Lady Kagome,” She exclaimed happily. “Please excuse me while I get some refreshments and sweets for you. And when I return, I’ll help to wash you. I shouldn’t be too long. I’ll have one of my girls keep watch while I’m gone.

Understanding, Kagome watched as Yui disappeared through the door before turning back towards the hot spring. Removing her straw sandals, she sat down and placed her foot into the water, followed after by the other and she sighed in contentment. It was hot, but it wasn’t scorching. It felt amazing.

She wasn’t exactly keen on another woman washing her, but then again, while staying in the Feudal Era, she didn’t often get the chance to bathe as frequently as she would like. Back in Kaede’s Village, they normally bathed once every week or two weeks, something she wasn’t used to doing, even after two months.

“I’ll enjoy this, like it’s my last hot bath…”

Ψ

Miroku’s eyes focused upon the shoji screen door, a single maid servant loitering just outside, her intention quite obvious, and yet, not enough to keep him away. He devised a simple solution and rounded the corner somewhat hastily, his eyes spotting her almost immediately and he approached.

She noticed this, quickly bowing her head in greeting. “Oh, good Monk. I hope you’ve been well,” She exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“As well as I would like,” He responded, with a weak smile, his eyes flashing towards the door
worryingly.

The servant noticed his stare, her gaze drifting towards the door just as concernedly before smiling slightly. “I’m sorry, but I was informed by Yui the Hot Spring is off limits for now.”

Miroku merely shook his head at her response. “I’m afraid I have not come for a simple cleansing; however, I couldn’t help but sense something was amiss until I felt a troubled aura nearby…”

She gasped, both hands to her mouth as she quickly backed away from the door. “You don’t mean, a demon has infiltrated the Spring?”

Miroku’s eyes softened and he gave her a reassuring smile. It wasn’t his intention to startle her so much, and since he didn’t wish for the entire Inn to be notified, he remained passive. “What I feel isn’t demonic in any sense. I believe there may very well be a restless spirit within the bath house. Perhaps it has made its way unknowingly into this Inn, and it’s likely the case in provincial places that spirits seek out excitement and fulfillment,” He explained suddenly. “Yet, as innocent as it might seem, restless spirits are capable of taking the forms of demons.”

The servant nodded. “I see. So, you’ll take care of it, won’t you?”

He nodded again, patting her shoulder soothingly. “Of course. It’s a simple matter, and nothing to get worked up over. Allow me to go in and say a prayer to the deceased. It may take me some time, but I’ll be in and out as swiftly as I can. In the meantime, you may continue what you’re doing, just make sure no one comes in until I’ve finished.”

“Of course! Thank you, good Monk!” She replied, momentarily forgetting about her reasons for guarding the bath house in the first place.

Pleased she complied easily enough, Miroku nodded and opened the door, sliding it shut behind him. As a veil of hot air and mist greeted him, he allowed a placid smirk to grace his face. It was too easy, but he was lucky this servant was so gullible.

As he ventured further inside, through the shrubbery, his eyes squinted through the mist and he searched the room for the woman of curious interest. It wasn’t difficult; she was sitting at the edge of the waters, both feet submerged and her eyes closed. From his perspective, she seemed lost in thought.

“I wonder what she looks like unclothed…” He murmured to himself as he crouched further into the foliage, watching her through the leaves.

And he didn’t have to wonder for much longer. The woman opened her eyes and pulled herself up to her feet, and tugged at her obi before it slid and fell to the ground at her feet. Beneath that, was her white kosode, and as her hands worked to unfasten the second obi, it too fell away, leaving her in only her undergarments. Undergarments Miroku couldn’t help but stare confusedly.

His indigo eyes were drawn immediately towards her breasts; they were quite ample, and yet he noted the strange and form fitting cloth covering her delicate mounds. It was white with large straps over her shoulders which crisscrossed in the back. It was strange, but he likely guessed it allowed for better support.

While she worked to unfasten her hair from its messy bun, he noticed her hair fell just at her lower back, the length adequate enough, but not nearly as long as nobles. As much as he enjoyed the view of her breasts bouncing, her fingers gliding through her hair, his eyes trailed down her curvaceous body, admiring her toned stomach and petite waist.
Her fundoshi was quite different compared to his and other beautiful ladies. A fundoshi was a simple and elongated white cloth which was easily wrapped around the front to conceal the nether regions, be it man or woman, and was braided around the hips and between the cheeks of one’s buttock until they were conjoined with the other side. And yet, hers was nothing like anything he’d ever seen before; this ravishing woman’s fundoshi was connected entirely from all sides, a pale yellow in color without any exposure seen in the back.

He swallowed suddenly, eyeing the strange undergarments and yet, he got satisfaction from viewing them. ‘She truly is different from other women…’

One by one, she removed her undergarments, starting first with the thin coverage spanned around her breasts, the material pulled over her head and tossed to the side, and just as quickly as she’d pulled it off, she removed her fundoshi, this time folding it and lying it atop the other.

Even without clothes, she looked as beautiful as a celestial maiden. There was hardly any comparison between her and the other women he’d lain with in his lifetime. He was used to flat chested women with flat asses as well, but this woman, she was gifted with large breasts and a rounded buttock; she was the epitome of beauty and sex appeal.

Leaning forward in the bushes, he tried to get a better look at her, and as the woman sat upon the wooden floor, he watched as she eased herself into the hot water, gasping suddenly from the hot temperature. Not long after adjusting herself, he heard her contented moan, and that alone excited him.

“This feels amazing…”

As she swam further into the water, slightly hidden by the veil of mist, Miroku quietly slipped off his kosode, leaving only his fundoshi on and proceeded out of the bushes towards the edge of the water. Ever so slowly, he lowered himself into the steaming water, his eyes suddenly noticing a wooden container, and bringing it to his nose, he suddenly smirked, an idea coming to mind.

Kagome sighed in contentment. It felt amazing. The water was nice and hot and it seemed like all her aches and pains were fading away. She swam for a bit and allowed the water to soak into her dirtied hair and eventually found comfort leaning against a strange rectangular wooden table connected to the spring. Kagome was fairly certain it was used for a variety of reasons such as eating or drinking, but she preferred resting her head on it, its warm surface easing her thoughts away.

“Mm … I could stay like this forever.” She murmured, kicking her legs slightly as she closed her eyes. If she stayed like this any longer, she was sure she’d fall asleep. “I should probably wash myself before I get too pruny…” But she didn’t feel like moving. “I’ll do it in five more minutes.”

Yet, the longer she rested there, the sleepier she felt, her mouth parting slightly and her legs no longer kicking beneath her. Kagome forced her eyes open every now and then while taking in the grandeur of this inside hot spring; it felt like she was outside more than anything, what with the giant boulders and plants here and there, not to mention this giant body of water. Similar to the Demon Slayers, they must have built around it.

“It makes sense this Inn is so famous … I wonder if it still exists in the future…” She murmured curiously. Somehow, she envisioned the future Inn with elevators, and emergency exits, signs which separated men and women, saunas, as well as a place to dine; all of it in just an Inn. “It would be so different than now, but I kind of like it here. It feels cozy…”
Before sleep fell upon her, she suddenly felt the water push against her back, the action doing little to bother her, but when she felt hands upon her shoulders, suddenly massaging into her, she gasped. Those hands startled her, and believing Yui had returned, quite possibly to help her bathe, she relaxed against her touch, sighing as the fingers worked into her shoulders and neck.

“Mm right there…”

Yui’s ministrations continued, pressing deeply into the areas where Kagome felt tightness and stiffness. The knots were certainly there from her ventures traveling with Yuuta as well as the days she spent working in the fields, and as she allowed Yui to work her magic, her body relaxed.

After a moment or two, her hands left her shoulders, and though Kagome felt slightly displeased her massage vanished just as fast as it came, she suddenly felt a cool substance applied to her damp hair, the scent of rosemary accompanied after.

Another sigh escaped Kagome, the scent of the oils reminding her of her time spent with Sango just the other day. It was thanks to her Kagome now had a means to create her own soaps and shampoos and according to Sango, it was possible to extract the oils from flowers and shrubbery, however, she wasn’t entirely sure of its entire process.

‘Maybe I’ll ask Sango when Yuuta and I return to the village…’

Yui’s hands lathered the oil in her hair, massaging her long strands, and as Kagome pulled away from the table to allow better access, as well as to avoid the sweet-smelling substance from getting in her eyes, she couldn’t help but sigh. She felt the woman brush back her bangs, lathering her front ends with oil just the same, her fingernails grazing slightly over her scalp; Kagome shivered at the feeling.

“I really appreciate this, Yui,” Kagome softly replied.

Although Yui remained ever so silent, she continued working her magic, removing the dirt and sweat from her hair until she was well cleansed and refreshed.

Feeling Yui’s hands leave her hair, Kagome realized she must have finished, and taking over for this step, especially since there were no showerheads in this era, sadly, Kagome dipped her hair into the water. Her fingers worked to remove the oil from her hair, and as Yui assisted, Kagome ultimately submerged herself under the hot water, resurfacing until her hair was gleaming and clean.

The hot water stung her eyes, and as she pushed her bangs from her face, wiping away the moisture from her eyes, something soft fell over her head. Touching it curiously, Kagome realized it was a towel, and pleased, she patted the soft material against her face. Once she could see again, her blurriness dissipating, Kagome laid the towel on the makeshift table and leaned her upper body upon the table, the towel acting as a makeshift pillow.

‘I could stay like this forever…’

Once again, she felt Yui’s hands upon her shoulders, this time lathered in the cool and sweet-smelling substance. From her shoulders to her back, she cleansed Kagome, removing the dirt and sweat easily enough and ever so silently. Even though Kagome was still half submerged, she felt content as Yui did her job well, and not once, did she feel awkward.

‘I thought I would hate this, especially since I’m capable of washing myself just fine, but it’s not as bad as I first thought.’ Another sigh escaped Kagome, and she couldn’t help but smile. “Don’t
stop…’ Yui would make a great massage therapist, that much Kagome was certain.

Yui’s hands traveled down the length of her arms, massaging the oils into her small hands, and it was then Kagome noticed just how large they were. If Kagome didn’t know any better, she’d say those hands belonged to a man, but that wasn’t possible, and Yui had this softness about her touch.

The servant’s hands glided up her arms once more and this time reached down her shoulders, massaging the oils into her neck and collarbone until ultimately cleansing her breasts. For the longest moment, Yui’s hands remained there, rubbing the oils above and beneath her breasts, and although Kagome was half asleep at this point, she couldn’t help but notice how Yui’s hands squeezed slightly upon her mounds.

It felt weird, having a woman touch her so intimately, and yet, Kagome wondered if she was thinking too deeply into it. Maybe she wanted to be thorough with this washing, and yet, she couldn’t help but blush when she felt Yui’s finger rub against her nipples, the sensation causing Kagome to stiffen.

‘She’s just helping to wash me. That’s all. Besides, it only feels strange because I’m not used to this kind of treatment.’ Then again, Yui’s touch was becoming just a bit too bold in her cleansing.

What followed after was the feeling of Yui’s knee separating her thighs, and while Kagome’s arms were still propped up upon the table, she raised her head only slightly, mouth agape in surprise. Wait a minute, this felt a bit too sensual. Surely, she wasn’t overthinking this, right?

Before she could turn around and allow Yui some time to rest while she finished washing herself, she suddenly felt her hands upon her shoulders, her thumbs pressing into her skin and the area between her neck. Kagome moaned at the feeling, her head instinctively pressed upon the table yet again. Those hands continued for another minute before drifting to her lower back, her thumbs pressing into her spine in a circular motion, which eased the pressure off Kagome’s back immensely. It wasn’t long before Kagome felt herself relax once more.

Ψ

Miroku’s grin couldn’t get any wider, and it took a great bit of willpower to withstand from anything else other than massaging her. Like other women, she melted at his touch, his fingers relaxing her, and though she was on the verge of falling asleep, he couldn’t help but bite his lip. Her skin was so smooth and it truly was as white as porcelain, the fairest skin he’d ever seen, and yet, he couldn’t help but assume those rumors of her originating from a poor village were false; this woman was clearly of nobility, that much he was certain. How else would it explain such fine skin? There was not even a blemish seen, at least, not what his eyes could discern from her waist down.

“Your hands are like magic…” She softly moaned into the table.

Miroku smirked. ‘So, I’ve been told, countless times…’ He was doing his best not to get too close to her from behind. One wrong move and she would immediately realize it wasn’t Yui.

While his hands remained upon her lower back, he became bold in his movements, allowing his fingers to travel further down beneath the water until his hands rested upon her supple ass. Immediately he felt her body stiffen, especially when he gave her a firm squeeze, and as he leaned in slightly closer, he noticed a blush spread across her face, her eyes wide but still turned away from him.

His knee, which still remained between her thighs, probed her lightly, the action causing her to jump slightly, and she lifted herself suddenly from the table, both hands firmly flattened upon the
smooth surface. From his point of view, it seemed she was about to turn and demand an explanation, but before she could, he quickly leaned into her, one strong arm encircled around her waist, the other fondling one of her breasts.

Ψ

A noticeable blush swept Kagome’s face as she felt Yui press into her from behind, her knee still rubbing between her thighs. It was also bad enough she felt her fondling her breast, the action entirely uncomfortable and unnecessary.

Unable to move, Kagome’s cerulean eyes looked down at the arm encircled around her, and the mere sight of it suddenly alarmed her. Before, she hadn’t noticed, but looking closer, she realized it was large, slightly hairy and even the hand squeezing and touching her chest did not look feminine whatsoever. Somehow, she had a feeling this wasn’t truly Yui behind her, but quite possibly a man.

“If you want, my dear, I can make more than just your back feel good…” The masculine voice huskily whispered into her ear, biting her lobe affectionately.

That was the only incentive she needed to realize in that moment the situation she found herself in. So, it was a man! Alarmed, if not half scared, Kagome’s hands tightened upon the edges of the wooden table, feeling it move slightly under the weight.

“You know what else will feel good?” Kagome replied back, her eye twitching irritably.

“I’m sure I can easily gues—”

It happened so fast, it surprised even Kagome. One minute, this asshole was whispering in her ear and the next, Kagome’s grip upon the table tightened so much, she felt it loosen from its hinges. What happened next, happened equally as fast. The table sprang up from the water and with it, a loud pop resonated in the room, and Kagome turned swiftly, board in hand.

“Giving you perverts a piece of my mind!”

As hard as she could, she swung the table, its exterior colliding with his face, so hard in fact, the noise sent a shudder through her, and she watched in satisfaction as he fell beneath the surface of the steamy water. Even as he disappeared from sight, no longer touching her, thankfully, Kagome couldn’t help but breathe heavily.

“What the hell is wrong with these men?! Are they all horny?!” She cried, asking no one in particular as she seethed angrily. Ever since she arrived to the Feudal Era, it was either Satouru or this lecher. “I swear to Kami I could fucking kill you!”

Kagome was pissed. If it wasn’t one goddamn lecher than it was another! If she’d paid more attention during her relaxation, she was sure she would have noticed sooner, before he put his hands on her. Now she understood why she didn’t feel comfortable during her washing.

“I hope you drown!” She loudly exclaimed, table still raised above her head with anticipation as she watched the water anxiously.

Miroku resurfaced, sputtering and wiping his face, a huge red mark across his cheeks. “Well, that certainly wasn’t how I planned this,” He replied, groaning in discomfort as he touched his jaw. Once his eyes were clear of water and his vision no longer blurred, he brushed away his fallen black locks and looked at her, his eyes shifting towards the table in her grasp. How she managed to pull the board from the spring was a mystery to him. “You’ve got quite the arm—”
Again, Kagome swung at him, and just like the first time, she struck him, the impact causing him to fall beneath the water for a brief moment before he immediately resurfaced, his face suddenly panicked as she raised the table once again.

“Wait a minute! Hold on a second!” He exclaimed, fearfully attempting to swim away from her, but the water only allowed him so much speed.

“You fucking prick! Where do you think you’re going?!”

He couldn’t help but sweat drop at her vulgar use of language. As he dodged right and left of the flying table, he found an opening during her swings, and just as the board hit the surface of the water, narrowly missing him, he closed in on her and grabbed her wrists.

The action surprised Kagome, and now that she was completely facing him, her hands bound in his strong hands, she shrieked and pulled against him, but he only tightened his grip. “Let go!”

“Calm yourself, woman!” He replied, not truly understanding why she fought against him. With the board still raised in midair above their heads, he couldn’t help but release a steady breath. He didn’t want to feel the edge of the board a third time. Noticing a collection of boulders just behind her, he tightened his hands around her wrist until he felt them slacken slightly and it was enough to quickly disarm her and toss the table across the water.

The action certainly took Kagome by surprise, and realizing she had no way of protecting herself, she found herself pulled behind him in the water until she was ultimately pressed up against the rocks and on an incline, which fully exposed their bodies. With her hands held tightly above her head, she glowered menacingly at the lecher, his face mere inches away from her.

“Get the hell off me!”

From this close proximity, she took in her attacker’s physical characteristics. He had shoulder length black hair with a few bangs framing his forehead and he was slightly more tanned than herself. Similar to herself, his eyes were also light in color, though his were slightly darker in color; if Kagome had to guess, his eyes were the color of indigo; this was the first time she’d seen someone of this Era with similar eyes.

A large red and veiny scar spanned the entirety of his chest, its length wide and as she lowered her gaze, Kagome noticed how it wrapped around his left thigh. Fortunately, he wasn’t completely naked, and although he was wearing only a fundoshi, she momentarily freaked out when she saw his bulging dick hanging out from the side of the white cloth and it was enough to make her scream at the top of her lungs.

“Yuuta! Yuuta! There’s a pervert in the spring! Yuuta!”

“Stop that!” He quickly replied, releasing one of her hands to cover her mouth. His eyes darted around the room briefly, and thankful no trouble had followed, he locked his gaze with her own. “For Kami’s sake, I’m not going to harm you. I assure you. For your sake and mine, refrain from screaming.” The last thing he wanted was to ruin his reputation and be labeled a creep and he also didn’t want her reputation as the Daimyo’s concubine to be tarnished either. It would be a lose-lose situation.

When Miroku noticed she visibly calmed down, despite glowering still, he removed his hand from her mouth and pressed one hand against the rocks by her head, the other still grasping her wrist. “Now, let’s be reasonable. I’d like to ask first what I’ve done to warrant such hostility?”
Kagome seethed. Not only was she completely mortified by this entire situation, she wanted nothing more than to hide under these rocks. “Don’t try to act innocent! You’re a molester and a peeping tom!” She retorted.

Miroku blinked. “No more than a few moments ago you were telling me not to stop,” He clarified, his words true. It was certain after all, but why was this woman fighting against him? Why would she be so upset she’d want to kill him? This had never happened in all his years seducing women.

“I thought you were Yui!”

He sweat dropped. Well, he understood why she thought that at first. “I know what you must be thinking, and I’ll admit, perhaps I came on a bit too strongly… I did not realize you were so timid —”

“Timid?! I was fucking scared you pervert! Yuuta! Yuuta!”

He visibly stiffened, not only to her screams but also to the fact that he had actually frightened her; it hadn’t been his intention. Scared? Why was she scared? Because this sort of situation never happened to him, he didn’t know what else to do but cover her mouth, but he pulled away when he felt her teeth bite into his fingers. “You’ve got it all wrong. I never wanted to frighten or harm you.”

Kagome fought against him, his strength still somewhat overpowering, and during her struggle, he grasped her other wrist again. Since they were standing just on an incline, no longer held down by the force of the water, she lifted her knee and struck him in the ribs. The action worked to her benefit, but only briefly when he doubled over, his expression contorted into pain, but his hands did not release her.

“How did I misunderstand?! I thought Yui came back to wash me, and I thought she was giving me a massage! But you fucking tried to molest me!” Kagome exclaimed, lifting her knee once more.

Miroku reacted quickly this time and turned her entire body towards the rocks, her back facing towards him. This time, he held her there, one hand held firmly behind her back. In this position, she wouldn’t be able to hit him. Still, this only made the gravity of his situation more questionable.

He sighed in frustration, no longer feeling certain in this situation. “So, I take it you didn’t enjoy it?”

“Hell no!”

This woman’s words stung him and he felt his ego suddenly deflate. This woman didn’t enjoy any of his ministrations? None at all? How? This had never happened. Not in his entire life. “How are you displeased? You’ve been relaxed by the spring, and I washed you only part way and you were enjoying my touch earlier. Is it because I’m a man?” He inquired, but she only continued struggling. Miroku continued. “I just don’t understand why you’re being so difficult. Other women could only dream to be in your place, alone with me and in the bath no less,” He explained, mentally counting all the times the servants and villagers had swooned for him by mere conversation.

“I’m not like other women!” She replied.

Miroku nodded at this. “I’m beginning to see that now…” Sighing once more, his eyes scanned her body, but only briefly before locking his gaze with hers. “If my touch truly offended you, I apologize and—”
“Yuuta!”

The velocity at which she screamed certainly took him by surprise, and he couldn’t help but flinch as her scream nearly deafened him. And yet, within mere moments, he heard the sound of the shoji screen door slam open and the sound of slippered footsteps running into the room and the jostling plates and utensils sounding.

“Lady Kagome? Lady Kagome? Are you alright? I heard you scream,” Yui’s voice exclaimed through the thin mist. When she realized Kagome must have entered into the water, she turned towards the rocks, her eyes shifting until she noticed two figures pressed up against a collection of towering boulders and shrubbery.

Squinting further, she saw Kagome in a state of panic and a familiar monk behind her, holding her in place; the scene seemed so intimate, she almost looked away, but remembering Kagome’s troubled scream, she turned back in question.

Why on earth was the monk in the spring and with their special guest? Yui remembered specifically asking one of the maid servants to keep watch and allow no one entry. She almost sighed, tray in hand, as she looked between the two, blushing suddenly before looking away. Should she leave Kagome and the monk alone? Yui wasn’t sure. Of course, it wasn’t out of the ordinary for Lord Miroku to flirt, especially with their customers, and she’d admit, there were a few instances she’d seen more than just flirting in the Hot Spring.

Perhaps, she should have warned Kagome before leaving the room that something of this magnitude would likely transpire, especially what with the servants gossiping right and left.

Realizing he’d been caught, and yet, fortunately not by the management, Miroku feigned ignorance, hoping he could find a way to escape this uncomfortable situation. Remembering his words earlier with a random maid, he turned to Yui with confidence, despite his full-on nudity. “Just in time. I believe an evil spirit has possessed this woman!” He lied, but even as he said this, even he saw through his lie, and he couldn’t help but weakly sweat drop.

“So now I’m possessed?!?” Kagome retorted. “Don’t listen to him Yui! This creep snuck into the hot spring and tried to force himself on me!”

Yui remained hesitant. She’d do something if she could, but this man was someone of higher status than she was. Then again, it was Lord Miroku, and she feared if she even so much as tried to pull him away from Lady Kagome, she might end up in a similar fashion. “Oh dear…” She could get help, get the manager to handle this situation, but the embarrassment would be too much and certainly rumors would quickly spread around all of Edo. Yui couldn’t let that tarnish Lady Kagome’s reputation.

Yet, before Yui could set her tray of delicacies down and jump in to remove Lord Miroku, the sound of heavy footsteps sounded suddenly, the Inn unexpectedly trembling. Yui turned in the direction of the open door, her eyes suddenly wide with fright, and she covered her hands with her mouth.

Miroku also heard the sound, and bewildered and slightly bothered, he followed Yui’s gaze and visibly paled. Standing in the doorway, despite being slightly concealed by the mist, was an enormous beast of a man, dressed in a calf-length white kosode, the length barely reaching his ankles, a scar upon his face and a complexion so fierce, he almost pissed himself out of fear.

“Yuuta! Thank god you’re here!” Kagome cried, smiling elatedly.
Miroku nervously swallowed, an eye twitching as he took in the man’s immense height as he stalked closer towards the spring, strong hands fisted and a scowl evident on his face. ‘That’s her guard?! He looks like a bandit…’

While on his way to check up on Kagome, despite missing for close to half an hour, he was no further than the second floor when he heard Kagome’s voice from behind the first-floor building. Yuuta remembered jumping from the balcony, startling many servants and customers, and ran as fast as he could.

When he arrived, stepping inside, he found the servant girl Yui standing just near the edge of the water, a look of horror upon her face as she looked between him and the spring. He followed her line of sight, and instantly locked eyes with an unknown man, naked entirely except for a simple fundoshi, but even that did not conceal his swelled member which hung out. What made the situation worse was his grasp upon Kagome’s wrist, and how he had Kagome pressed against the rocks in a manner which seemed too intimate and forced to his liking.

Yuuta’s eye twitched, and he popped his knuckles, his scowl darkening as he brushed past Yui, and without a word, jumped into the scorching water and swam with unnatural speed towards the rocks, the likes of which caused the young man to release Kagome.

As he noticed Kagome quickly swim away and towards Yui’s outstretched hand, he focused his attention on the scoundrel who did Kagome wrong. The young man, despite being smaller than himself, shrank away from Yuuta, throwing his arms against the water in an attempt to escape, but Yuuta easily caught his leg, pulling him under the water.

A lot of struggling was involved, and despite this man trying his hardest to escape Yuuta’s clutches, it was all inevitable; Yuuta pulled him by his leg, reaching into the water with a powerful arm before grasping the peeping tom by his neck, pulling him above the surface eye to eye.

“How dare you touch my woman!”

Miroku sputtered and choked, the feeling of this rogue’s hand tightening around his neck nearly suffocating him. And yet, a look of complete shock and confusion surrounded his countenance at the guard’s declaration. His woman? Wasn’t the girl the rumored second concubine? “Y-you’re … woman?”

Yuuta seethed, nodding only once before raising his fist. “My wife!”

Nothing could make Yuuta more irritable. That disgusting man touching Kagome remained at the forefront of his thoughts, his hand upon Kagome and Kagome forced into a situation not of her choosing. It pissed him off, so much so, he realized he went a bit overboard. Nothing could have pissed him off as much as that had, and while he considered himself someone who was worthy to protect Kagome, he’d failed, especially at such an inconvenient time.

“Fucking hell. If I so much as see that man again, I’ll break him in two,” He muttered, stomping through the halls and up the stairs. Yuuta ignored the servants giving him passage, their fear evident upon their faces and despite hearing their gossip behind his back, he couldn’t care less.

It wasn’t long before he arrived at the third floor and when he found himself standing before his and Kagome’s room, he paused, his hand mere inches away from the handle. Pressing his ear
against the door, he listened; he was expecting to hear crying, yelling or anything, but he was greeted with silence and that didn’t set well with him.

Sighing and trying to swallow back his anger, he slid the door open and stepped inside, pausing briefly when he noticed Yui comforting Kagome. His companion was sitting atop the newly rolled out futon, her knees raised to her chest and her arms encircled around her legs. Kagome was silent, her gaze looking anywhere but at him or Yui, and it was a sight he’d never seen before. Yuuta didn’t like it.

“Kagome,” He called, easily managing to catch Yui’s attention, but he noticed Kagome ignored him, turning her head away from him and towards the windows.

“Lord Yuuta, welcome back,” Yui greeted, though her smile was dim and slightly forced. “I’ve prepared your evening attire already and I’ve already laid out yours and Lady Kagome’s meals,” She explained, motioning towards the small table in the middle of the room, filled with a feast big enough for a family.

Yuuta only nodded, approaching the futon before staring at Kagome. “Fetch the manager. I would like to have a word with him.” When he noticed Yui bow and leave the room, he turned back to Kagome, and still, she was not acknowledging him. “Kagome.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Came her reply.

He sat down beside her in the futon, his gaze traveling her form only briefly, trying to discern if there were any bruises, but he didn’t see any. “Are you alright? He didn’t touch you, did he?” And by that, he meant differently than mere wrist grabbing. “Answer me honestly.”

Realizing Yuuta wasn’t going to leave her alone to her own thoughts, she groaned and dropped her head to her knees, her fists clenched tightly upon her white kosode. “Yes. He did. And what’s worse, Yuuta, I let him…” She explained, hating the entire situation. “I didn’t know what to do…” No, that wasn’t true; Kagome knew what to do, but her strength in the situation wasn’t enough. She didn’t plan for some pervert to touch her breasts or even give her a whole back massage. Just remembering it left her shuddering in disgust.

Understanding her anger, he touched her shoulder softly. “Kagome.”

“I thought Yui had returned to help me wash, and I thought she was giving me this wonderful neck and back massage. Turns out it was that creep. I don’t know how he got into the spring and how I didn’t notice until he had his hands on me. I’m partially to blame; I should have been more aware. I was too relaxed in the moment,” Kagome replied, sighing. “I couldn’t even defend myself.” She wanted to change that. As soon as she returned to Lady Kaede’s village, she’d definitely speak with the High Priestess about this matter. The faster she could train, the better.

His hands clenched at her words. So, he did touch her. “Did he … take you?”

Kagome’s face reddened, and she quickly shook her head from side to side. Judging by Yuuta’s reaction beside her, his face contorted angrily, she quickly looked away. “No. He didn’t.” Kagome was fortunate it hadn’t gone any further. The last thing she wanted was to get raped and impregnated by some stranger in this time period.

“I gave him a reason never to approach you ever again,” Yuuta began, scoffing before running his hand through his hair. “I told him you were mine and that I wouldn’t hesitate the next time.” He said that but he threw in a harsh beating in between, just for good measure.
Kagome nodded.  

“But … if you should want, I can kill hi—”  

“Don’t,” She quickly replied. Despite wishing such a fate upon that man, and having expressed how she wished he’d have drowned, Kagome wasn’t the type to wish death on anyone. Sure, she might have been mad at the moment, and she had every reason to. “I’m sure he won’t try anything else. So, don’t worry about it.”  

“I don’t want bloodshed. It’s not worth it, Yuuta. I know you grew up relying on your sword, and as much as I respect your privacy, I can’t bear for you to kill someone simply because I was touched,” She replied. Did that make sense? “Besides, this happens all the time. I’m sure, there’s isn’t man, woman, or child in this world who hasn’t experienced similar situations. It’s always been survival of the fittest…” She muttered the last sentence to herself, but Yuuta heard it.

If that’s what she wanted, then he would respect her decision. “It may be survival of the fittest, but even then, a line must be drawn. I was completely at fault for this situation, Kagome,” He replied, earning a confused stare from the woman beside him. “We arrived in Edo, and were even granted such a luxurious Inn to stay freely. I was too comfortable and trusted the servant to guide you safely to and from the Hot Spring. I should have considered the wandering eyes of those customers following you the moment we stepped in.”  

“But Yuu—” He interrupted, grasping her shoulders suddenly and turning her to face him. “If it makes you feel any better, you may take out your frustrations on me. Do what you want and I won’t resist.”

She only shook her head. “Although it might help to vent my frustrations, it would only bother me later on. I’m okay, Yuuta. Thank you for looking out for me; I’m glad you’re with me; that’s all I can really ask for.”

Looking out for her? He felt he was doing more than simply that, and yet, he let her down. The fact that her body was sullied by a stranger’s hands, completely irritated him, and although Kagome refused to explain in detail what had all transpired, he didn’t press her. Instead, he pulled her against him and held her tightly in his embrace.

“Y-Yuuta?!” She gasped, not expecting his strong arms to wrap around her.

“I’ll never let it happen again. I swear on my life.”

Despite not wanting him to risk his life for her, she found comfort in his words, and she closed her eyes briefly. His musky scent emanated from his body, a scent which reminded her of the forest.

“You shouldn’t make empty promises,” She replied. “You can’t always be with me, Yuuta.”

The way in which she replied indifferently pained him, and pulling her away slightly, he cupped her face, his thumb caressing her cheeks softly. “Do you doubt me?”

For a moment, she was silent, regarding him curiously as she mused. She and Yuuta had never been this close nor affectionate like they were right now. He was looking at her in a way which made her nervous and yet, his stare spoke volumes, as well as his declaration to protect her. Yuuta cared about her, and he wasn’t exactly someone who often said so to others. This was a side of him she’d never fully seen before, and he was being so gentle with her. “No. I do trust you, Yuuta. But there are instances that even we can’t avoid in the future. Nothing is certain.”
Despite hearing this, his hold upon her shoulders remained. “If I say I will lay my life on the line for you, then I mean it. So, don’t ever doubt me.”

She slowly nodded, shocked and yet, a feeling of understanding swept through her. Although she and Yuuta had once been slightly distant starting off, she realized he was important to her and someone she could surely put her trust. He really was a good friend.

When he noticed her eyes close all of a sudden, sighing upon his words, he suddenly felt anxious, and deep within, he felt this inclination to lean in and kiss her. But just as those thoughts sprang to the forefront of his mind, he immediately scorned them. What was he thinking? He practically confessed his feelings for the woman and all because of an unpleasant happening.

Sighing along with her, he pulled her into his embrace, his hand running smooth circles upon her back, his eyes transfixed upon the window. Kagome never pulled away, and to his relief, she wrapped her arms around his waist, and snuggled her head against his chest.

“Thank you Yuuta.”

Ψ

Author Notice: (IMPORTANT!)

First, I would like to let you all know I've added a cover pic to this story and started adding actual summaries to each chapter. I also rewrote the summary of this story a bit, and I think it sounds a bit better than what was written before.

First off, i'm sure you're all excited to see Miroku added to the story, but I hope his intentions did not disturb anyone. We kept Miroku in character, but only slightly changed his personality and behavior as you've already noticed. In the anime/movies, it was only subtly noted that he would touch women, often asking them to bear his children, and it never explicitly mentioned him sleeping with anyone or being too aggressive; that's what we wanted to change, but he will not be a character similar to Satouru in any way; rest assured. Still, what he did to Kagome was wrong, and im sure he's learned his lesson; in his mind, he is a lover of women, and easily seduces them, so coming onto women in this way was normal to him, but for kagome, this is NOT normal and not something she would stand for either. So, i hope that helps.

The relationship between Kagome and Yuuta is merely friendship. It’s obvious he’s fallen for her, but respects her enough not to do anything which could upset her. Kagome sees Yuuta as a friend. Remember, this story is about Kagome and Youko. 😊

On another note, we are very close to ending Year One!!! Within a couple more chapters we will end the year. At the beginning of Year two, we will FINALLY introduce Youko Permanently! The plot will finally begin and there will be lots of demon interactions and surprises for all of you! :D Hope you are all excited for that, because I know I am!
August 25th

The jostling of the horse did little to soothe Kagome’s nerves; despite having enjoyed her conversation with the Daimyo and granted permission to undergo training, there were a few things which upset her during hers and Yuuta’s trip.

The first was obviously related to the Financial Advisor, and after everything he did to Kaede’s Village, as well as his threats towards Kagome and refusing her entrance to meet with the Daimyo, she had no other choice but to climb the walls of the manor. Fortunately, the Daimyo found her before the guards, and after half an hour of explanation regarding her journey to meet with him, the Financial Advisor faced serious charges, and in the end, was imprisoned for further questioning. It was lucky they had evidence to support their claims, a hand-written letter with the Demon Slayer’s seal.

The second thing which unnerved her was the incident which happened in the Inn. Although they were given only the best, thanks to the Daimyo’s precious wooden pass, which she and Yuuta returned to the servants the next day, there was one thing which bothered her. A man had snuck into the Hot Spring and had put his hands on her, and fortunately, Yui and Yuuta arrived, though a bit late. Whatever happened to him, Yuuta never said, only that he taught the creep a lesson he would never forget.

The last incident which happened to them began yesterday morning. After leaving the Inn, fully rested, Kagome followed the Daimyo’s advise to visit the temple in Edo, and although she and Yuuta found it easily enough, the priestesses there were quite the opposite of what Kagome had expected. Just thinking about it pissed Kagome off.

The temple was positively beautiful with large gardens encompassing its front entrance, and because it was a sacred place which they trained and partook in their practices, for themselves and for the people, it was well guarded. So, guarded in fact, there was even a wall and gate placed up around it entirely, and if it wasn’t for the Daimyo’s pass, she and Yuuta would have never been allowed inside.

They were granted permission and they explored the area just outside the temple, their eyes viewing many servant women attending their chores and it wasn’t long before they caught the eyes of many beautiful priestesses. To put it bluntly, they were nothing like Kagome imagined, at least from her memory of living on a shrine herself. Unlike the standard image, a woman dressed in a white haori and red hakama, they were dressed far more extravagantly, and if Kagome didn’t know any better, she’d think they were entertainers of some kind.

Their long silken black hair came in an array of different styles with many colorful accessories
adorning them from head to toe. Their clothes were not at all simple and held many layers, similar to nobles and it wasn’t just that which threw Kagome off, but the colors which adorned them. The girls were wearing Seisos in blues, pinks, reds, whites, orange, yellows, greens, and the list went on.

If that wasn’t eye catching, then certainly it must have been their makeup. Their faces were small and their complexion was just as fair as Kagome’s, but their faces were slightly whiter in comparison, the finely pressed powder concealing every flaw noticeable. Charcoal aligned their small and slanted eyes, and red rouge painted their lips and cheeks, even their eye lids; they looked more like geishas or maikos, only their hair wasn’t in the standard shimada hairstyle; after all, this was a much earlier time period and it was more custom to wear their hair down and past their waists.

Still, the very sight was something Kagome didn’t expect, and neither did she expect such haughty attitudes. A priestess, in her definition, was someone who was respectful and forgiving, despite having a slightly higher status than a common villager. And yet, they did not treat Yuuta and Kagome too kindly, at least, not until they explained the reasoning behind their visit, but even that was minimal.

They laughed and mocked Kagome, judging her based only on her appearance and how she was nothing but a mere commoner. They questioned her family background and the residence of her village, and although Kagome could only give them small details, it was enough for them to turn up their noses.

Snobs. If there was one word which described them, that was surely it. These women down right exclaimed they earned their positions because of their family name, and that Kagome was wasting her time since she came from a poor village.

Despite treating them ruefully, they did tell her something quite interesting. If she were ever interested in becoming a shrine priestess, and officially, she’d have to take the yearly exams. Yet, even then it was not an easy feat, unless you had a successful family name to help you along further, that and money; normally, only two out of hundreds of women were selected depending on their scores and the rest normally returned to their families or became female attendants.

Despite this information slightly upsetting Kagome, she explained she wasn’t looking for anything like high status or wealth; she simply wished to undergo training so she could help her village, even going so far as to deny payment for such services. To say this took the women by surprise was certainly an understatement, and they laughed at her.

“You won’t get far if you think that will help you along in life little girl,”

“You’d rather help your village and travel the lands to help others? Do you even know what that entails? You’ll likely die by the hands of demons if not by filthy bandits!”

“You are aware traveling priestesses no longer exist, right? In 1185, such priestesses lost their privileges and were forced into a state of mendicancy, meaning those poor temples and shrines they once held power over fell long ago. After so many years, only well to do families have survived.”

“If you think you can help others simply out of the kindness of your heart, you won’t survive. You’ll likely lose your virginity before you’ve even started. The only way to survive is with money and power little girl. There is no other way. If you want to succeed, you’ll need both.”

Kagome sighed, her hands wrapped around Yuuta’s waist during their travel, and she kicked her
legs while she rode side saddle. “Do you think they were right, Yuuta?”

Hearing her question, he shifted his glance over his shoulder, noticing her forehead pressed against his back, her eyes hidden by her bangs. “What?”

She looked up at him, scowling angrily. “Those girls back at the temple. They said traveling priestesses lost ownership of their shrines and temples and became nothing more but traveling prostitutes before evidently disappearing!” She exclaimed angrily, her hands clenching his shirt tightly.

He blinked and mused on her words. Honestly, he didn’t know much about priestesses besides the fact they trained rigorously, especially in well to do villages. “Well, it happened long ago. Doesn’t Kaede have a sister?”

Kagome nodded. “Kikyou. Kaede said her sister was once head of their village and she also traveled across Japan helping others, but I never heard anything ill mentioned about her. Kaede said Kikyou was a true priestess and never tarnished her reputation. I find it hard to believe…”

“If I’m being honest, in all my years traveling, I’ve never once seen a priestess besides Lady Kaede. I’ve seen many monks and priests but that’s it,” He replied. “Perhaps, their words were not entirely false.”

“But subjecting yourself into prostitution? I can’t imagine it…” Maybe it wasn’t all priestesses from humble backgrounds, but it might have been possible only a few did it, whether they wanted it or not. “Maybe … money was an issue.” That was the only explanation she could think of that made sense. “But even our village is suffering. And according to those women, it costs a hefty amount to require their services.”

“It could be, after those priestesses lost ownership of their shrines and temples years before, they’ve either settled in their own villages or have moved into much larger ones,” He began, and it made sense. “Those girls weren’t completely wrong when they said money and power will undoubtedly help you in your aim to become a priestess of high standing. However, you’ve made it clear you want neither money or power, and the road which you plan to travel will certainly be difficult, but I don’t think it will be impossible Kagome.”

“Thank you, Yuuta.”

“Somehow, I have a feeling those women in Edo are different kinds of priestesses as compared to Kaede and Kikyou.”

“You mean their gaudy outfits, accessories and their snobbish attitudes? Yeah, I can kind of see what you mean…” Kagome sarcastically remarked, rolling her eyes.

Snobbish? Yuuta merely shook his head. “What I mean is, they do not seem like the type to fight demons and you did notice their temple was well guarded. It seems they require protection for their services.”

She blinked. “I thought there was something strange about that. They seemed so spoiled and pampered, I wonder if they could actually take up the bow,” She mused briefly. “Regardless, I don’t plan to go back there or take their exam. I’ll talk with Kaede when we get back and see if she can train me the basics.”

Yuuta nodded, smiling at her words. He was glad Kagome was different from those other women, and he believed she could do it. Beginning from the basics would only be the beginning for her, but
he wondered how far she could manage along the way, especially when it came to demon confrontation. So far, on their journey, they were lucky not to have stumbled upon any issues, and he wondered if it was because they were still within the borders of the Demon Slayer Village and Edo.

“How much further?”

His gaze searched the path ahead, and he extended his arm. “We’re almost there.”

Moving away from his back, Kagome suddenly took notice of her surroundings and realized they were no longer on the road but riding through a thick and familiar forest. Leaning away from Yuuta, she noticed a tall and familiar structure just ahead, large wooden towers in the midst of it and an unnoticeable village hidden within.

With her ill thoughts pushed to the back of her head, Kagome’s face alit with excitement. “The Demon Slayer Village!” She happily exclaimed, both her hands atop Yuuta’s shoulders at this point. “Finally! I’m glad we’re back. I hope Shippo is doing well.”

The moment they arrived at the towering fortitude, two guardsmen noticed them, disappearing briefly, their shouts heard over the other and shortly after, the gates before them suddenly opened and they urged their horse inside.

The villagers noticed them, smiling while others held blank faces before turning away to resume their chores. A few village children remembered their faces, smiling and waving with excitement, and it was the distraction Kagome needed and she waved back.

Not long into their arrival, Yuuta pulled on the reins, and their gaze fell upon the main manor before them. Upon their return, a young servant girl noticed their arrival, and with a respectful nod in their direction, she quickly scurried up the steps and through the open shoji screen door. Soon after, the figure of a young and beautiful woman greeted them from the wooden entrance; no longer dressed in her slayer garb, Sango was adorned in a simple white and pink kimono with a green mobakama skirt wrapped around her midsection, a simple white ribbon holding her long brown tresses behind her.

A small child was cradled in her arms, Shippo’s green eyes staring curiously at Sango before turning his small face towards her and Yuuta. There was a flicker of familiarity in his gaze, his long furry red ears twitching upon his head and soon, he stretched his small hands out towards them.

Relieved and also excited at the reunion, Kagome jumped down from the horse and rushed over to Sango, taking the small child into her arms gently. “Aww, did you miss mommy? Mommy missed you so much!” She cooed, rocking him in her arms with all the affection he deserved. “Were you a good boy while we were gone?”

“Welcome back. You’ve returned sooner than anticipated,” Sango greeted, smiling warmly at the pair.

Looking away from Shippo, Kagome nodded. “A one night’s stay in Edo is plenty enough. How was Shippo? I hope he wasn’t a handful.”

“Not at all. He was a bit unsettled after you and your husband left, but he’s become content in his surroundings. The girls’ have been keeping him occupied while you were both away.”

Girls’? “Your girls’?”
“Yes. You’ve met them briefly before. Itsuko, Rui and Chiyoko.”

Upon hearing those names, Kagome visibly stiffened. Those girls? The ones who nearly chopped their heads off two days ago? And Sango let them watch her son? Somehow, it didn’t set well with Kagome, but the slayer didn’t seem too concerned. “Oh … those three…”

“Do not worry. They’ve only showed the utmost affection for Shippo. I can assure you, he was in good hands,” Sango assured, sweat dropping.

Even so, Kagome still didn’t trust them, but she was thankful Shippo was alright. Feeling Yuuta’s body slightly pressed against her side, she turned to him, a sneaky smile gracing her face.

“What?” Yuuta asked.

Holding Shippo close against her chest, she smiled almost gleefully, turning her body towards Yuuta, despite Sango’s knowing smile and Yuuta’s confused stare. “I bet you missed mommy a lot, but I bet you missed daddy the most,” She replied, holding Shippo out for him to hold, his small hands reaching out to the older man.

Surprisingly, he took the child from her outstretched hand, and he held Shippo close, the small child staring at him with great affection. Kagome smiled, watching Shippo’s curious hands touch the former bandit’s face, his fingers pulling lightly upon his dark shoulder length tresses. “Aww, look at him. He missed you so much Yuuta!”

His face heated at Kagome’s smile, and clearing his throat, he turned to Sango, lowering his head respectively. “You have our thanks for looking after him.”

“Of course. I figured you would be back any day now, so I’ve had my men fix up one of our carts for the voyage back to your village. But first, let’s go inside. We can talk there.”

Ψ

They were seated, knelt before an exquisite mahogany table, polished and shining, with trays of delicacies and warm tea filling the air. Sweet incense permeated from the farthest corner of the room, the shoji screen doors and furnishings ornate with pink and orange orchids. Lavish lavender pillows cushioned their knees, and as they bit into their food, they explained everything they endured since their arrival to Edo.

Sango listened, albeit surprised when she learned Kagome had riskily jumped the wall surrounding the Daimyo’s manor and, in the end, met with him and revealed her plight for the village. The situation regarding Takeo, who’d swindled many during the harvest inspection, was not surprising. Even still, it was fortunate Kagome and Yuuta hadn’t succumbed to prison or execution, despite the risk involved, and after learning the Daimyo would further investigate the matter, Sango congratulated them.

“I didn’t think it would be that easy, but I’m glad we got to speak with him,” Kagome replied.

“I told you it would be worth the trip,” Sango smiled. “And with my father’s help and the Daimyo’s, I sense only good fortune will greet the village soon enough.”

Kagome hoped so. “Thank you.”

“Did you take in the sights of Edo while you were there?”

Yuuta nodded. “We did. It was far larger than what we’re used to.”
“I noticed that only the poor villages surround the outer edge of Edo while the rich live near the center,” Kagome replied curiously. “Is there a specific reason?” Surely it wasn’t because of status, right?

At Kagome’s question, Sango mused. “It’s like that in many large villages, I’m afraid. There’s a fine line of discrepancy between commoners and nobility, as I’m sure you’ve noticed upon your arrival,” She began. “In return for providing them sanctuary behind their walls, they must do their part to protect the people; usually, they are the first to die before those with power take up their swords.”

Kagome gasped. “What? That’s ridiculous!” When she realized her voice had risen, the two female attendants near Sango covering their mouths in surprise, Kagome lowered her voice. “I mean, that’s just crazy. It’s not fair to them. They should at least have the same protection as everyone else.”

Sango nodded. “Indeed.”

The door opened suddenly, a familiar face stepping within. It was Kohaku, and much like his sister, he was dressed in simple clothes, dark blue hakama pants and a long sleeved kosode with patterns of bamboo embroidered on the material. Upon noticing his sister’s guests’, he smiled, and took a seat beside Sango. “I heard you’ve returned from Edo. I hope it’s gone well.”

Sango nodded. “It went very well. They met with the Daimyo and he’s currently investigating the matters regarding their village and the inspector.”

Hearing this, Kohaku grinned. “That’s great! I’ve heard it’s not easy to request a meeting with him. Did he reward you with anything?”

“Kohaku, you mustn’t pry.”

“Oh, I’m sorry…”

Kagome shook her head, smiling from ear to ear. “No. It’s alright. Actually, he allowed Yuuta and I to stay at the Inn in Edo. He even had his servants escort us on a palanquin as well.” Riding on the palanquin, jostling at every turn and step, wasn’t the most comfortable, but it was nice giving her feet a break.

“You mean the infamous Inn? I’ve never been there before, but I’ve heard it encompasses a large hot spring.”

Kagome nodded. “It was nice.” Some parts at least. The remainder of their stay was relaxing, except the incident where some pervert snuck up on her; the memory still unnerved her, but it was a new day, and she was sure she’d never see that creep again. “The servants were very sweet and the food was simply amazing. I honestly didn’t expect the Daimyo to allow us a free night’s stay. He really is a kind man, different than what I expected.”

Hearing this, Kohaku nodded. “Although I’ve never met him in person, I’ve heard he is quite young and that many speak well of him. Did you know he has a fondness for literature and flower arrangements?”

Flower arrangements? No, she didn’t know, but it wasn’t like she had the time to ask about his personal hobbies. How did Kohaku know though? “I didn’t, but it seems like a relaxing interest.”

“I suspect it’s likely the case since he spends most of his days in the manor,” Sango replied, sipping her tea delicately. “Kagome, have you figured out what you will do?”
She blinked but on account of her knowing expression, her eyes widened and she fervently shook her head. “I gave it some thought, and I’ve decided to give it a shot. You and your father were right. I shouldn’t carry on wondering what if when I can do something about…” She trailed off, realizing Kohaku was still in the room.

Noticing her hesitance, Sango smiled. “It’s alright. Father has already informed Kohaku about the Sacred Jewel.”

Relieved, Kagome went on. “I see. I brought the matter up with the Daimyo, about wanting to take up training with Lady Kaede. He seemed surprised but he accepted my decision. He pointed Yuuta and I in the direction of a large shrine in Edo which we visited earlier this morning,” She revealed. “Although, it wasn’t exactly welcoming.”

Sango’s eyes widened at this, her cheeks reddening suddenly, and she quickly averted her gaze. “Ah, yes … the temple. Well, I believe their services are quite different from what you intend to do, Kagome. Quite different…”

Her face reddened as well. “You mean … they’re…” Those snobbish girls were selling their bodies? How could they technically be called priestesses?

Sango sweat dropped, despite her brother’s confusion. “I’m afraid so.”

And here those girls were giving traveling priestesses a bad name. They were nothing like how Kaede explained in her stories of her older sister. Somehow, she regretted even visiting the temple in Edo, but then again, she was glad she got a good look at something she didn’t desire any part of. “Well you learn something new every day…”

Yuuta chuckled at this. “Indeed, you do.”

“I’m pleased you’ve reached a decision. I’m sure it wasn’t easy, but you made the right choice Kagome,” Sango began. “Since the jewel has emitted a dark power inside you, and for how long I’m uncertain, it would be best to control it, perhaps even subdue it further than with those beads around your wrist. There’s no guarantee how long that protection will last.”

“You’re right. For my sake and for everyone else, I have to do this. The last thing I want is for something terrible to happen,” Her eyes fell to Shippo in her arms, snuggling against her warmth contentedly.

“Now that you’ve returned and with newfound thoughts, perhaps it would be best if we leave for Kaede’s Village.”

Kagome’s head shot up at this. “Are you coming with us?”

Sango nodded. “While you were away, I had some thoughts to join father and the others and offer my assistance, in any way I could. Escorting you and your husband would be the first step in this task. I’ve prepared a wagon filled with water and food, enough to last us the journey back to your village.”

“What about your village? Surely someone must stay behind to look after everything,” Yuuta began, a delicate brow arched.

Before Sango could reply back, Kohaku suddenly turned his head, his expression surprised. “You’re going with them? I want to come along as well.”

“I was planning to leave you in charge while we were away, and it’s a long journey to the
A pout fell upon her brother’s lips. “I would like to see Kagome and Yuuta’s village. What if you need an extra hand? Besides, I’m already caught up on my training here. Please sister?”

The young woman almost sighed, but on account of her brother’s persistence, she smiled warmly. “Very well. I’ll see if Itsuki will manage things in our absence.” Turning her gaze back to Kagome and Yuuta, her smile remained. “If you don’t mind the rush, we should leave as soon as possible. After all, it will take us a matter of days to reach the village.”

“It’s alright. I wonder how the village is doing. I miss everyone,” Kagome replied.

“In that case, let’s head out!” Kohaku replied enthusiastically.

Ψ

August 28th

A dreary gray sky loomed overhead, promising rain, she was sure. The wind was cool to the touch, and after traveling three days in sweltering heat with Sango and Kohaku accompanying them back to the village, Kagome welcomed the storm, her eyes closed as she smelled the oncoming rain approaching.

It was now well into Fall, with nearly two months left before the cold season, but instead of constant drought and heat, she would soon feel the bitterness of winter. There was no telling what she could expect in the coming months, only that it would be more difficult to find food and likely remain warm. As these thoughts weighed upon her mind, she thought back to the villagers in Kaede’s village, their huts without proper doors and windows; how would animal hide protect them from the elements or even provide decent protection against invaders or wild animals? It was something to think about, perhaps even something she could bring up with the High Priestess.

Before setting out three days earlier, Sango had been kind enough to offer Kagome a new set of clothing. Riding side saddle in a kimono was hard enough, and since her kimono smelled of dirt and sweat since she left the village, she was thankful Sango was kind enough to give her something to wear, but she wasn’t intending on anything more than a plain kimono.

The outfit was simple and more extravagant than she was used to wearing; it was a simple knee-length ivory kimono with various patterns of green and brown leaves with red, white and pink flowers embroidered into the soft material. The sleeves fell at her elbows and it hugged her body nicely with a multicolored red and white obi secured around her waist. It was comfortable and a lot easier to walk in than the standard kimono, and for that, she was thankful.

As the wagon jostled with each movement, Kagome leaned forward on her knees, looking out across the vast terrain, her eyes taking in the familiar trees and rivers. Turning her head, she saw the village come into view, and smiling, she turned to Yuuta beside her. “We’re almost there!”

Kohaku’s head moved up at this, and similar to Kagome, he also moved beside her, his eyes lighting with joy. “So, this is Kaede’s Village. I hope father and the others are doing alright.”

“I’m sure they’re fine,” Sango replied. “I’d say it’s been five days since he arrived. I’m sure he and the others have gotten a lot done in that time span.”

Squinting, Kagome noticed a figure of a robust man standing near the entrance of the village, his body facing away, and the closer they arrived, Kagome recognized the individual as one of Yuuta’s
men. Excited, she cupped her mouth and called out, “Akira! Akira!”

The noise certainly surprised the older man, Kagome visibly noticing him jump and turn towards their approaching horse and wagon. There was a slight pause as he stared, and Kagome called out again. Immediately after, it must have dawned on him who it was because he suddenly raised both arms, waving them, his voice loud and clear.

“Boss! Yuuta!”

“Akira! We’re back!” Kagome shouted, waving her arms just as joyously.

“Boss!”

Before long, they finally arrived, Akira immediately bounding towards them eagerly to see them. As Kagome leapt off the side of the wagon, Yuuta following close behind, Kagome enveloped Akira in a hug, and he returned it.

“Boss, you’re back! You were gone an entire week! We were sure you’d be gone for longer!” He cried, his arms strong and gentle around her.

Kagome laughed, patting his broad shoulder gently. “It’s great to see you Akira.”

“We were getting worried when you and Yuuta didn’t return with the slayers and Suo almost took all the guys out to search for you, but the chief of the demon slayers said you and Yuuta went on an errand to Edo before coming back. But he wouldn’t tell us what you guys went there for.”

As he pulled away, his eyes glossy and wet, Kagome’s smile softened. He really did miss them. Akira was the emotional one of the bandits, too soft hearted for his own good. “There, there, it’s great to be back too. Everything is fine Akira. I’ll explain everything later, but for now, I need to speak with Lady Kaede. Have you seen her?”

He blinked at this and mused. “Oh, Lady Kaede? She’s … uh … she’s around here somewhere… Where did she go?” He murmured to himself. “You would think for someone her age, she would stay put. She’s always disappearing right and left.”

Yuuta struck Kagome a knowing glance her way. “Who does that remind me of?”

Seeing his stare and teasing smile, Kagome smacked his arm. “We should greet everyone. Let’s go!”

As Kagome pulled Yuuta behind her, Sango ushered the horse forward into the village behind Kagome and Yuuta, it wasn’t long before curious stares fell their way.

“Everyone, the boss is back!” Akira shouted almost repeatedly. “The boss is back!”

The moment they stepped inside, there was a sudden commotion among the people, especially the women who were in the fields and the men who were working upon the huts. Since their departure, much had changed in the village. Although it had nearly been a week since they left, there were new huts erected and it looked like a new barn was being built just ahead.

“Hey, Lady Kagome is back!” Someone shouted.

“It’s Kagome! She’s returned!” Another followed.

“Boss!” A chorus of shouts followed immediately after, louder and more excited than most of the
other villagers who had turned and approached.

Without warning, a stampede of barbaric and sweaty men ran towards them, dirt rising from their heavy movement, and unable to dodge what seemed like an attack, Kagome and Yuuta were soon crowded by the remaining bandits, each wearing relieved and excited expressions upon their faces.

All at once, they asked them questions, about the journey, the meeting with the chief and why they went to Edo. They were also cooing over Shippo, rubbing his head gently before asking about the child.

From the wagon, Kohaku couldn’t help but blink and lean into his sister, both watching the scene in morbid surprise. “Sister, some of these villagers look like bandits…”

“Don’t be rude Kohaku. They’ve had it rough lately.”

“Boss, we’re glad you’re back. We were getting worried when you and Yuuta didn’t return.”

“Yeah, we thought something bad happened to you. Did everything go well?”

Kagome nodded, smiling at each and every one of them. They were like excited children and less like grown men. “Everything went well. Yuuta and I spent a day in Edo Village. That’s why we were late returning.”

“We heard you went there for an errand but you stayed behind Edo walls!?” Another asked.

“What was it like? I’ve never been there before.”

“We were never allowed inside… How did you get past the guards?”

“Why did you go to Edo?”

She raised her hands, unable to keep up with everyone’s questions, and to her relief, they settled down, their eyes wide as they stared almost impatiently. “Calm down. I’ll explain everything later. But first, I need to speak with Lady Kaede. Do you know where she is?” Somehow, she was surprised she didn’t see the older woman amidst the crowd of onlookers smiling back at her.

“Kaede?” One asked. “I think I saw her with those farmers…”

“No, last I saw her she was in the field with the chieftain.”

“I was just with the chieftain a few minutes ago and he wasn’t in the fields.”

“Well, I thought I saw the old lady go into the forest of Inu …hashu?”

“It’s Inuyasha you moron!”

“Oh yeah, I remember now. Yeah, I saw her go in there half an hour ago now that I think about it.”

“Wait a minute … weren’t you supposed to be with her?”

“Was it my turn to watch her today?”

One of the bandits face palmed. “You idiot. Well, we better go search for her then.”

“Ye do not need to search any further. I’m right here,” An elderly voice replied somewhere behind the grown men, and upon hearing her voice, they quickly stepped away, the old woman smiling
welcoming to Kagome and Yuuta before sending the bandits a chastised look. “If ye are going to look for me, just turn around.”

On account of finally entering into the village, Sango and Kohaku stepped off the wagon and together, they politely and respectively greeted the older woman.

“Hello Lady Kaede. We apologize for the sudden arrival. We hope you have been well,” Sango replied, her head bent slightly.

“Quite well. Ye people have done much for our village these passing moons, though we’ve not much to offer in exchange for such kindness.”

“Do not worry about it. We are glad to help,” She replied back smiling.

Pleased by this, the High Priestess turned to Kagome and Yuuta, her eyes surveying the child sleeping in Yuuta’s arms. “It’s good to see ye have all returned safely. If I heard correctly, there’s a lot ye wish to discuss with me, is that right Kagome?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

Understanding, Kaeade half turned. “Very well. We’ll discuss ye journey in my hut. Lady Sango, Lord Kohaku, ye father is in the far side of the village helping with repairs. Please make ye-selves comfortable.”

“Thank you,” The siblings replied.

Ψ

An awkward silence drifted through the hut, Kagome’s eyes staring apologetically to the older woman seated across from her, and Yuuta who was seated beside her, smothered by the many bodies of the bandits seated uncomfortably within the small hut. It was clear they were excited to see them return after a week’s disappearance, but she couldn’t right out tell them to leave.

“Speak freely child,” The older woman replied, quite unbothered by the many onlookers within.

Sighing, she gave her full attention to Kaede. It was better this way than repeating herself later on. “Right. After meeting with the Demon Slayers, a lot happened, as I’m sure Lord Shako explained when he arrived. The next morning Yuuta and I made our way to Edo to speak with the Daimyo and…” Kagome wasn’t sure how to continue, but she immediately caught Kaede’s surprised stare.

“So that was why ye went to Edo. I thought it strange when Lord Shako revealed this, but now I’m starting to understand. Did ye meet with him by chance?”

“Yes.”

A noise fell from Yuuta’s lips, his expression amused as he stared at Kagome beside him, his head shaking from side to side. “She was determined to meet with him despite the harassment in front of his manor. Never once have I heard such vulgar words fall from a woman’s mouth, and if that didn’t surprise me, she even went as far as jumping the wall.”

Hearing this, all eyes fell on Kagome, her cheeks reddening as she smacked Yuuta’s shoulder. Although Yuuta found amusement from their earlier endeavors, Kaede and the others were simply surprised as well as bewildered.

“Boss, you jumped the wall? How?”
“No offense Boss, but you’re small and those walls are pretty high even for us.”

Kagome shook her head. “I wouldn’t have done it if Yuuta hadn’t given me the idea.”

“I was only speaking my mind. I didn’t think you would actually act upon it,” Came his reply.

“But it helped us in the end, didn’t it?”

He sighed, nodding, his mouth turning up into a grin. “Indeed. She might look small and fragile on the outside, but this woman spits venom like you wouldn’t believe. Kagome was bound and determined to meet with the Daimyo, even after telling off the guards at the gate.”

“That’s incredible boss. Nothing frightens you!”

“Great job boss! What happened after you jumped the wall? Yuuta, did you jump it as well?”

“Was the Daimyo nice? Did the guards catch you?”

There was a cough, the older woman clearing her throat, and almost immediately, the men fell silent, biting their lips anxiously. “So, why did ye see him Kagome? I can only assume ye informed him of our village’s dilemma?”

“That’s right. I couldn’t just ignore it, and I brought the issue up with Yuuta during our travels. At first, he didn’t agree it would be a sensible idea, but after what happened at the Demon Slayer Village, it was Sango who ultimately encouraged me to speak with him. I won’t say I wasn’t scared, but I’m glad I met with him. Lord Shako had me deliver a letter to him since I planned to reveal my plight concerning the village, and the letter contained information regarding Takeo’s abuse swindling other villages with their taxes.”

Kaede nodded, her eyes widening slightly at this revelation. “I see. I thought it strange the taxes were raised.”

Whatever was going through the older woman’s thoughts, Kagome couldn’t be certain, only that it wasn’t an expression of disappointment. “Well, you’ll be happy to know the Daimyo took action immediately after hearing our story and Takeo will be investigated for his crime. The matter regarding those who were taken from this village will soon be solved, so all he asked is that we remain patient until then.”

A smile finally graced the older woman’s countenance; it was warm and grateful, that even Kagome couldn’t help but return it. “For what ye have done Kagome, I truly thank ye. Never in my life would I have reached out like ye have, but ye surprised me. I must say, ye are an incredible woman. Most wouldn’t have the confidence ye do, but ye have done much for this village than we deserve.”

Kagome’s eyes widened when the older woman suddenly bent her head forward, her body lurching further towards the floor, her hands flat upon the wooden floorboards. Kaede, the High Priestess, was bowing to her, and somehow, she felt this incredible urge to stop her, but on account of Yuuta’s hand upon her shoulder, and his smile, accompanied by the entire room, Kagome smiled softly. Maybe now, after all their struggles, things would change for the better. This was only the beginning after all, the beginning of something new.
Kagome’s eyes focused upon the Goshinboku Tree, its height extraordinary, and while her thoughts lingered on her family in a more distant future, there was a feeling of acceptance left behind. Similar to her last visit, the magic which once surrounded the tree was no longer visible, nor could she hear the voices of her family on the other side. It seemed, the last time she was in danger, after the attack from Mistress Centipede, the magic had allowed her to briefly return.

It was strange, but whatever this magic was, Kagome was certain it was no coincidence; the people of this time period needed her, at least, that’s what she assumed given the voice which had spoken to her before she ended up in this situation. The magic which once surrounded its bark was gone, and it was likely impossible to pass through again, but this didn’t dismay her, as devastating as it seemed.

“The time has come … Return to us priestess. Save us. Thus, is your fate.”

It was strange; although she’d only been in this world for roughly four months, despite the dangers and misunderstandings, somehow, it felt welcoming. Maybe she felt that way because people were looking at her in a different light than before. But it was almost certain because she’d managed to forge friendships, friendships between different clans and groups, not to mention she was now raising a child which was not her own.

‘I should feel overwhelmed by all of this, but I don’t. After everything that’s happened, I’ve decided to take up responsibility for the Jewel inside me. Mom … Souta … grandpa … I’m sorry, but it seems like I can’t return home. You’re all probably worried, but it’s alright. One day … maybe one day, the magic will return. Until then, I’ll be doing my best here.’

When they arrived two weeks prior with Sango and her brother, Kagome was surprised to see how far the construction of the village had gone since their leave. Lord Shako and his men went above and beyond, erecting the few remaining huts in an astounding amount of time, and to Kagome’s relief, the villagers were no longer burdened by door flaps, but were instead gifted with shoji screen doors with sliding wooden locks. With this, everyone could rest easy, especially in the coming Winter.

There was fast improvement on the old storage shed near Kaede’s hut, and the men were making fast repairs, going so far as to expand it, and similar to the huts, latched doors were also attached. At the current moment, half the men were focusing their efforts in stabilizing the barn roof and support beams, the others determining the fields which were no longer filled with crops.

With the repairs coming along quickly, even Sango was doing her part to help the villagers; every two days, she led the hunting party further out from the village, following the river until it arrived upon an area inhabited by many animals; although the trip took hours to reach, it was well worth it when they returned by dusk with enough to sustain everyone for two days. Despite this, Sango taught the men a better way to set traps, one being a pit trap covered by leaves for larger animals, and to catch smaller prey, using a wooden basket trap from twigs and rope.

With the Demon Slayers assistance, there was no longer any fear when it came to the demons in the nearby vicinity; in fact, the slayers had done their part to keep them away, and with it, the people felt their built-up tension fade away.
Kagome recalled Kaede and Lord Shako discussing the advantage of erecting a protective wall around the village, but even that would take a considerable number of weeks, maybe even months, but even then, it would be useless since their fields were so poor in quality. Sango believed it would be best, once Winter ended, to move their entire village until they found rich soil, and from there, start over, otherwise, they would continue to be greeted by poor harvests in the coming years.

It made sense, at least to Kagome, but there was a disagreement among the people to move their village, especially since they had no dominion over other lands and would need consent from the Daimyo himself. It would mean someone from their village would need to consult with him, and though they were lucky with Kagome and Yuuta’s help, there was no guarantee it would be as easy the next time.

In the end, they decided to put off the idea of erecting a wall, despite it’s benefits to keep bandits and demons at bay. At the moment, they needed to consider the coming Winter, which was sure to be a long one, similar to last years. They needed furs to make their blankets, enough wood and kindling, and food which would surely diminish in the coming months. Once the cold season ended, then they would consider moving their village, but there was no guarantee what would happen in the future.

With everyone so busy preparing for the first snow, Kagome had volunteered to help the women of the village craft fur blankets; with Aiko and Naomi’s guidance, they spent their nights tirelessly stitching. As hectic as it was, it was kind of exciting; at least they didn’t have to toil in the fields plucking weeds.

Brushing her ivory fingers against the bark of the tree, Kagome released a heavy sigh. They’d come so far in just a short amount of time, but things were better for the village. Somehow, she was certain they would prevail through the Winter. “I wish you could see this…”

“See what?” A feminine voiced asked from behind.

Blinking, Kagome turned away from the Goshinboku Tree, dropping her hand to her side. “Oh, Sango. I was just thinking of my family.”

Dressed in comfortable pink and white kimono, the young woman nodded, her caramel gaze drifting to the tree curiously. “This tree must be important to you? You visit it almost every day, I’ve noticed.”

She nodded. “Yes. There is a tree very similar to this on my family’s shrine. It brings me comfort,” She replied, blushing when she caught Sango’s stare. “I guess that sounds strange…”

“Not at all,” She replied, moving to stand beside Kagome, her eyes taking in the tree’s immense height. “If I recall correctly, you mentioned your home is quite far from this village; so, it’s only natural to feel a sense of longing.”

As her blue eyes lingered upon the tree, she shifted her gaze to the woman beside her, her caramel eyes somewhat lost in thought, though her eyes lingered upon her almost curiously. “Sango?”

“Kagome, you mentioned before a mysterious light swept you away from your family a short time back, and you awoke in this forest, later taken in by the village. Although I assume this is the work of a demon, I can’t help but question it...” Sango began, her head tilting to the side, and briefly, her gaze fell to Kagome’s chest. “But, after that night, when the jewel turned black, I couldn’t help but wonder if it was the cause for separating you from your loved ones. Of course, it’s only a thought…”
This caught Kagome off guard, and touching her chest, she wondered if the jewel was capable of opening a portal to the past. Then again, what about the voice? Was it possible the voice came from the jewel and not the tree? Somehow, she wasn’t sure; there was no indication of a jewel within her when she was first pulled through; in fact, Lady Kaede had thought its powers remained dormant for a long time until just recently.

But Sango’s words didn’t seem entirely impossible; in fact, what if it was true? What if, all this time, it was the jewel? Since the moment she was born, the jewel remained within her, and maybe it was possible, that night when she was attacked by Mistress Centipede, the jewel sensed her fear and want to return home. Like Lord Shako revealed weeks ago, her emotions were definitely a key factor in determining the jewel’s powers. And if this was a jewel which was capable of granting wishes, then maybe, just maybe, it was possible.

“You know, I never thought about that. You make a great point, Sango.”

She only nodded, her lips curving into a subtle smile. “It’s only a guess. Perhaps, your key to returning home lies in the jewel. Then again, I could be completely wrong…”

“Why?”

“All your life, you’ve lived sheltered from demons, until one day you were mysteriously pulled from your family’s reach and into this very forest,” Sango began, her hands touching the tree’s bark. “And yet, when you arrived, there were problems among the village, such as the bandit attack, the demons and then the jewel’s powers awakening. In a way, it sounds to me your connection to the jewel is much more than you first thought. I suppose, what I’m trying to say, maybe this is fate, Kagome. Maybe you were destined for this path.”

Destined? Kagome mused over the word. Fate, the mysterious voice, the Sacred Jewel; they were all connected to each other, connected to this era of constant warfare. For the first time, since her arrival, the pieces were slowly coming together. If this was certainly the jewel’s doing, then perhaps her training would help her to return home.

‘It can grant wishes. If I can train enough to where I can call upon the jewel, I could ask to return home! Right? ’ She couldn’t hide her excitement from bubbling to the surface, her smile stretching upon her face. This had to be true! Why hadn’t she thought of this before? And yet, as her excitement grew, she suddenly furrowed her brows, her smile falling. ‘But … I didn’t decide to take up training simply to leave this world. In fact, I did it so I could control these powers so they wouldn’t harm anyone, and besides, I decided to take up this role to help everyone, not simply turn my back on them and run away.’

“Kagome?” She called.

Realizing Sango was probably troubled for mentioning this, Kagome released a heavy sigh and flashed her a reassuring smile. “It’s nothing. I was just taking it all in. Thank you. I think I should reveal this to Lady Kaede; it’s something to think about.”

She nodded. “Of course. Speaking of Lady Kaede, she was asking about you earlier.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It seems she wishes to discuss something with you, and so, she asked me to bring you back, that is, if you are not busy.”

Despite taking a short reprieve from training, she turned away from the Goshinboku, both she and
Sango walking side by side down the path towards the village. “Not busy. I was about to head back anyways.”

“How is training? You’ve been working with Lady Kaede for two weeks since we returned.”

She mused, recalling the moment Lady Kaede had presented her with a few tomes riddled with dust to examine and study. Supposedly, these books belonged to Kikyou long ago, but the pages were so worn, it was difficult to discern certain passages. “It’s not too bad. I’ll admit, I was a bit confused at first. When I’m not busy helping Aiko and the other women, I’m usually studying. There’s so much information about medicinal plants, so it’s a lot to take in.”

“I see,” Sango replied.

At this, Kagome nodded. “Yes. Almost every day, Lady Kaede and I go into the forest to collect herbs, roots and other various plants. I’ve been writing them down as we collect them. I’ve started my own book, and so far, I’ve learned how to make a couple medicinal salves.”

Sango smiled at this. “What ones have you learned so far?”

She pondered. “Let’s see … I was taught how to make a paste using the leaves of a Comfrey plant. Traditionally, this is one of Lady Kaede’s primary uses for small injuries or accidents around the village. It can also be made into tea as well, which I found interesting.” She began. “She’s taught me how to staunch bleeding using other herbs and numb pain, but that’s all I’ve learned so far.”

This information must have pleased Sango, and she smiled warmly. “Very good. You’ve done well for even two weeks of training. Have you also been practicing with the bow? And what about your spiritual powers? Has Kaede helped you to control them?”

“When it comes to using a bow, Yuuta has been teaching me, but I’m not very good at hitting targets head on, so that’s something I’m trying to fix.” Kagome sweat dropped, touching a few scratches on her fingers which had bled on account of her many failed attempts in her training. “Kaede hasn’t mentioned anything about controlling my spiritual powers. She’s been dedicating her time teaching me about herbs, where to find them and how to use them. I’m sure controlling my powers will come once I’ve learned the basics.”

“I see. Well, either way, you seem to be doing just fine, Kagome.”

Not long into their travels, they reached the outskirts of the forest, their eyes taking in the view of the village below the hill. The newly built huts stood in the distance, the people attending to their daily chores.

“I guess all that’s left is to finish stabilizing the roof of the barn, right? After that, our village should be fine for the coming Winter,” Kagome replied thoughtfully, continuing the trek downhill.

“That’s true,” Sango replied soon after. “Father and I were just discussing this. Since Winter is quickly approaching, father has decided to leave most of our men here until late Spring.”

Kagome blinked. “Why?”

“It’s merely a precaution. There’s no telling how bad it will get. We’re expecting a long winter this year, and though we’ve supplied you with what we can, we thought it would be best to make sure all is well during the coming months.”

“I see.”
“I also brought something up to father just yesterday,” Sango continued. “I’ve noticed your village lacks kamado stoves…”

“That’s right,” Kagome explained, recalling her last visit to Hitomi Village; that had been the first time she’d seen a kamado stove, built from what she assumed was stone, sand or clay; it seemed more proficient than a pit fire.

“We’ve agreed to gather what clay we can and supply your village with these stoves. We plan to have one built for each family,” She explained. “As you are probably aware, it is common for many villages to have their own. The process would only take a matter of days to complete.”

“That would definitely be a load off for sure,” Kagome grinned. “I’m curious, is it only clay that’s used to build these?”

“Yes, along with some forms of attachment, which I’ll leave to our blacksmith,” she replied. “And, in regards to what many villagers have nowadays, it will have two stove tops.”

“You and your father have done so much for us. I’m sure you’ve heard this, many times. Thank you, Sango.”

She nodded. “We’re glad to help. And, in the future, please don’t hesitate to ask for our help. While our village may be miles away, we’ll do what we can,” She replied, smiling. “And, I hope this doesn’t sound rude, but I enjoyed it. Often, I’m so busy with training and handling assigned missions, it’s not often I get the chance to do something like this, helping with construction and hunting affairs, I mean,” she laughed. “And, the company has been nice too. I don’t often get the chance to converse with another female like I do with you, Kagome.”

“Yeah. I agree.”

When they reached the river, pausing just at the bridge leading into the village, Sango paused. “Well, I must attend to some other things. So, I’ll leave you for the time being.”

Hearing this, Kagome watched as the young woman, dressed in her pink and white kimono, turned to leave, but a thought came to her. “Sango,” She called, the young woman turning curiously. “In the next hour or so, me and the girls’ are planning to have lunch near the lake. If you like, you and your brother can join us.”

Sango smiled at this. “That would be nice. Well, then, I’ll see you then.”

Pleased Sango would accompany her and the girls for a picnic later, Kagome returned the smile, and with a wave of her hand, turned and darted across the bridge towards Kaede’s hut. Somehow, she had a feeling she and Sango would get along just fine.

As she followed the path, she noticed Aiko and Naomi assisting Ume’s father just outside his hut, and though she didn’t have enough time to chat, especially since Lady Kaede wished to speak with her, she sent them a friendly wave, the trio returning it happily.

When she finally neared Kaede’s hut, she paused before the newly made sliding door to catch her breath, silently admiring its craftsmanship. Thank god that old deerskin flap was gone. With a soft knock upon its exterior, she opened it slightly and stepped inside, closing it behind her.

“Lady Kaede? You wished to speak with me?”

When she turned to greet the older woman, whom she assumed was sitting cross-legged in front of the small pit fire like usual, she was surprised to see Yuuta and his strong gaze staring directly
back at her. “Huh? Yuuta?”

“Ah, there ye are, Kagome,” Kaede’s voice soon drifted to her ear, the older woman appearing from behind one of her shelves in the room. “Please, have a seat.”

Nodding, she crept into the room, seating herself beside Yuuta, though she couldn’t help her gaze from wandering his form. There was a bit of sweat glistening from his arms and neck, likely from working with the others on the barn earlier. “What’s going on?” She asked, wondering why he was also summoned, but he only shrugged, bemused just the same.

Silently, Kagome watched as the older priestess rummaged through an old chest across the room, and after retrieving what seemed like a decorative, carved wooden box, she returned to Kagome and Yuuta’s side. Although appearing to struggle as she knelt before them, she soon made herself comfortable, the box held within both hands, her eyes locked on Kagome.

“I’ll just get straight to the point,” Kaede replied, opening the box before retrieving a rolled-up sheet of parchment, yellowed with age. Smoothing over the wrinkles slightly, she held it out to Kagome.

Confused, she accepted the old paper, her eyes shifting over it curiously before turning back to Kaede. “I don’t understand. What is this?”

“This is the document stating my ownership of this village and the land surrounding it, including the Forest of Inuyasha,” Came Kaede’s reply. “Kagome … my time is running short, I’m afraid. I would like to ask that ye take care of this village and the people in my absence. When the time comes that I can no longer protect my people, will ye take ownership?”

What? “Lady Kaede … what are you saying? This is too sudden, and besides, why are you talking like you’re going to pass away soon? Besides … isn’t there someone else?”

“No,” Came her reply. “For some time, I’ve been thinking of this. I do not plan to leave this village in the hands of someone that cannot be trusted. There’s not many I do trust, no one except ye.”

Kagome’s eyes widened.

“Ye said before, ye wanted to take up training to help this village, and help it ye have, tremendously, might I add. Ye have done more than ye fair share and have gone above and beyond,” She explained, smiling with a warmth and hopefulness in her gaze.

Surprised by this, Kagome’s eyes fell upon the document, immediately recognizing the last two names beneath a series of unfamiliar names. Kikyou and Kaede; it was likely the names above those were of their families and the families before them, and now, Kaede wished for Kagome to write her own and lead this village. Honestly, Kagome didn’t know what to think, and besides, she’d only just begun her training, but looking at Kaede, she felt a tinge of sadness follow. ‘Lady Kaede … are you unwell?’

As if reading her expression, Kaede continued. “Of course, ye mustn’t feel burdened. Perhaps I’ve sprung this upon ye too early, but I thought it would be best to explain so ye could think about it.”

“Lady Kaede … this village has been in your family for so long…”

She only nodded. “That it has, and I see ye as my own.” She declared, surprising Kagome. “Since the time my sister passed away, I was so young and inexperienced in my training; I didn’t know how to protect my village, as young as I was. I never got the chance to experience a life as a normal person, and I never had children of my own; I dedicated my days, tirelessly, for the sake of my
people. After all these years, I find it difficult in my old age to keep up these rigorous tasks. Ye have shown determination to help this village, and through those efforts, I want to pass this village down to ye, Kagome.”

Understanding, Kagome weakly smiled, Kaede’s words touching her heart. “Alright. I’ll do it. I’ll take care of this village when the time comes, Lady Kaede…”

Pleased, Kaede’s eyes shifted to Yuuta. “Now, onto the matter concerning why I’ve summoned both of ye. It has come to my attention that ye and Yuuta are husband and wife?” She inquired curiously, a single brow arched. When she noted Kagome’s blush and immediate awkwardness, she squinted her gaze thoughtfully. “So, it’s true?”

After some time, remaining silent, Yuuta suddenly spoke up, waving his hand dismissively. “No. it’s merely a front I created so it wouldn’t seem strange for a man and woman to travel alone together, especially with a child,” He replied almost blatantly, despite a small blush spreading across his countenance.

Kagome nodded in agreement. “Yeah. It’s nothing more than that.”

“I figured this lie would keep others from questioning our relationship,” Yuuta clarified.

Understanding flashed through Kaede’s gaze, her frown suddenly turning into a smile, obviously amused by this explanation. “So that was it? When I heard from Lord Shako, I had thought ye two eloped during the journey,” She laughed. “Well, since that’s the case, I do have a reason for summoning ye still. I have a proposal. How do ye feel about an arranged marriage?”
Nearly falling back in disbelief, the seriousness splayed upon Kaede's countenance told Kagome it was no joke. Kaede had intentions to marry her and Yuuta off, that much was certain from her shifting gaze between herself and the older man sitting quietly beside her.

Fervently, she shook her head from side to side, the very idea ludicrous. No offense, but, her feelings for Yuuta were nothing more than friendship. "Arranged marriage? Lady Kaede … what are you saying?"

Her brows shot up at her response, but there was a glint in her gaze, and she couldn't help the amused chuckle which fell from her breath. "From what I've heard from Lord Shako, the two of ye have been married since you left the village," She began, resting her hands upon her lap. "And I would not be surprised if the other villagers have already heard this rumor…"

"No, Lady Kaede … you're misunderstanding. It's not like that between Yuuta and me. We're just friends." As she tried to explain, Lady Kaede merely raised a hand, and she bit her lip worryingly.

"Just hear me out, child. Ye marriage would not be real. In fact, it would be as fake as the one ye were traveling with."

Fake? What was Kaede insinuating? Have a wedding which wasn't legal? Lie to everyone? But why? Shifting her gaze to Yuuta, who was blatantly staring straight faced at the older woman, without so much as a concern, Kagome merely sweat dropped. "Yuuta, at least show some emotion! Why aren't you rejecting this?"

"This is called a marriage contract, Kagome," Kaede suddenly voiced, catching her curious stare once more. "This is not a marriage by law but by contract. Ye will not be officially bonded to one another. This is merely a front for the village."

Even still, Kagome wasn't too sure about this. Besides, it was too sudden. "Is it really necessary? This seems a bit … extreme."

"Allow me to put it like this. When ye both left, ye were single, but upon ye journey, ye have convinced many ye were married. Ye convinced passerby's, I'm sure?"

Recalling the family in Hitomi Village, as well as those residing in Demon Slayer Village, not to mention the hotel staff in Edo, Kagome slowly nodded. Perhaps, their harmless little lie truly had caused an issue between herself and Yuuta.

"Ye have convinced Lord Shako and his family, as well as the entire village. Not to mention…"

Her eyes widened in realization. "Even the Daimyo…" She nearly face palmed.

"I'm sure those closest to ye may understand, but as for the others ye have convinced, I believe this lie has stretched a little too far, and I fear it may lead to issues down the road, were it found false."
Overcome with sudden anxiety, Kagome covered her face with her hands. This little lie, as innocent as it might have been during the time, truly had escalated into something quite dangerous. Now that she thought about it, she recalled garnering curious attention from some of the men in the village who were helping the Demon Slayers; it was likely they were aware of their situation and had believed it.

According to Kaede, the only way to fix this was to cover it up with an arranged marriage, but it seemed too rushed and unplanned, not to mention there were no feelings between her and Yuuta. How could they possibly get married? Wouldn't it be better to simply confess the truth to everyone and explain the situation from their point of view?

But, as she thought about this, she couldn't help but sigh. No. It wouldn't be so simple, especially in this time period, and the fact that the Daimyo was aware made it all the worse. For women to reveal such a lie would certainly tarnish her reputation, and even worse, she might lose respect from everyone. In fact, she could almost hear the words *whore* echoing in her ears.

"You sneaky old bat," Yuuta suddenly voiced from beside her, drawing her out of her reverie. "Are you backing us into a corner?"

"Yuuta, don't call her that."

But the older woman only laughed in response. "I suppose so. Yes. Then again, ye two do get along rather well. One would think ye were married and with children already. It's not uncommon to marry young," She began. "I did not bring this up merely to cover this lie, but also as something which could help ye in the near future after I pass on."

"Lady Kaede?"

"Once I hand over the rights to this village, it will not be easy. Ye will need someone to help ye, I can guarantee. Alone, ye will face many hardships, and because of ye situation, I believe it would be best to take a husband and share the duty. I only wish, in my younger days, I had taken a husband. Perhaps I could have managed to avoid many hardships then."

So that was why? "Lady Kaede … you want us to get married, for the sake of the village?"

"Yes. And by having Yuuta take the title as ye husband, it would mean lessening ye burdens. I understand ye feelings clearly, and if it helps, this does not need to be a marriage which will last years. After all, it is merely a contract marriage. Should ye both find someone whom ye wish to settle down with in the future, then ye can end it. Ye are both responsible and ye do not have to look at it negatively. How does this sound?"

Turning her gaze to Yuuta, Kagome bit her lip thoughtfully. It was for the sake of the village, and seeing as how she had already agreed to take ownership after Kaede's passing, Kagome wondered just how difficult the task could be.

'It would likely take place after my training has finished, I'm sure, but with the way Lady Kaede is talking, she truly believes she doesn't have much time left. Honestly, I'm not sure how I feel about this.'

"There is so much more I do for this village, and because I have been on my own for so long, it's no wonder I've found hardship. With all the help ye have brought to this village, it's brought great relief and has taken much off my shoulders. I am truly grateful. As for the barrier, I can no longer find it in my strength to maintain it, I'm afraid. it weakens as the days go by, and I fear for the safety of the villagers."
From her peripheral vision, Kagome noticed Yuuta's thoughtful countenance. Just as she, he also seemed burdened, but he didn't say anything else in response.

"I would like for ye two to think about this. I will not force this upon ye," She explained after a moment. "But, before ye leave, I have one last thing to discuss with the two of ye. It concerns ye training, Kagome. It's been two weeks, and I'm afraid there is nothing more I can teach you."

This came as a surprise, especially to Yuuta, who looked up confusedly. "What do you mean? It seems too early for her training to be finished."

"With the books I've lent and the time I've spent teaching her of medicinal herbs, there is still a great deal more that I cannot do for her," She explained. "From what I gather, ye still lack in ye training with the bow, am I right?"

Kagome nodded. "I can string a bow, no problem, but my aim is weak…"

"Those licks against your cheek say otherwise," Yuuta unexpectedly chuckled. "You are lucky you haven't lost an eye."

"I'm trying!" She replied, touching the scratch on her cheek. Kagome recalled miserably failing to string her bow the first several times, and the result ended with the string striking her cheek.

High Priestess Kaede's lips curved upwards, and just as Yuuta, she couldn't contain a hearty chuckle. "And this is why I believe it's best to continue ye training with another. Someone more experienced than myself."

"What?" Someone else would train her? "Who is this person? Is it someone from the village?"

Kagome asked curiously.

"Sadly, no. Ye will have to make a journey to meet with her."

"You're sending her away?" Yuuta asked, somewhat surprised. "We've only just recently returned to the village."

"It would be for the best. I cannot teach Kagome what she needs, and she will learn far more than I could ever teach her. I have someone in mind, someone who is well known across the Kai Province."

Yuuta's brows shot up, his eyes widening at her words. "The Kai Province? That's quite a journey. If I had to guess, it would be nearly a month by foot to reach."

"Indeed, it is. But it will certainly be in Kagome's best interest. There is a temple which resides there, one which trains many girls in the arts of swordsmanship, archery, and a place which will help Kagome to connect with her spiritual powers. The person whom I have in mind is an old acquaintance of mine. Her name is Tsubaki."

A temple? So, she would leave the village once again? For how long would this training last? "I see. If it takes that long to reach the province of Kai, then about what Shippo?"

"I'm afraid ye will have to leave him here," She explained, noticing Kagome's distraught expression. "Where ye are going, it will be impossible for Shippo. He will be safe here. I will watch over him until ye training is finished."

"Just out of curiosity, how long do you propose her training could last?" Yuuta asked.
"A year if not more. It depends."

"A year?!!" Kagome exclaimed, her mouth agape. That long? "I can't possibly … For so long … what about Shippo?" In all honesty, he was her son. How could she abandon him for so long? Her chest ached just thinking about it.

"I figured as much," Yuuta suddenly replied, arms crossed. "It makes sense. With the way you are now, you will certainly need more training, Kagome. And if you intend to take leadership of this village later, then you will need all the training you can get."

Kaede nodded, flashing Kagome a reassuring look. "And it's not unknown for a priestess to train for so long. Do not forget, Kagome, ye have only scratched the surface of ye training, barely if I might add. One year or two is nothing compared to life training, and with ye dedication and how easily ye pick up on things, I'm sure ye will do just fine. Perhaps, there is even a chance ye will finish sooner."

Even still, this didn't settle right for Kagome, but if Kaede was unable to teach her anything more, then maybe it was best to make the journey to train with this priestess. "Alright. When should I leave?"

"If ye feel ye are not ready and wish to continue ye archery here, ye may do so, but I leave the decision with ye."

Feeling a hand on her shoulder, Kagome caught Yuuta's stare. It was obvious he was worried, perhaps even a bit concerned about this journey, but there was also understanding in his gaze. "You don't have to reach a decision right away."

"I'll admit, I wasn't expecting this, but if Lady Kaede believes this is for the best, then I'll do it. Besides, I've learned what I can already, so there's no use staying here any longer. The longer I put it off, the longer it will take to get started on my training. I'll leave first thing in the morning, Lady Kaede."

Seemingly pleased by her quick decision, Lady Kaede nodded. "Very well. I will get the papers ready to send with ye, and a map of where to find the temple. Yuuta," She suddenly shifted her gaze to the young man. "Would ye be willing to escort Kagome there?"

Perhaps he was still caught up in surprise by Kagome's decision, but with a few moment's pause, he soon breathed a heavy sigh. "Of course…"

Ψ

Delighting herself with a tasty onigiri, with a side helping of roasted fish and nuts, Aiko's gaze drifted from the hillside, seated together with Kagome, Naomi, Ume, Kosuke, Sango and Kohaku. From the scent in the air and the cloudy gray skies overhead, she knew it would rain soon, perhaps within the next hour.

While enjoying their small picnic, Aiko realized it was the first she'd ever spent time with the Chieftain's daughter, let alone hold little conversation with. Both she and her brother had joined them twenty minutes ago after Kagome returned from Lady Kaede's Hut, and according to Sango, Kagome had asked them to join them on the hillside earlier.

For a chieftain's daughter, Aiko had expected to see the young woman donned in something more expensive, intricate and colorfully flattering than a simple pink and white kimono. Even her long and beautiful brown tresses were without painted accessories, tied just at her back with a standard
white ribbon. It was surprising, even more so when she learned Sango was one of the best Demon Slayers of their village.

As for her brother, he was quite a joy and kind-hearted. Ume was practically leaning against him, holding Shippo on her lap as they talked animatedly together, Sango joining in on the conversation here and there, but the majority of their time eating was spent in comfortable silence.

Even Kosuke had taken time away from helping with the repairs of the village, situating himself close to Kagome's side. Whether he realized it or not, it was certainly obvious he held feelings for Kagome, especially with the way his eyes watched her. Seeing this, she merely shook her head. If the guy didn't muster up his courage and admit his feelings, then it would only continue on like this.

From across the lake, she noticed the men from demon slayer village gathered together, a few traveling in and out of the woods with carts filled with logs. There were a few standing near the tree line, closest to the lake conversating, and from her field of view, Aiko accessed them. They were slightly rugged, a few strongly built, but the majority had faces filled with short beards and mustaches, their dark locks either contained in high top knots or flowing just below their shoulders.

In all honesty, they were quite handsome, and she couldn't help the sly smile from spreading upon her face as one of the workers bent over to retrieve a fallen drinking container. Very handsome indeed.

From her peripheral vision, she couldn't help but notice Naomi's eyes also lingering on the men, one in particular who was assisting with the carts. By the flushed expression upon her cheeks and the way she bit her lip, it was obvious she had an intimate inclination towards one of the workers.

Before she could tease Naomi, she paused on account of Kagome's absentminded stare beside her. Unlike Naomi, she'd managed to devour half of her food, but she wasn't focusing on the workers, in fact, there was a crestfallen expression upon her face, her eyes turned downwards towards her lap.

"Hey, are you alright, Kagome?" She asked, touching her shoulder gently, and it worked when her raven-haired friend blinked at her. "Were you daydreaming as well?" She teased.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just had some stuff on my mind. That's all."

"Does it have to do with Lady Kaede? I noticed you seemed a little quiet after leaving. Did something happen?"

She nodded. "I've finished up my basic training, and Lady Kaede wants me to train with an old acquaintance of hers. It seems like I'll be leaving the village, and probably for a long time."

"Huh?" Naomi suddenly joined in, leaning forward to stare at Kagome. "You'll be trained by someone else?"

"Yes. She owns a temple in the province of Kai. I'll be leaving first thing in the morning. According to Lady Kaede, this training could last well over a year or more," She explained somewhat dismally.

Immediate silence fell upon the group, and as if sensing their stares, Kagome smiled. "But, it's for the best. The sooner I can begin the rest of my training, the better."

"Yeah … but you only just returned, Kagome…” Naomi replied. "And what about Shippo?"

"I have no choice but to leave him behind. It won't be safe for him to make the journey, and I doubt
this priestess will allow demons in the temple," Kagome answered, her gaze shifting to her child situated on Ume's lap, playing with her long hair.

"You've made your decision," Kosuke replied after a moment. "If you plan to leave tomorrow, I wouldn't mind taking you there. It won't be safe leaving on your own…"

"Yuuta will be accompanying me," Kagome explained, not noticing Kosuke stiffen at the response, a somewhat envious look crossing his expression. "Lady Kaede says it will take at least a month by foot to reach."

"So, who will watch Shippo while you're away?" Ume asked curiously from behind her and the other girls.

"Lady Kaede said she'd look after him until Yuuta returns."

While this was definitely a surprise to Aiko, she understood the situation well enough. Still, seeing Kagome leave just as soon as she returned, left her feeling somewhat disappointed, but she kept to herself. It was for the best.

"So…" Kosuke started, his expression somewhat bothered. "Yuuta will watch him until your return? If only you could bring Shippo along. Being without his mother would surely bring him discomfort."

Kagome nodded at this, taking a small bite of her rice and swallowing slowly. "I feel the same, but it can't be helped. Yuuta volunteered to handle Shippo once I arrive at the temple. Besides, I'm sure Shippo will be fine; he is quite fond of Yuuta after all."

From Aiko's peripheral vision, she noticed Sango and Kohaku exchange a worried glance, but the two remained ever so silent behind them. "Well, that's quite the job, even for a man to handle. I don't mind helping out with Shippo. He does make the strenuous days a lot brighter."

"Will it really be alright?" Kohaku's voice drifted to their ears, earning Kagome's attention when she shifted her body around to face the younger brother of Sango. "I can't imagine leaving my family for a whole year, even if it is training…" Although he also seemed somewhat disappointed by Kagome's decision, his expression immediately brightened, an excited grin gracing his face. "How about you train with us? I'm sure father would agree to it, that way you wouldn't have to leave everyone."

"That's a sweet gesture, Kohaku, but Kagome needs more than just simple hand to hand combat training. She needs spiritual training, and that's something we cannot provide for her," Sango explained, a small hand upon her brother's shoulder.

"Oh…"

"Honestly, the idea isn't half bad. I think it would be nice to learn some self-defense, and I couldn't think of anyone better than your clan," Kagome revealed, smiling as she lifted Kohaku's defeated expression. "But, I'm pretty sure it would be impossible to lift Sango's giant boomerang."

Sango merely sweat dropped at the term. "It's made from the bones of many demons and only a small selection of people can withstand its density. It would require a great amount of strength. It took years until I managed to lift it with both my hands."

"How did you manage to smelt all those bones into a weapon, let alone come up with the idea?" Aiko asked, eyeing the large weapon nestled beside Sango.
"It's not fair! You just got back!" Ume's voice suddenly interrupted, surprising everyone as the little girl stood up from beside Kohaku, Shippo held tightly against her chest as she carried him with both arms to stand in front of Kagome. There was a small pout upon her face, her eyes narrowed angrily. "How can you just suddenly leave us again?"

Softening her expression, Kagome removed her small bowl of food from her lap, setting it beside her in the grass and extended her arms towards the child. Easily enough, she pulled Ume, along with Shippo, onto her lap, her arms folding around both. "I'm sorry, Ume, but it won't be for long. Once my training is over, I can stay in the village forever, and I'll never leave you or Shippo again."

"Really? But a year is too long…"

Pressing her chin upon the child's head, she rocked Ume from side to side, hugging her a little tighter. "Yes. It's a long time, but I'll do my best to finish my training as quickly as I can. Do you think you can wait until then?"

"Can't I come with you?"

"Ume, what about your papa? He would miss you if you left for so long," Aiko suddenly interrupted, smiling as she leaned forward, her arms wrapped around her knees as she watched her. "Not just him, but Naomi and I would miss you as well, as would Shippo."

Although somewhat troubled by this, Ume's pout remained. "I don't want papa and the others to be sad…" Sighing, she turned in Kagome's embrace, her large brown eyes staring into Kagome's. "Promise? Promise you won't leave again after?"

"I promise, Ume," She replied, hugging the child tighter. "I love you so much, I could never leave you or the others again."

The loving connection between Ume and Kagome certainly didn't go unnoticed, and the group smiled upon the sight. It was obvious, from everyone's perspective, that Aiko noticed, Kagome was a natural born mother. Ume only had her father to depend on, and though her mother had passed on long ago, she truly did look up to Kagome greatly. *They're like mother and daughter, those two…*

Hearing a sigh escape Naomi, Aiko followed her friend's gaze across the lake, the sight of a handsome young man easily noticed kneeling at the water's edge filling one of a few buckets with water; he was positioned a short distance from the others working, though, Aiko noticed his gaze linger towards the hillside where they sat.

Looking back at Naomi, she caught her blush, her head quickly turning away, and Aiko couldn't help the smirk from sliding across her face. While he was indeed quite handsome, his black hair pulled neatly into a high topknot with only a few strays falling over his thick brows, he also had a sharp jawline and high cheekbones. Still, peering closer but not enough to catch his curious stare, his lips appeared full, and if she had to guess, this young man was probably in his early twenties. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Hearing Naomi's intake of breath, Aiko followed her friend's gaze across the lake, the sight of a handsome young man easily noticed kneeling at the water's edge filling one of a few buckets with water; he was positioned a short distance from the others working, though, Aiko noticed his gaze linger towards the hillside where they sat.

"Huh? W-what do you mean?" She slightly stuttered, fiddling her thumbs together.
"Oh, don't play coy with me. That young man across the way. You've been staring at him this entire time."

"What's going on?" Kagome suddenly interrupted, her smile curving into a similar grin as Aiko's. "Does our Naomi have a crush on someone?"

"It would appear so. Right, Naomi?" Aiko teased. "See that guy over there, Kagome?" She pointed, both hers and Kagome's eyes watching as the young man stood from the water's edge to stretch his aching muscles, unaware of the attention across the way. She heard Kagome whistle low in reply. "He's pretty cute. I haven't seen him around the village before. I'm guessing he came with those from Demon Slayer Village."

"Looks like it. So, what are your thoughts, Naomi?"

Naomi only looked at Aiko and Kagome uncertainly, biting her lower lip before focusing her attention on her food. "What … do you mean?"

"Do you see him as potential husband material?" Kagome questioned, causing her friend to gasp at the insinuation. "If he's caught your notice, you must like him, right?"

"I suppose…"

"Why don't you talk to him? Looks like the guys over there are going to go on lunch break," Aiko explained, watching them without a care in the world. "It could be your chance."

The very thought of speaking with him must have caught her off guard, and she insistently shook her head from side to side, as if the idea was the farthest thing from her mind. "What? No. I can't do that."

"Why not?" Kagome asked, canting her head curiously. When Naomi failed to reply back, obviously flustered and timid over the very thought, Kagome mused. "Then … I know. We can invite him over to eat with us. There's plenty here," She explained, pointing towards the small basket between the group. "Great idea. He's been working hard since this morning. I'm sure he'd love to sit down and eat with us."

"But what if he's already married?" She softly murmured. "I'd make a fool of myself if I revealed my feelings…"

At this, Aiko and Kagome exchanged a glance. Well, that was certainly a good reason to worry. It wouldn't be surprising if such a good-looking man was already taken, but there was always a chance he might be single.

"Sango, Kohaku, that man over there by the lake. Do you happen to know his name?" Kagome asked.

The siblings shifted their gaze towards the person of question and within a brief second, the two nodded. "His name is Tenchi. Why do you ask?" Sango inquired.

"Is he single?"

"Are you interested?" Sango asked, laughing suddenly when Aiko's cheeks burned, but upon realizing it was for Naomi's sake, she pondered. "No. I do not believe he is, but he is quite the
catch, isn't he?"

"Definitely," Kagome exclaimed, watching the young man once more. "If my friends were here, they'd jump at the chance to speak with him. What's he like?"

"Aside from hard-working, he's got quite the reputation back in our village, though nothing lewd, I assure you. He's very charismatic and wonderful with children, but he spends a great deal of his time training our young ones."

Kohaku nodded at his sister's words. "He's more of a sympathetic kind of guy and isn't the type to show any aggression. His family runs the blacksmith in our village, and he's trained me from time to time."

"Good to know," Aiko replied, turning her attention to Naomi, whose eyes were once again watching Tenchi, but she seemed nervous. "You've always been timid by nature, but wouldn't you like to change that? You never know, he could provide you with a family in the future."

But she only nodded in response. "I..."

When Naomi failed to reply after a moment, Aiko mused. Of course, it wouldn't be so simple for Naomi to open up on this topic, after all, she'd never been in a relationship before, nothing serious. Still, another thought surfaced, and recalling Naomi's traumatizing incident a short time back, she bit her lip. "I guess it's a bit soon for that..."

"No," Naomi surprised her. "You're right. Nothing will change if I keep to myself, and its time I find a husband."

"Well, there's no need to rush into marriage." Kagome replied, chuckling in response.

"Yeah, but our village is quite small as it is, and there aren't that many young- and good-looking guys," Aiko replied. "Then again, we shouldn't be too choosy..."

Reaching beside her, Kagome took Naomi's hand in hers, patting it softly and reassuringly. "Take this chance and go talk with him. Who knows, you two might get along well," She insisted. "There's nothing a guy likes more than receiving food from a pretty girl, and you've got nothing to lose. What do you say?"

"What should I say to him?"

"Well, for starters, you should introduce yourself," Kagome began. "Then, ask him if he'd like to join us for lunch. And, if he accepts, then we'll handle it from there and see how it plays out. How does that sound?"

With her mind apparently made up, Naomi nodded. "Alright. I'll do it. I'll be right back..."

When she moved to stand up, Aiko watched as the young woman began her slow descent down the hillside, adjusting her kimono nervously. From beside her, she heard Kagome shout a strange term, and bewildered, she stared at the raven-haired girl beside her. "Huh?"

"Fighting!" Kagome replied once more, a single fist raised into the air as she flashed Aiko an encouraging smile. "It means good luck, as a way to cheer someone on."

"For a moment there, I thought you wanted Naomi to fight Tenchi," She laughed. What a strange term, then again, Kagome normally said and did things which were not the norm she grew up with.
Kagome only sweat dropped. "I guess I can see how that might be misinterpreted."

"Kagome," Kosuke soon voiced. "are you sure you want to make this trip? It's such a long journey by foot. It's a shame we don't have any spare horses…” He explained, musing on their earlier conversation. "What if I talk to Lady Kaede and ask to escort you there myself? We could take my cart."

Her eyes gleamed at this idea, but her expression soon fell when she shook her head. "It's a good idea … but you're needed in the village."

"I'm pretty sure they can survive a couple weeks without my assistance," He joked. "Besides, I wouldn't mind taking you there myself, that way, Yuuta can remain behind with Shippo."

This didn't seem like a bad idea, now that Aiko heard it. By allowing Kosuke to handle Kagome's travels, it would give Yuuta more time to rest and spend time with Shippo. Still, it was painfully obvious Kosuke intended to initiate some form of contact between him and Kagome, perhaps admitting his affections most of all.

From behind her, Aiko heard a small intake of breath from Sango, and glancing over her shoulder curiously, she noticed the slayer's eyes glowering suspiciously at the young man seated near Kagome. Something about her gaze spoke volumes of distrust, but no one else seemed to notice.

"I think I have an idea," Sango suddenly interrupted, her eyes no longer glued to Kosuke, but instead were focused upon Kagome. "I could ask my father if we could lend you two horses, that way you and Yuuta," She paused, shifting her gaze to Kosuke for a slight moment. "can still travel."

Although Kagome was completely oblivious to the silent exchange between Sango and Kosuke, Aiko certainly felt the tension. Did the chieftain's daughter have something against him? What was with that pointed stare? Judging by Kosuke's countenance, his eyes meeting the slayer's, there was confusion in his eyes.

"Really, Sango? That would mean so much!"

At the sight of his hands fisting upon his lap, his eyes turning away from both Sango and Kagome, Aiko only shook her head. He lost once again. No matter how many times he tried, he never got his chance. Perhaps, he and Kagome were never meant to be.

"Oh, Yuuta!" Kagome's voice rose suddenly from beside her.

Looking away from Kosuke, Aiko's gaze met Yuuta's briefly, his tall and rugged appearance watching them from above the hill. Like most of the village men, his kimono shirt was open, exposing his chest and navel to the world, and she bit her lip at the sight. Even his muscular arms were exposed, the sleeves of his shirt ripped unevenly at his shoulders, his hair falling just a little over his shoulders. He truly was a work of art, even in her opinion, and as the days dragged on, he looked less menacing.

"Yuuta, why don't you join us?" Kagome offered. "We've got plenty to eat."

Although his eyes fell upon the basket situated between the group, he merely shook his head. "I ate earlier. Kagome, I need your opinion on something."

"What's that?"

He beckoned her with his hand, and while his question certainly confused Kagome, she otherwise
stood up, dusting her kimono and proceeded up the hill after Yuuta. When Kagome stood at his side, he bent his head low to whisper something into her ear, his arms crossed and his expression slightly serious. Whatever they were discussing, it fell on deaf ears, but Kagome soon turned apologetically to everyone.

"Sorry everyone. I'm going to head off with Yuuta for a bit."

"Of course. Take your time," Sango exclaimed, smiling softly.

Although no one was upset by Kagome's sudden departure, everyone except Kosuke, Kagome soon turned, her arm wrapped around Yuuta's elbow as they left. The sight alone wasn't surprising; Kagome, after all, was a touchy-feely person, but as for Kosuke, she noticed his mouth open disappointedly.

"Ever since Kagome and Yuuta returned, they've been awfully close. Closer than usual," She found herself saying aloud, watching as Kagome leaned her head against Yuuta's shoulder before the two both disappeared from view.

Kosuke only scoffed, turning his head away before biting into his onigiri agitatedly. "If I remember correctly, he was also indifferent and distant with her…"

"Isn't it normal that they're affectionate?" Kohaku asked from behind them. "They're husband and wife, after all."

A noise fell from Kosuke's lips, the sight of him beating his chest as he choked on the rice, obviously the case he swallowed too quickly. "What?!" He cried, startled as Aiko patted his back. "What do you mean husband and wife?!"

Even Aiko turned her questionable stare to the siblings. Where on earth had Kohaku heard that from? Or did he just assume Kagome and Yuuta had that sort of relationship? "You must have misunderstood. Kagome and Yuuta aren't married." When she revealed this, Sango suddenly struck her a look, as well as her brother, but the stare was disbeliefing.

"That's not what I heard," Kohaku immediately replied. "They introduced themselves as such when they visited our village. They even shared a room together."

"What?!" It was Aiko's turn to gape. They did what?

"Really? They married?" Ume asked beside Kohaku, her eyes widened in pure delight. "When did that happen?"

"Could it be possible they eloped while on the road?" Aiko couldn't help but wonder aloud, exchanging a confusing stare with Kosuke. 'That can't be right. From what I know of Kagome, she isn't that type of person, and there would be no reason to keep it secret either. What is going on?'

"You mean you were unaware?" Sango inquired.

A scoff escaped Kosuke, this one much louder and with a countenance filled with agitation, he pushed his food off his lap, as if it had offended him in some way. "I can't believe him! He took that opportunity away from me!" He stood up immediately after, fists clenched, and without a word, he left in the opposite direction of Kagome and Yuuta.

"Uh oh…” Ume made a noise beside Kohaku, watching as Kosuke disappeared over the hillside.

"Poor Kosuke…” Aiko muttered, cleaning up the rice littered upon the grass.
"I'm sorry. I think I'm misunderstanding something. What is going on?" Sango soon asked.

"To make it short and simple, Kosuke has always been smitten with Kagome since she first arrived to our village three months back," She explained. "And I guess a rivalry built up since Yuuta came to our village not long back. Yuuta has an interesting background, one that didn't set well with our village before..."

"He used to be a bandit!" Ume jumped in excitedly, her reply immediately surprising the siblings. "He stole Kagome away but Kagome came back with the bandits and they apologized."

"Stole?" Sango inquired, exchanging a glance with her brother.

Aiko otherwise sweat dropped at the child's reply. Well, she wasn't wrong, and judging by Sango and Kohaku's expression, they were not aware of this little fact. "That's a good way of putting it," She weakly laughed. "He's been by Kagome's side ever since, so it's no wonder Kosuke feels jealous. I guess you could say, Yuuta placed himself between him and Kagome."

"I knew Kagome was an incredible woman, but I didn't realize her influence was so strong..." Sango replied thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Kagome is very kind and forgiving," Ume loudly exclaimed, holding Shippo as he slept in her lap. "even to those who don't deserve it."

The child's words did not go unnoticed to Sango, and she soon nodded. "I see. This is definitely a story I need to hear from Kagome, when the time is appropriate."

"So... are they married or not?" Kohaku suddenly asked.

Ψ

A troubled sigh fell from Kosuke's lips, and as his eyes shifted towards the evening and cloudy skies overhead, he felt an incredible urge to jump in the lake, clothes and all, if only to release his pent-up frustrations. Clenching the grass at his side, the roots lifting from the ground with each tug, he closed his eyes.

Married? It couldn't be true. Somehow, he couldn't seem to believe it, and yet, Aiko was right when she said Kagome and Yuuta's relationship had changed; since returning two weeks prior from their trip, they'd spent a great deal of time together, whether it was training or not. As much as he'd feigned ignorance to this fact, he couldn't deny it; something had indeed changed, and he wondered if it was possible, they had eloped.

"Kagome would have said something if so..." He muttered, trying to understand. It couldn't be possible in the short time they'd been gone that they'd come to such a decision; but according to Sango and Kohaku, it was supposedly true.

Another sigh escaped him. Kosuke couldn't think straight. It seemed, no matter how many times he tried, he could never get a chance to spend time with Kagome except for the small occasions within the village. She'd been so quick to turn him down when he asked to escort her to Kai that it hurt him, and he questioned whether it was truly worth it to continue wooing her. Did she even notice his affections?

"Why does it have to be him, of all people?" He asked aloud.

He recalled the moment when Yuuta and his men attacked the village, the scuffle between himself and that beast of a man, until the moment he took off with Kagome. At the time, he truly thought
he would lose the village as well as Kagome permanently, but he never anticipated Kagome's safe return and her unexpected bond with the bandits. "I met Kagome first. I did my best to protect her."

Thinking back, this wasn't the first he'd felt such irritation towards the bandit. Sure, with his years of swordsman-ship, terrorizing the lands with his fellow brothers, it was no surprise he held considerable strength, even greater than him own. Still, the conversation with Yuuta weeks back remained at the forefront of his thoughts.

"Two weeks?" The thought was ridiculous and without a horse? "I could certainly escort Kagome there on a wagon. The terrain North is not easy."

Yuuta only sighed. "No, I need for you to remain here, Kosuke. Besides, with me gone, who will aid the men in constructing the huts? We prepared everything the night before and it would be a waste of your skills if you didn't participate."

"Listen—"

Yuuta only interrupted, turning on Kosuke with an arched brow. "Besides, you're still a bit beaten up after that scuffle with Satouru. Let's say I brought you with me, could you protect Kagome and Shippo?"

"Of course!" He replied without hesitation.

"I've had more training than you ever had, Kosuke. If you couldn't defeat me, even without injuries, what makes you think you can protect them? Especially if a demon were near?" Noticing the young man's silence, Yuuta only sighed. "That's enough. You'll only get in the way as you are now. If you want to be of use, stay here and help the villagers."

The very memory urged a disgruntled groan from his throat, and without a word, he reached for a large stone nestled close beside him and tossed it down the hill, watching as it ricocheted off the narrow incline several feet away. Another followed after, and another traveled much further than the last. Before long, he fell back into the grass, his arms spread wide beside him as he followed the dark clouds overhead.

It would rain soon.

But before he could accept this painful reality, he heard laughter nearby, a laugh very familiar to him, and he immediately rose into a seated position, his dark eyes scanning the landscape of the village below the hill. Squinting his gaze, he caught sight of Kagome walking the path, and tempted to call out to her, he quickly stood up, but he soon paused when he noticed she wasn't alone.

Yuuta stood a short distance down the path with Shippo snug in his arms, and Kosuke watched, without a word, as Kagome ran towards him, her hands affectionately touching Yuuta's forearms as she stopped to coo at her son. There was no doubt in his mind, something had definitely blossomed between the two of them during their trip.

While he went unnoticed, he silently watched the two fell into short conversation, Kagome's arm sliding around Yuuta's elbow, similar to earlier, and once again, her head against his shoulder. There was no doubt in his mind, something had definitely blossomed between the two of them during their trip.

Again, he found the sight unbearable to watch, but there was no helping his feelings; he needed to know the truth and most importantly, why.

For a short time, he watched them until Kagome took Shippo into her arms and made her way back towards the huts, likely turning in for the night. With this opportunity, he stood up and followed...
the bandit as he made his way towards the barn. Just as Yuuta stepped inside, Kosuke closed in behind him.

As if sensing he wasn't alone, Yuuta turned at Kosuke's quick approach, but before he could utter a word, Kosuke reared his arm back and threw his fist into his jaw, causing the bandit to stagger back in surprise. Disbelief and confusion immediately swept over Yuuta's expression, and picking himself off the ground, he struck Kosuke a glare. "Kosuke. Have you lost your goddamned mind? What's gotten into you?"

Although he wished it hadn't come to this, he couldn't deny this any further. "I knew it was a bad idea for the two of you to travel together! You knew of my affections for her and yet, you still went behind my back and slept with her! Now you're husband and wife?!"

Yuuta's astonished wide-eyed stare was clearly discernable, even in the shadows of the barn's entryway, and from his expression, Kosuke realized it was true. So, Kohaku was right. "Bastard!"

Wiping his lip, he noticed a small dribble of blood upon his finger and sent Kosuke an accusatory glare, as if he hadn't expected Kosuke to knock him off his feet and spill his blood. Picking himself off the hay-littered ground, he towered formidably before him, his hands clenched. "How do you know of this?" He asked, his voice low and menacing.

Although he expected this reply, he couldn't deny the nervousness and betrayal settling at his lower abdomen. "So, it is true! I heard from Kohaku and Sango," He began, watching Yuuta's expression carefully.

Yuuta spit what glob of blood he had from his mouth but otherwise kept his glare on Kosuke. "Well, it was only a matter of time before it was revealed. So, what do you intend to do about it?"

Unnerved, Kosuke reared his arm back once more and lunged at him, but Yuuta caught it with ease, side stepping before reaching out and grabbing his arm with little effort. Unable to break free from his strong hold, he could do nothing more but collapse to his knees as his arm was pulled behind his back, the tension alone enough to grind his teeth.

"So, you intend to fight me? Is that it, Kosuke?" Yuuta inquired loudly, applying more tension onto his forearm. "I'll admit, I didn't expect this reckless behavior, but it's clear you've misunderstood."

"What's there to misunderstand, Yuuta?" He retorted, casting him a dirty glare. "You slept with her, married her in just a short amount of time. And even during the past two weeks since your return, neither of you mentioned a word to anyone. Even Aiko was unaware!"

"Calm yourself," He groaned, pulling away from Kosuke before crossing his arms indignantly. "Your anger is unnecessary. If anyone is at fault, it should be me. The idea was mine."

"What?"

"It was the only way to protect Kagome's reputation," He pressed. "You know how it is. A woman and child traveling alone with a man. For her sake, I did her this favor, to spare her the torment and resentment from those who would accuse and sully her name. I didn't want a repeat of what happened last time with that bastard Satouru," He explained. "The only person aware of this reasoning is Lady Kaede."

So, that was it? That was the reason? Picking himself off the ground, he turned. "And what gives you the right to continue this lie, Yuuta? It's clear you haven't explained this to the Demon Slayers. Now that Aiko and Ume are aware, no doubt Naomi as well, it won't be long before the entire
village finds out," He explained, pinning Yuuta with a steady glare. "For Kagome's sake, how will you fix this?"

There was a pause which fell between them, and it was clear from Yuuta's expression, Kosuke had cornered him. If anything, it would have been best to reveal this relationship only to the eyes of strangers, but to reveal it even to the Demon Slayers only created an awkward air and with it, tension would surely follow.

"You needn't worry your britches, Kosuke. It will be handled accordingly."

Even still, this didn't settle well with him. "So … there's nothing between you and Kagome? Answer me this, Yuuta. Did you sleep with her?"

"Even if I did, that's my business. Not yours, Kosuke," He replied unblinkingly, obviously aware it drove Kosuke over the edge. "I'm aware of your feelings for Kagome. There's nothing stopping you from confessing to her. Then again, you've never been the type to openly reveal your feelings."

"Yuuta!"

A heavy sigh escaped just then. "If it eases your thoughts, then I'll be blunt. I did not sleep with Kagome, we merely shared a room together. There's a difference, and it served its purpose while pretending to be husband and wife."

After hearing this, immediate tension fell from his shoulders and he exhaled the breath he'd been holding since he came at Yuuta. So, that's what happened? If that was the case, then he felt relieved, but he still couldn't erase the image of Kagome touching Yuuta, even if it were mere friendship. "I see. I apologize for striking you then. My anger got the best of me…"

Yuuta only scoffed in reply. "Clearly, but that punch of yours caught me off guard. No man has easily snuck up on me like you have. You've improved a bit with that arm of yours."

Kosuke didn't expect the compliment, especially after what he'd done, but he accepted it with a weak smile. "Again, I do apologize," He explained, running his hand along the back of his neck awkwardly. Now that he knew the truth, he felt relieved, but he still couldn't erase the image of Kagome touching Yuuta, even if it were mere friendship. "I see. I apologize for striking you then. My anger got the best of me…"

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"Why haven't you told her?"

He looked away, feeling heat rush to his cheeks; just revealing it only deepened his embarrassment. "Well, I can't say I haven't tried. Though, something always manages to get in the way." He explained, recalling the time, four weeks prior when he had tried to kiss Kagome before she left on her trip North with Yuuta; Clover, the name Kagome gave to the goat, had purposefully managed to ruin his opportunity.

"I do recall that time you were adamant on escorting Kagome to meet with the Demon Slayers, but at the time, your injuries were great. I suppose I wouldn't blame you for thinking I got in the way."

"I suppose I did feel resentment towards you, but thinking back on it, you were right. If anything, I blame Satouru."

Yuuta nodded at this. "But you did rescue Shippo," He began. "And from my understanding, Kagome was greatly appreciative of your efforts," He began slowly, musing suddenly. "I'll be honest with you…"
"What is it?"

"If there's one thing I should apologize for, it's my cruelty towards you and Kagome when we first met. When my men first attacked this village, the moment I first set my eyes upon Kagome, I had intentions to make her mine. Looking back, I regret such lewd thoughts, even if they were brief," he revealed. "I clearly see why you adore her, Kosuke. Kagome is unlike any woman I've ever met; she's compassionate to people, no matter their differences, and she's forgiving and brave in ways even I cannot fathom. There's certainly a mysterious air about her, but I can clearly see she cannot so easily reveal her most troubled thoughts."

As he watched Yuuta intake a deep breath and close his eyes, he felt the all too familiar tug at his abdomen, and the weight upon his chest, which had lifted earlier, returned. "Yuuta? What are you saying?"

Opening his eyes, he struck Kosuke with a determined stare. "I suppose, what I'm trying to say is this. I no longer see Kagome as a simple traveling companion with whom I should return a debt to. I see her as a woman, much like you. I'm afraid I cannot give her up to you so easily, Kosuke."

Ψ

Author Notice: (Please Read!)

Finally, we've managed to complete Temptation's Flower (Book One).

Soon, we'll update Temptation's Flower (Book Two) which will be the second and final part of this fanfic. Roughly, it will be around 30 or more chapters. We'll notify everyone in an Author Notice as soon as the first chapter is updated.

Book Two will begin the plot of this story, seeing as how we've only scratched the surface; it was necessary for what we have planned soon. We'll involve more demon interaction/battles, bring in Naraku, Spirit World and Youko. Youko will permanently arrive, and with it, the romance between him and Kagome.

In regards to the cover of Book One, if you haven't already noticed, the priestess outfit for Kagome will be White and Blue in our story. Initially, we thought about using White and Green, but we chose White and Blue since it matches her high school uniform. You can expect a slight change to her priestess attire in Book Two, nothing major.

Thank you for remaining patient with this slow build up in our fanfic, and we appreciate all your reviews. We look forward to hearing from you in Book Two! Until then, see you soon!
Author Notice: (Book Two)

After spending time researching, re-editing and adding interesting scenes for *(Book Two)*, it's been decided that updates will begin **January 1st, 2020! :)**

Currently, I'm working on the first couple chapters so that they will be ready ahead of schedule, and they will be pretty lengthy. The ending of the story has already been worked out, and we're sure it will surprise all of you and leave you all entertained!

The reasoning behind updating January 1st, 2020 is so MyWorldMyImagination and I can focus on other fanfictions which have been put on hold.

Those fanfictions are:

*Twilight's Tears*

*My Sweet Gome*

If you have any questions concerning (Book One) or (Book Two), please feel free to ask. We will do our best not to give away any spoilers as well.

Thank you all for remaining patient with this story and providing us with wonderful reviews, both positive and negative. Your comments help us to improve on our stories. With that said, we hope you look forward to future updates! :)
Hello everyone!

We bet you’re all eager to read the continuation of Book Two, right? We’re just as eager to begin posting! But I’m afraid we still have two months left before we update! :D

During this small break, MyWorldMyImagination and I have come up with two unique fanfictions which correlate with Temptation’s Flower. However, these two stories will be quite different, so different in fact, we’re twisting up the entirety of the story, including the characters, events and especially the world and time period in which everything pieces together. Is it connected to Temptation’s Flower? Yes and No. We are merely using elements from the main story, but other than that, it’s a brand-new adventure for Kagome!

The first story we have planned will be called “The Three Kingdoms.” And if you’ve ever watched a fantasy anime with magic, or have seen Escaflowne, Munto, and Sailor Moon, it will have these certain elements in the story. The pairing will involve our favorite bandit, Yuuta. That’s right. This will be a romantic/fantasy fanfiction with Kagome and Yuuta. There will also be a NEW character added to the story to help Kagome on her adventure! (You’re all going to like this character, and it’s not OC) Unfortunately, we cannot reveal anything more regarding this story, but we hope this excites all of you.

The second story, “Ripples in Time,” will tie much more closely with Temptation’s Flower, but it will be a short story, without any plot. It will take place in an alternate timeline, continuing off where Kagome returned home after escaping Mistress Centipede in chapter Nine. There will also be a main love interest as well, though I’m afraid Yuuta and the other bandits will not be present in this story. The pairing will be between … Kagome and … Satouru. (Don’t worry! We’re going to do a complete 180 on his character. What if Satouru wasn’t a psychotic, disturbing assbag?) xD

To be honest, he’s probably my favorite OC that I’ve created so far, with Yuuta and Aiko coming in second and third. Why? I think I did a pretty good job fleshing out his character to a point that he became a disturbing, psychotic, resentful and most hated character throughout Book One. xD As for MyWorldMyImagination, she loves Yuuta’s character the most, and I can completely understand why; I mean, who wouldn’t want a guy like Yuuta? 😊

Moving on, eventually, we’ll begin updates to “The Three Kingdoms” and “Ripples in Time,” but not until we’re close to finishing the ending of Book Two.

(As a side note, we will also be returning to Twilight’s Tears!)

Lastly, we would like to ask everyone some questions:

1. Who were your favorite characters, scenes and or interactions in Book One?
2. What are you expecting to take place in Book Two? What would you like to see happen? Who are you most eager to see? (There’s going to be a lot of familiar characters appearing in Book Two!)
3. Are there any questions you have for Temptation’s Flower or the new stories we’ve mentioned above?

We hope to hear your thoughts and or questions that you may have, and we really hope you’re excited for these new stories coming up! January 1st, 2020 is almost here! :D Prepare your hearts, because it’s about to happen!
Here's an early Christmas Day present! We've now updated Temptation's Flower (Book Two)!

Please enjoy the long first chapter!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!