Embracing the Seasons

by Penguiduck

Summary

Shuichi had the potential for anything in life — he could be outrageously wealthy, successful in his ambitions, and could quite likely woo any woman he set his eyes on.

However, none of that interested him. Or so he thought.

He longed for something more, something that sparked the thrill of adventure, purpose, and challenge.

He never could fathom how the call of the autumn wind would one day summon the side of him he left behind and bring to him a future, a love, worth protecting.

This is a wholesome and wistful account of Kurama, and how he finds a love so compelling that his world is shaken. He meets phantoms of his past, and the sacrifices he makes to keep his loved one safe forces him to confront the piece of his soul that is demon. Both Kurama
and his beloved must overcome the darkness that threatens to destroy their future together.

[Reader x Kurama]

Notes

So I started this about a year and a half back as a gift for a good friend who shares my love for Kurama.

Kurama has a special place in my heart. I go through phases with anime and TV shows, but I always come back to YYH, and I always swoon at the sight of Kurama. He is breathtaking. I've longed to write for him for the longest time, but I've never felt that my writing was worthy of his beautiful, profound complexity.

Over the years, I've improved, and I think I might be ready. But ready or not, I think Kurama deserves to have his story told, the depths of his character explored.

For those who don't know me, reader-inserts are my specialty. I seek not to give the reader an identity -- she already has that. I seek to give the reader an adventure, a nostalgic awakening of sorts, a poignant tale that serves to make her heart full.

In this case, I will attempt to tell the story that I've longed to read, a wholesome and wistful account of Kurama and how he finds a love so compelling that his world is shaken.
Life's Threat

It was a strange feeling.

There was this tingling in his soul.

It whispered to him: life itself was threatening to move on without him.

He felt restless, a spirited pulse urging him to search for the missing pieces of the puzzle. It had been incomplete for so long that he had forgotten what the individual pieces looked like; however, he remembered the whole picture, vividly etched out in his memories.

He had lost himself in the mundane activities of daily living. He was successful in all that he pursued, but objective after objective, he toppled these ambitions over as though they were nothing more than a child's wooden blocks. The challenges of every day would not suffice.

He was bright, yes, with a daringly high IQ and sharps wits to accompany it, but his intelligence was not the agent of his dissatisfaction.

It was something more, a deep longing that haunted him from the pits of night, lingering above him during the day and watching over his shoulders.

He could barely sleep, and when he did, his dreams never allowed for secrets to be revealed, curiosities to be satiated; and when he awoke, he would never feel refreshed. His days would drag on, banal assignments sifting across his desk, leaving him less and less interested in the commonplace duties tasked as his responsibilities.

"Shuichi? Shuichi, is everything all right?"

He snapped out of his trance -- he was so lost in his thoughts that he had not realized that the newest addition to his team had slipped into the office, a folder in hand.

"Forgive me, _____," he said. "I was thinking about how volumes might increase in the next few weeks."

"Oh, sure," you agreed. "I know how tax season can be. Although I've never seen one here, I'm sure it can't be that different than at any other financial institution. We're about to get buried, aren't we?"

"Hopefully, preemptive planning might alleviate some of the burden." He held out his hand for the folder. "You have something for me?"

You acquiesced. "The reports you asked for, Shuichi. I analyzed everything the best I could. I divided our clients up into four major categories -- satisfied, at risk, opportunity, and unknown. From there, I dug deep into their profiles to see if I could add any helpful notes about what our financial advisors might do to add value."

"Excellent work," he said. "You're much quicker to bring me reports than the last advisor I charged with these tasks." He remembered the difficult conversation when he had to let the young man go because of performance issues. _____ was far better with managing her time efficiently.

"I'm glad," you said with a small smile. "Is there anything else I can do right now?"
"Nothing beyond the tasks I've already given you."

"You know where I'll be, if you need anything. Just let me know." You left Shuichi's office, mentally organizing yourself for the busy afternoon ahead. You had a couple of appointments with clients who had wanted to come in at the last minute to discuss their estate planning alternatives.

"Mm, just a moment, ______."

You looked back at Shuichi, only to see that he was already behind you.

He reached around to place a hand on your opposite shoulder, guiding you toward your office. "There actually was something I could use your help with..."

How odd. Shuichi modeled the most professional standards for the employees of this institution -- you had never seen him physically touch anyone, much less you.

Then again, perhaps men were strange about these things. There really were only two other women in the branch -- Rita was married with two children, and Ginger was looking to retire in the next two years. Maybe Shuichi thought that he could be a bit more open with you than your fellow colleagues.

In any case, he gave you your assignment and left you to work. It was a small request, and you would have no problem getting it done within the hour.

You watched after him as he exited, taking note of how perfectly ironed and fitted his slacks and shirt were. His wayward hair cascaded down his back in silken tresses. You wondered how much time he spent to perfect his look each morning.

Probably longer than you.

Shuichi paced down the office hallway. That was concerning. With everyone else hard at work, he opened the palm of his hand -- there was the creature he had snatched from ______'s shoulder. He had not seen one in many years, but there was no doubt in his mind that this was an insect of the Makai. Now crushed in his hand, the insect's energy dissipated, taking its physical body with it. Although the evidence was now gone, he knew that there was something on the horizon.

He could sense it. The smell of the enigma was unmistakable.

Such news would normally bring alarm... but he was fascinated.

"There must be a rift between the two worlds," he thought. "Only a disturbance could possibly cause this, and a purposeful one at that. The current state of affairs must have tipped the delicate balance, for better or for worse."

An investigation was in order.

For the first time in years, Shuichi felt excited about something. When he returned to his office, his eyes fell on the number of folders stacked neatly on his desk. He stared at them for a moment. He had never had an issue with delaying gratification, but he was far too eager to leave the everyday insipidity behind.

Work would just have to wait. He grabbed his suit jacket, preparing for the cool autumn weather.

"I'm leaving for a late lunch," he said to one of his colleagues as he left the building. "I'll have the
analysis finished by tomorrow."

The moment he stepped outside, the wind picked up. He felt refreshed, the chill filling his lungs and pushing him toward his destination.

*Kurama had returned.*
On the Topic of Women

Chapter Notes

Feeling pretty inspired recently and have a couple of chapters written ahead. Excited to share this story with you!

His friends had moved on, content with their lives and the mundane adventures that awaited them. Perhaps they were relieved, peace a priority for once.

Yusuke and Keiko were happily married, an invitation to their first baby shower pinned on Kurama’s refrigerator. He planned to attend this spring.

Kuwabara had recently graduated from college with a degree in architecture and worked for the most successful company in the city. He remained faithful to Yukina, who stayed at Genkai’s compound, assisting with her training regimes as a medic.

Hiei wandered Demon World, patrolling the borders for miscreant demons and lost humans, alike. Kurama would never have guessed that Hiei would be satisfied with what seemed like such simple work, but his friend had changed.

They had all changed.

Except him.

Even Shuichi had changed, adjusted to his human life, working in the office, churning the days.

But Kurama was the same. He stirred, restless and hungry, gnawing for the opportunity to satiate his lust for wonder. He clawed at Shuichi’s consciousness, testing his resolve, questioning his adamant resolution at living a normal, human life.

It just wasn’t enough.

Kurama boarded a bus, heading to Genkai’s estate -- if anyone knew anything about this recent breach of Makai insects, it would be her. Perhaps this new discovery was what he needed to temper the fox demon.

The work was tedious, but you were used to it. You were relatively new to the company, having been around for only a few months. You enjoyed the benefits and the pay, and your office was filled with handsome young men, many of whom were single -- this was common in the financial industry, a male-dominated trade. You barely had any time for dating, however, and even if you did, you weren’t sure how you felt about dating a coworker.

You were happy with your employment situation and wouldn’t want to ruin anything. It wasn’t necessarily difficult to find an appropriate career path in your line of work, but you experienced unique challenges as a woman. You liked this company.

Shuichi interviewed you, and while he seemed like an accomplished financial advisor, he was also mesmerizing. You admired his eyes, the deep green that seemed to lure you into the calm of the
sea. His hair was both untamed and polished, a strange combination that could only be attributed to superior genes, you postulated. He was well-dressed, confident and kind, and despite his good looks, he made you feel as though the interview was nothing more than a conversation. You were comfortable around him from day one.

After hearing you talk through a series of hypothetical financial planning questions, he hired you right on the spot, and you accepted. Going into the interview, you hadn’t thought that you’d make a decision so quickly, but you were impressed.

He was a good boss, usually soft-spoken, and firm when he needed to be. He was clear in his expectations and left you to your own devices -- it was nice to have the autonomy to finish your work in the way you found most appropriate.

A knock sounded at your door, relieving you of your thoughts. “_____, Mr. and Mrs. Ichiko are here for you.”

“I’ll be right there,” you said, grabbing your suit jacket.

He made his way up the stairs to Genkai’s estate, relishing the feel of being among nature again, quiet and clean. The lights and pollution of the city wore on his heightened senses, and he missed the songs of birds and crisp mountain air.

As he climbed, he felt the energy of an old friend not too far ahead. Yusuke awaited him at the very top, leaning casually against the wall surrounding the estate.

“I see you’ve noticed the recent infestation. Ready to play exterminator?” he said.

“It’s good to see you, too, Yusuke,” Kurama said. “Admittedly, I’m a little surprised that you’re here.”

“What? Don’t think I still have it in me, fox boy?”

“It’s not that. With a little one on the way, Keiko must be particularly worried about your being away.”

“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

“Are you sure this is wise? ‘Happy wife, happy life’ -- isn’t that what they say?”

“You got yourself a girl yet? You can put your own advice to good use.”

Kurama chuckled. “I’m not sure any woman would put up with me.”

“If girls put up with Kuwabara, I don’t see why not.”

“Funny, Yusuke. Last I heard, Kuwabara was quite popular with the ladies.”

“That’s just what happens when you go to college and get a fancy diploma.” Yusuke grinned. “Figured I didn’t need one.”

“Oh, I see. That’s why you chose not to pursue your education. You found love already.”

“Well, I figured that if I got a degree, I’d have to put it to good use -- and that means no more ramen cart!”
“In any case, I’m glad you’ve found happiness… in both Keiko and your ramen cart.”

“You’d be surprised. I’ve discovered my inner chef. Keiko’s dad owns a restaurant, and he helped me get started. People come from far and wide to try Urameshi’s legendary noodles! Come by for a taste sometime!”

Kurama smiled. Yusuke seemed sincerely content with his life, as simple as it seemed. For someone who had spent his young life saving the world, it was nice that he could enjoy it.

“The world is in peril, and you want to talk about noodles?” a raspy voice interrupted.

“Master Genkai, it’s good to see you,” Kurama said.

“Hey, you’re still walking!” Yusuke said. “I thought my favorite fossil might have a cane or be in a wheelchair by now. I’m impressed!”

“How come you didn’t invite me to your baby shower?!” she said, shaking him as hard as she could. “I’m sure if Keiko were in charge of the mailing, I’d be on the guest list!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know how to send an invitation to Spirit World! Your post office must be closed!”

“Enough!” Genkai said. “Botan came on business. You all can have fun naming Yusuke’s kid later.”

“Oh, right!” Botan said. She knelt to the ground, opening up a familiar suitcase. “Koenma wanted me to bring this so he could join in, too.”

The screen in the suitcase lit up, the Spirit World prince sitting across a desk. His hands were folded in front of him, and he appeared formal, despite the mountain of paperwork that plagued his office. “Greetings,” he said. “I’m glad you both came. Otherwise, Botan would waste precious time searching for you. Where is Kuwabara?”

“I know it’s crazy, but he has this thing called a job,” Yusuke said. “He has a love affair with designing bridges and buildings, probably more so than being my sidekick.”
“He’ll be here, I’m sure.” Botan said. “His office is quite a bit up north of Genkai’s estate, so he has a long way to go. I’ll fill him in as soon as I see him.”

“Very well.” Koenma took a deep breath. “I wanted to inform you of some recent intelligence. I thought long and hard if I ought to reveal this, as our information is limited, but since our suspects are operating in the Living World, I think it’s only fair.”

“Well, what is it?” Yusuke said. “Spit it out. We haven’t got all day. Grandma’s gotta drink her prune juice, Kurama’s got work, Yukina’s got some healing to do, and I need to sell some noodles!”

“Someone from Demon World is looking for someone in Living World.”

“Is that… all?” Kurama said.

“It’s all we know. The Makai insects you see are merely a vessel, searching for this someone. They are a unique breed, designed specifically to seek and relay their findings. They are harmless on their own, but I’m afraid there may be something more sinister involved.”

“I admit I had expected a bit more information. Do you have any suspects?”

“What does it matter?” Yusuke said. “If you don’t know who they are, what they’re looking for and why, then what are we supposed to do about it?”

“Let me finish,” Koenma said. “It seems that the years haven’t curbed your impatience, Yusuke. The advent of these insects is alarming because they are created by a notorious chemist from Demon World. His name is Honyu. You may remember his work. The infected humans on earth when you were occupied by the Saint Beasts? That was him. Suzaku commissioned an insect hybrid that can possess humans, only tractable with a special flute. And what about The Doctor’s army of virus-carrying insects? He took a page from Honyu’s biological engineering. You see, any demon who has the resources and inclination to seek out Honyu for his services is determined; historically, anytime Honyu is involved, there is chaos and death. I fear this may be a precursor to another incident.”

“So,” Genkai said, “be on the lookout for strange insect activity. Otherwise, don’t bother.”

“Exactly. There’s no feasible way to eliminate them all -- at any rate, it’s likely they’ll leave when they’ve found what they’re searching for. We want to locate the target before they do, but we’ll need to study them. Any information you can obtain, report to Botan.”

“Aha!” Botan said. “Looks like I’ll be hanging around for a little while longer.” Her eyes narrowed on Yusuke mischievously. “Maybe I’ll even invite myself to the baby shower~!”

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You were exhausted. While you enjoyed helping clients with their financial concerns, your efforts required enormous amounts of energy. You sighed and leaned back in your chair. It was time to go home. On days you had fewer client interactions, you could work longer, sometimes into the night. But tonight, you felt done.

You hung up your suit jacket and tidied your desk. Tomorrow, you would pick up where you left off.

Purse in hand, scarf around your neck, you looked around the office to see if anyone remained. You bid goodbye to the few coworkers who were staying later, and made your way to the entrance.
Two men opened the door from the outside -- you immediately recognized the red hair, and you took a respectful step back to allow them passage first. “Welcome back, Shuichi,” you greeted.

“Hello, ____,” Shuichi said. “How did your conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Ichiko go? I hope they were pleased with the analysis you created.”

“It went well. Thank you for asking. They were very impressed -- I couldn’t have done it without you.” You smiled at him, noticing that the other man was not someone from the office. “I was hoping you went home for the evening and you wouldn’t have to pull another long night.”

“I’m just here to pick up some documents,” he said. “This is my friend, Yusuke. We haven’t seen each other in over and year, and we have some catching up to do.”

“Good to meet you,” you said, reaching out to Yusuke for a handshake.

“You too,” Yusuke said. “Nice office you got here. Must be a real money-maker -- I can see the appeal.”

“Well, last I heard, we’re hiring. Aren’t we, Shuichi?”

“No this one,” Shuichi said, a charismatic jest in his tone. “Trust me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Yusuke said, “I wouldn’t want to work in this stuffy office anyway. I get to work in the open air selling the best noodles in the world.”

“A noodle cart? I’ll have to come by sometime, then,” you said. “I love noodles.”

“It’s on the house for you.” Yusuke glared at Shuichi. “You can pay for hers.”

Shuichi chuckled. “Of course. Have a good night, ____. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Goodnight,” you said, stepping out of the office and into the chill of the pending night. Your apartment was calling with its warm baths and hot meals. You only had leftovers in the fridge, but that was good enough for you.

_________________________________________

“She’s cute.”

“Yusuke, there are still employees here. Use some discretion, please.”

“I’m not wrong.”

Kurama picked up several folders, fitting them neatly into his laptop bag. “I’m unsure how that’s pertinent.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I assumed you like to date pretty girls. Maybe you prefer ugly ones.”

“And I apologize. I didn’t realize that you’ve evolved beyond ramen-maker to matchmaker.”

“Fine, fine! You’re right! You should probably make sure she’s single first, anyway.”

Kurama was already out the office door. “Come along, Yusuke. We have work to do. Botan should be arriving with Kuwabara any minute now.”
In case you haven't noticed, I'm super excited about this. I just finished rewatching
seasons three and four of YYH the other day, and the feels are so real. I hope this
inspiration keeps up because writing is much easier this way.

Enjoy! Please consider giving me some feedback if you like it! :)

“_____, wait up!”

You stopped, looking behind you. “Ryohei? What’s going on?”

Ryohei was one of your fellow advisors. He was handsome and young, a little awkward, but he was
ambitious and a hard worker. He had helped train you when you first started at the office. “I’m
heading home, too,” he said. “Long day, huh?”

“Yeah, tell me about it. I’m ready to be done. I can’t imagine how you handle tax season
volumes.”

“Day by day. It’s the only way to deal with it.”

“You’re so good with clients, Ryohei. I’m sure whatever strategies you use work just fine.”

He seemed to perk up at your compliment. “I’m happy to share them with you.”

“Thank you. Any tips you have will be helpful.” You waved at him. “Look, I need to get going. I
have an early meeting tomorrow, and I need all the rest and relaxation I can get.”

“Oh, sure. Would you like me to walk you home? It’s dark already.”

“It’s really not necessary. I live not too far from here, just on the northwest corner of Green Acre
Park. It’s a safe stretch.”

“I live in the area, too!” Ryohei said. “Since we’re heading to the same place, we might as well
walk together.”

You had hoped for a moment of peace, a nice and quiet walk back home. Nevertheless, Ryohei had
only been kind to you during your short time here, and you did not wish to hurt any feelings over
something so trite. “Sounds good,” you agreed. “Let’s get going.”

“All right, boys!” Botan pulled out a map, unrolling it onto Kurama’s dining room table. “We’ve
seen the highest concentrations of Makai insects here” -- she pointed -- “and here.”

“So whoever’s looking for whatever knows that whatever is in the city,” Kuwabara said.

“That’s right,” Botan said. “Spirit World intelligence suspects that they’re looking for a person, not
a something. If they were looking for a something, they would most likely send demons to Living
World to snatch it right up. Searching for a person is a far more delicate process, hence the insects.”

“Gross.” Kuwabara made a face. “Any idea why this guy is hiding? Was he a traitor or something?”

“We don’t know. He could have been. He could be hiding for any reason, I suppose. Whoever he is, he clearly doesn’t want to be found.”

“I don’t blame him. Being stalked by a bunch of demons is creepy,”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Yusuke said. “No one wants to stalk you.”

“You know what I mean, Urameshi.”

“I suppose that being stalked by anyone would be uncomfortable, demon or human,” Kurama said. “While it’s entirely possible that our target is the victim, we have to remain open-minded. We don’t know the circumstances of this search.”

“Kurama’s right,” Botan said. “I’ll let you know when Spirit World gives me reports about the situation, but we’re relying on you to help the investigation.”

“I got work tomorrow,” Yusuke said, “but afterwards I’ll be free to do some investigation.”

“You sound like you miss this Spirit Detective gig!” Botan exclaimed.

“Well, it’s a bit more exciting than operating a ramen cart, but it doesn’t pay the bills. Koenma’s a cheap bastard. You’d think that those who save the world should be compensated.”

Kurama chuckled. “Think of it as a civic duty that only you can perform. Saving the world is no easy feat, after all.”

“Yeah!” Kuwabara seemed excited about this prospect. “We’re heroes, Urameshi! We get to do it again. Don’t be such a sourpuss.”

“I’m not upset about this, all right?” Yusuke said. “It’s good to be involved in something again, even though I can’t say I have anything to complain about.”

“How’s Keiko doing?” Botan asked. “She must be looking forward to the baby.”

“Yeah, she’s excited to be a mom. She’ll make a good one.”

“What about you?” Kuwabara said. “Are you ready to be a dad?”

Yusuke shrugged. “We’ll find out.”

Ryohei walked you to your apartment building as he said he would, bid you a good evening, and left. You could tell that he tried to make good conversation during your walk home, though he seemed like he was afraid of silence. You had a feeling that he liked you, but until he did otherwise, you would continue pretending that your relationship was a professional one.

You could pretend to be oblivious to save him the obvious embarrassment when you would not reciprocate his feelings. It was never comfortable, unrequited love.

The first thing you did was take a bath, washing away the weariness of the day’s work.
Although you enjoyed your job, you, like most people, only worked because you had to. If you didn’t need to put food on the table and pay rent, you wouldn’t bother. It wasn’t like your passion for finance was greater than your other aspirations in life.

You sat on the sofa, a takeout box of leftovers in your hand, watching Netflix to round out the night before you went to bed.

It was nice living alone in your small apartment. You were free to be a slob, pushing daily chores out day after day as time and energy allowed. You made it a point to never let tasks sit longer than a week, but during workdays, you could relax.

Your dog, an Akita mix, lay by your side, hogging even your half of the couch. His name was Yugen. He found you several years ago, following you home, and he was the perfect companion. He never barked, never exhibited any aggression. He was not overly fond of visitors, but he deferred to you if you told him that the people were friendly.

Yugen was really all you needed in a roommate. He kept you warm when it was chilly outside, and he ensured that you exercised before and after work. He liked his walks, rain or shine, and you were happy to supply them. He was a medium-sized dog, and you had inserted a dog door into your sliding balcony door so he could go outside to his portable patch of grass anytime he wanted.

You petted Yugen as you finished your evening meal. His pointy ears lifted to the door as though he heard something outside. A soft growl rippled in his throat.

“Settle, boy,” you said.

Yugen relaxed, even though his ears still remained alert.

Later that night, you heard him snapping his jaws at something. When you turned on the light, you couldn’t find the source of his temper. You merely called Yugen to you, directing him to his bed as you climbed back into yours.

Yusuke yawned, stretching his arms out. “Well, it was nice catching up, but I’ve got to get home.”

“Keiko keeps you on a short leash, eh?” Kuwabara said, fighting back a giggle.

“At least I have someone to go home to.”

Kuwabara frowned.

“So when’s Yukina moving in with you?” Botan asked, handing him another soda.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Kuwabara said. “I’m still figuring out this adult life thing. Yukina seems pretty happy on Genkai’s compound, and she doesn’t have to commute to help out.”

“Have you even talked about it?” Yusuke said. “I mean, you have to pop the question eventually, right? Moving in together seems like a logical first step.”

Kurama gave him a knowing glance. “I don’t recall you moving in with Keiko. If I remember, you proposed before even really dating.”

“Hey, we kind of dated our whole childhood.”

“You sure have a strange definition of date,” Botan teased. “My understanding is that you harassed Keiko endlessly when you were kids, and she trailed after you trying to get you back into school.”
“That’s only part of the story,” Yusuke said sheepishly.

“And what’s the other part?” Kuwabara said. "Remember how she lied to teachers for you so you wouldn’t get into trouble? Or how she forced you to study in the library with her before midterms? Or when you were sick, she would bring you homemade meals?“

"Sounds like a gal doing right by her guy to me!“

Botan tipped her head to the side. "Sounds like a one-sided relationship."

"Hey, she didn’t have to marry me."

"I suppose you must have some redeeming qualities, then," Botan mused, pressing a pensive finger to her lips. "I should mention that Keiko once told me that you scared off a group of boys that harassed her and her friends. You also chased down a mailman to help her get something on the delivery truck that she needed to go out that day. You also listened whenever she was upset, letting her cry on your shoulder. My, Yusuke, you are a hero in her eyes!“

"As long as she’s happy," Kurama said. "I suppose that’s all that matters."

Yusuke narrowed his eyes mischievously. "Speaking of making girls happy, what’s her name?"

"Whose name?" Botan asked, leaning into the conversation.

Without skipping a beat, Kurama replied, "Yusuke is referring to one of the advisors in my office. Apparently, he thinks she’s cute."

"Yusuke! How can you say that about a random girl?! What will Keiko think?"

"Yeah!" Kuwabara said. "What will Keiko think?"

"THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT--"

"But it’s what you said," Kurama replied, smoothly. "I quote, ‘She’s cute.’ Or did you forget? It’s only been a few hours."

Yusuke crossed his arms, huffing under his breath. "I mean, she is, but I meant for you."

"For Kurama?" Kuwabara paused. "I don’t think I’ve ever seen you interested in a girl."

"Interest is a strong word," Kurama said. "She’s my subordinate, so a relationship would hardly be appropriate."

Botan looked particularly excited. "Oh, but you can change jobs, can’t you, Kurama? You shouldn’t overlook pursuing a relationship with the perfect someone just because of corporate etiquette."

"Perfect is also a strong word. She’s motivated, clever, and polite with clients -- she handles pressure well and can manage her time independently. I wouldn’t have hired her otherwise, but I’m afraid our relationship is limited to the workplace."

“Well, I think you should ask her out anyway,” Yusuke said, picking up his jacket at the door. “Take it from me -- I asked Keiko to marry me until she said yes. It worked eventually.” He grinned and then left.

“Oh, Yusuke,” Botan sighed. She turned to Kurama as the door shut. “Do you like her at all?”
“As an employee, yes. I’m unsure why this is so important to you.”

“It’s important because every guy needs to find his better half,” Kuwabara said. “Urameshi has Keiko, I have Yukina, and Hiei’s hopeless. But you still have a chance to find where that pinky string leads.”

“Pinky string?”

“Yeah, the red pinky string of love! It’s destiny!”

“I see.”

Botan shoved Kuwabara toward the door. “To each their own! As interested as I am in hearing about your romantic escapades, you do whatever makes you happy, Kurama. Have a good night, now! We’ll see you tomorrow!”

Kurama sighed. “What did I ever do to deserve such nosy friends?”

You came into the office the next morning feeling refreshed by the misty rain. You shook out your umbrella by the door, tucking it in the holder outside.

“Morning,” you said as soon as you stepped inside.

“Hello, _____,” Rita, the receptionist, said. “My mother-in-law just came back from Europe. She brought some tea with her, which I’ve left in the breakroom, if you’d like to try some.”

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to it!” Curious, you wandered into the breakroom, deciding that tea was the perfect way to start the morning.

“Good morning, _____,” Shuichi said. “Were you looking for this?” He handed you a cup of steaming tea.

“I was, actually. Thank you.” It smelled of a fine earl grey, fragrant and deep. You accepted the cup, perplexed at just how perceptive Shuichi was. You thought at first that he might be offering you his, but there was yet another filled cup on the table. “How did you know?”

“You always arrive at exactly 7:30 in the morning, and the first thing you do is select a tea from the collection in your office. Since Rita has been kindly offering hers this morning, I knew you’d be interested.”

“I certainly appreciate your foresight. You saved me a couple minutes of productivity.”

“Well, the secret of getting ahead is getting started.”

“Mark Twain?”

“Yes.” Shuichi seemed to perk up at your response. “You’re familiar with his works?”

“I studied literature in college.”

“I thought you were a finance major.”

“I was. I studied literature for the fun of it.”

Shuichi chuckled. “Though I enjoy it, literature has always been my weakest subject in school.”
“If at your weakest, you’re quoting Mark Twain off the top of your head, I’m daunted by your strongest. What was your favorite subject?” You sipped carefully at your tea, careful not to burn your tongue.

“Not a surprise considering our line of work, but I enjoyed math.”

“That does sound perfect for a financial advisor.” You remembered you had a busy day ahead of you. “I should prepare for my first appointment. Thank you for the tea, and have a great rest of your day!”

“You, as well.” He watched you leave, the gaze in his eyes pensive. He never asked anyone for advice because he never thought he would take it, but his friends’ unsolicited opinions of last night made him wonder.

“Shuichi, can I have a moment of your time?”

He turned around, only to see Ryohei, one of his financial advisors. Ryohei was another hard worker, a numbers-oriented employee who found pure joy in analysis; he was, without a doubt, a valuable asset to the company. “Of course, Ryohei. Let’s step into my office.”

Shuichi led the way, opening the door for Ryohei. “Please have a seat,” he said. He shut the door behind them before sitting down behind his desk. “Now, what can I help you with, Ryohei?”

“I was curious about something.”

“Yes?”

“It’s not explicitly written in the employee handbook…” Ryohei looked uncomfortable.

Shuichi was silent, prompting him to continue.

“I wanted to ask about our company policy on employee relationships in the workplace.”
This one is a little slow, so I apologize. I want to make sure that I’m pacing the chapters appropriately. One of my reader-insert/fanfiction pet peeves is when the pairing rushes into a relationship with no rhyme or reason. Of course, given how cautious Kurama is, he would take it quite slowly, I would think.

Thank you for reading! As always, if you enjoy this, please consider leaving me some feedback. I'm always up for a conversation about Kurama!

Since the financial industry was dominated by men, and especially at such a small firm, Shuichi had never been concerned with employee relationships. Before _____ was hired, the two women employed, Rita and Ginger, were already married.

However, now that she was here, a young, attractive, and single woman, the company culture was sure to be tested.

Shuichi folded his hands on his desk. “I think it’s wise to proceed with caution,” he said. “You intend to ask Miss _____ out?”

“I figured you’d know,” Ryohei said, straightening his glasses. “Nothing gets past you.”

“Far be it from me to dictate your personal lives, but I do expect professionalism at work.”

“I understand.”

“If I forbid it, is it purely for the purpose of company policy?” Shuichi thought. “Would it protect our company culture and business? Or would that mean losing a good employee? Encouraging dishonesty? Letting frustrations fester?”

Briefly, his thoughts fluttered to _____ . Those he hired exemplified professionalism. They wouldn’t take advantage of a lax policy. Ryohei was responsible enough to ask, and _____ was careful and modest.

“I'll contact HR to have a clause listed in the employee handbook,” Shuichi said. “Employee relationships are fine so long as they do not impact day-to-day activities and services to our clients. If, however, problems arise, I will have our HR department step in.”

“Thank you, Shuichi!” Ryohei stood, a grin wide on his face. “There will be no problems, I guarantee it!”

“Very well. Is that all you have for me? If so, you’re dismissed.”

You worked hard all morning, and when lunchtime rolled around, you were feeling ready for a break. There was an indoor market within walking distance of the office, and you often went there for a quick bite to eat when you needed some fresh air.
You wrapped a scarf around your neck, picked up your purse, and put on your jacket. As you headed toward the front door, Ryohei joined you. “Hi, _____,” he said. “How was your morning?”

“Good,” you replied. “How are you?”

“I’m well. Would you like to grab some lunch?”

“Sure,” you said, not thinking anything of it. “I was going to run to the marketplace.” This wasn’t the first time that you had lunch with a coworker, and since Ryohei did much of your training, you spent a lot of time with him.

“That sounds good to me. I could go for some udon.”

You remembered to take your umbrella as you stepped outside. While it wasn’t raining right now, the skies were grey. “I’m just happy to get out of here for a while.”

“Yeah? What happened?”

“Oh, it’s nothing serious. I just have a client who’s likely to run out of money by age 82, given her current spending. Her health is good, so she’ll probably live longer than that. No matter how much I try to impress upon her that she needs to cut back, I can’t seem to get through to her.”

“You just do what you can,” Ryohei said. “I’ve been in advice for years now, and you can only help a client so much. You collect the data, run the numbers, and give advice, but that’s it. They have to execute it.”

You nodded. “I know, but it’s hard not to take it personally. I can’t imagine what it’ll be like for this client in twenty years, though, when she doesn’t have any money to take care of herself. She refuses to go back to work or spend less, so we’re out of options.”

“She can win the lottery.”

“Yes, I’ll tell her to do just that.”

“Alternatively, she can die sooner.”

“What an idea!” you said, unable to hold back a laugh.

“She likes to spend money on vacations, doesn’t she? They all do. Tell her to do risky things, like bungee jumping or skydiving. Or she can pick up a smoking habit. That ought to help increase her success rate.”

“I’m sure this is the type of advice she’s paying me for.”

“She won’t get it from any other financial firm in town.”

As you walked, Ryohei started going into complex tax strategies that he used today, and while this normally would have interested you as it was helpful information, you weren’t feeling up to learning right now. You watched the people in the crowd, the busy traffic, the puddles that formed on the sidewalks.

It was hard to believe that this was your life. You didn’t hate it -- far from it, in fact, but you wished that there was a little more awaiting you when you awoke in the morning.

You knocked at the door frame, rapping just twice. “Shuichi, I have a question for you.”
He looked up from his desk. “How can I help, _____?”

“I was wondering how you’d handle this situation.” You stepped inside of his office, a folder in hand. “I had an appointment with the Yamamotos today, and they have some concerns.”

“How so?”

You began to talk, articulating your clients’ situation as clearly as you could. You had no idea that observant Shuichi was only half-listening.

He was thinking of the Makai insects. They were hard to ignore, even though he realized that most people couldn’t see them. He figured that until he heard screams in the office, everything was fine to the human eye, at least. “They do like her, don’t they?” he thought, noticing that several were buzzing around your shoulders.

You, of course, were blissfully unaware. “So what do you think?”

“I think you should call the Yamamoto’s agent, the one who sold them the annuity product. Get an idea of any fees and surrender charges, and try to understand the product, the riders, the limitations. Annuities are confusing for a reason -- if a client doesn’t understand them, it’s easier to make a sale. See if you can get them out of it.”

“You think? I know annuities aren’t always the best product, and I know this one in particular probably isn’t a good one. But considering how much the Yamamotos struggle with maintaining a budget, the income might be helpful.”

“It’s your call, ______. That’s why you’re the advisor.”

You sighed. “But it’s so hard when it’s my call. They’re depending on me, and I want to make the right decision. Sometimes I wish things were a little more black and white. There can be so many shades of grey.”

“Hardly anything in life is easily defined. Spectrums allow you to question everything you believe in. It’s not always easy, but little is.”

You paused for a moment. “That sounds more like a life lesson and less of a financial planning one.”

Shuichi chuckled. “I suppose it could be interpreted that way.”

“I like it that way,” you said. “It’s important to take what you learn every day, regardless of what it is, and apply it as judiciously as you can tomorrow. It’s how you develop and grow as a person; I wonder if it’s just human nature to evolve and adapt.”

“I can appreciate that. I think you may be right.”

“But do you ever wonder if you’ve maybe missed a few lessons along the way? Sometimes, in hindsight, I feel that I should have realized things sooner. It’s always so obvious on second thought, and I wonder how I might have saved myself the trouble.”

“I imagine most everyone has felt that way at one time or another. But I don’t think that lamenting the past, aside from reflection, lends you much advantage in the long run. A tragic hero may do less good than he intends. Even Aristotle, a lover of tragic heroes, considers them men of immense misfortune, subject to their own errors in judgment. Imagine them crying bitter tears over their past mistakes. Would it not be better for them to simply move on?”
"First Mark Twain, then Aristotle. Literature and philosophy. Your knowledge is impressive, Shuichi."

“Only if applicable to daily conversations and tasks,” he said, the gaze in his eyes seemingly coy. “What use is knowledge if you can’t employ it?”

“And modest, too! You always know what to say to make me feel better. Thank you. I’ll give you an update on the Yamamotos whenever I see them next.”

“Good luck, ______.”

“Oh, and Shuichi?”

“Yes?”

“Do you know what’s going on with Ryohei?” you asked. “I went to lunch with him today, and he’s more talkative than usual, though I sense that he’s nervous about something, too. I hope everything is okay.”

“Perhaps you should ask him.”

“I know I should,” you said with a sigh. “I just prefer to go into conversations with a little bit of insight at least.”

He gave you a small smile. “I’ll tell you this -- Ryohei has been working with me for years now. He’s an honest person. If you strike a conversation with him, he will tell you the truth to the best of his ability.”

“To the best of his ability?”

“I can’t account for his social skills.”

You laughed. “Touché. I suppose he can be a bit awkward in the best of times. Thank you, Shuichi. Your advice is appreciated.”

As she left his office, he found himself looking after her again. It wasn’t the way she walked or the heels she wore. It wasn’t her hair or the scent of perfume left in her wake. It wasn’t the perfect fit of her skirt or the neckline on her blouse. Kurama was touched by her genuine concern for others -- for both her clients and coworkers.

“Such kindness... truly a rarity in this world,” he thought.

He tore his gaze away back to his desk, where he was to finish his analysis. There were still a few hours left in the day. Fortunately, he had no client appointments. He preferred to keep his Fridays open, and that was perfect for the investigation this coming weekend.

He’d better get to work.

You were typing away on the computer, compiling notes before you left for the night. You didn’t want to come in on a Saturday, after all.

You had thought about your conversation with Shuichi. He was so well-spoken, calm, and perceptive. You wondered how he managed his day-to-day thoughts -- he must have had so many of them!
A knock sounded at your door, and you looked up. Ryohei stood there, one hand on the frame of the door, the other in his pocket. “____,” he greeted. “How are you doing?”

“I’m well,” you said. “Just wrapping up before the weekend. What about you?”

“I’m done, actually. I wanted to see if you need help with anything before I got going.”

“That’s sweet of you. I’m okay, though. Just some notes, and I’ll be done.”

“All right.” Ryohei stepped inside. “I was wondering something, _____.”

“Hm?” You were still typing, the keys clacking away. Your goal was to not waste any time, and multitasking was your forte.

“Do you have any plans this weekend?”

You stopped, looking up at him. He seemed to have frozen, his gaze on the floor and not on you. It was in this moment that you realized your apprehensions about Ryohei were true. Nevertheless, you couldn’t bear to turn him down before giving him a chance -- that would seem unfair, wouldn’t it? “My Saturday afternoon is free,” you said, allowing yourself a way out for the rest of the weekend.

“You wanna go out for lunch? I mean, it’s not unusual that we go for lunch during the week, but we could go someplace nicer.”

“What do you have in mind?”

”Um, well, anything you’d like! We could go to Aspen Pines or Masa…“

”You know, I’m not sure fine dining really suits me,” you started, trying to keep this as casual as possible. ”I do like that small brunch place near the lakefront called Café Dewey. Have you heard of it?”

”I think I might have passed it before -- it looks nice.“ Ryohei grinned. ”I suppose the boardwalk will be fun, too, on a Saturday afternoon.”

”Yeah, I just like the breeze and walking along the shoreline. It’s so peaceful.”

”That all sounds great. Why don’t we meet at your place around 11:00 a.m.? Your apartment is on the way.”

”I’ll see you then, Ryohei. Have a good night!”

”Bye, _____!” He left your office, his spirits high.

You breathed out a sigh. It wasn’t relief necessarily, but you felt as though romance wasn’t a priority right now. You wanted to find yourself before you began your journey to look for your better half. It seemed like the logical first step.

Of course, when it came to matters of love and business, nothing was logical.
Longing

Chapter Notes

I promise the next chapter will have more Kurama interaction with the reader. ;)

Meanwhile, thank you for the kudos and the comments! If it's not too much to ask, any feedback or thoughts are much appreciated! Knowing what you guys think is really inspiring!

Saturdays were always busy, no matter where you went. That was why you didn’t usually go out. The bustling of the city was of little appeal to you, and you preferred to stay home with your Akita mix, Yugen.

But today, you had promised to go to lunch with Ryohei, so you would. You picked out a casual outfit, something not indicative of a date but not sloppy or unkempt either. You did your hair, your makeup, and ensured that you were freshened up for the afternoon. As promised, Ryohei arrived at your apartment at 11:00, and the both of you were off.

“Nice dog you have there,” he said. Yugen had chosen not to go anywhere near him, but he was clearly protective of you.

“Thanks. I know it sounds cliché, but he’s my best friend.”

“You know, I was never allowed a dog growing up, so I never had that feeling. Even the stray dogs, my parents chased away.”

“Yugen was a stray, too,” you explained. “He just followed me home one day, and we’ve been together ever since.”

“You train him yourself?”

“I would, but he’s required no training. He came with all of his manners. He sits at the door before I open it, never jumps on me or guests, never barks unless there’s someone outside my apartment. He never snatches food from my hands or the table or has any house-training issues. He’s really the perfect dog.”

“Wow, lucky you! Do you ever take him to the park?”

“Yes, nearly every day, but just for walks. He has no interest in other dogs or people or even fetch. He really just bonded with me, I guess.”

“He probably appreciates you for giving him a home.”

“I’d like to think so,” you said. As you cleared a building, revealing the late morning sky, you saw colored shapes fluttering in the wind. “Oh, look! It looks like people are flying kites today!”

Ryohei smiled. “I used to do that with my brothers. The wind sure picks up in the fall, doesn’t it?”

“I love the autumn,” you said. “I like to see the leaves change color. People are outside enjoying
the breeze -- it’s like the humidity and heat of summer have melted away.”

“Well, maybe we can go rent a kite for the day or something.”

“That could be fun!” You could smell the water in the air -- the lake was near. “But first, I’m starving. I haven’t eaten yet today, and I could use some brunch!”

“Ugh, these insects are disgusting,” Botan said as she walked. “It’s a good thing that these humans can’t see them. Otherwise, they’d probably riot!”

“Tell me about it.” Yusuke casually swatted one away. “Can’t even enjoy a nice, sunny day.”

Kuwabara walked next to him, hands shoved into his pockets. The expression on his face was serious, his eyes narrowed. “I feel like I’m breathing in antennae and nasty bug legs,” he murmured. “The sooner we get rid of them, the better.”

Kurama was quiet, sharing the same sentiments as his friends. Still, the mystery of it all intrigued him and gave him a sense of purpose he had long forgotten.

“I do have some new findings for you from Spirit World,” Botan said. “Our scientists have extracted genetic material from these insects to study. As soon as a single one finds the target, all of them are programmed to return to Demon World.”

“So they’re not going to poison him or inject him with some sort of disease?” Kuwabara asked. “That doesn’t seem to make any sense.”

“If the target is someone they merely wish to locate, then relaying information serves that purpose,” Kurama said. “Perhaps the instigators will decide what to do later.”

“That’s right,” Botan said. “We think that’s the strategy. So if you see any insects buzzing around like they are now, they haven’t found their target.”

“Sounds like you still know nothing about this person,” Yusuke said.

“Not yet. We found the energy print that has been programmed into their genetic code, but it doesn’t match up to anything feasible in our records -- of course, this doesn’t mean anything as there are plenty of demons in the pits of Makai whose energy Spirit World hasn’t been able to document. All we know is that they are specifically looking for a demon, not a human.”

“That doesn’t help much,” Kuwabara said. “If they know who they’re looking for and even have an energy print but still can’t find him, I don’t know where to even start.”

“How about the lakefront?” Yusuke said. They had finally arrived, the late morning bustling with visitors. The insects were everywhere, swarming about, wings fluttering as they buzzed from oblivious person to person.

You finished your brunch, setting down your fork. The specialty waffles at Café Dewey were the best -- crispy on the outside and soft on the inside. They came drizzled in syrup, sliced fruit and berries tossed together, a generous dollop of fresh whipped cream on top. On the side, you had eggs, any way you liked them, and breakfast potatoes, and even bacon or sausage, if you wanted.

Ryohei wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Wow! This is probably the best meal I’ve had in a long time. How did you find this place?”
“It’s not exactly hard to find. It’s right near the lake, one of the most popular spots in the city.”

“I guess you’re right. I wonder why I’ve never seen it before.”

“Do you come here often?”

“I suppose not.”

“Well, then that’s probably why. I love walking along the lake. I come here with Yugen in the evenings sometimes. It’s beautiful.”

“Do you have a lot of friends in the area?”

“Most of my friends are back in my hometown. I moved here for work by myself.”

“Why not find something back there?”

“I suppose I’d been feeling too comfortable,” you said, noticing that your waitress was heading your way. “I wanted to try something different. Mediocrity really plagues you after a while.”

“I can’t imagine being bored. There’s always so much to do between work and taking care of the apartment. By the time you spend some time in front of the TV or on the computer, the day is over.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” the waitress said, setting your bill down.

You saw Ryohei reach for his wallet. “Let me get that,” he said.

“Oh, no,” you said, opening your purse. “Let’s split it.”

“It’s fine -- my treat, _______. I was the one who proposed grabbing lunch.”

You sighed. “All right, but I get the next one.” You mentally winced. “Did I just imply that there’s going to be a next time?”

He seemed satisfied with your answer. “You know, I’ve never met anyone like you,” he said. “The financial industry can be unforgiving. It’s intimidating in some ways. The possibilities are always endless. There is never a ‘right’ answer, per se, as all the advice you give comes in shades of grey.”

“I’ve noticed,” you said. “Advice can get complicated fast.”

“But you’re one of the fastest learners I’ve ever met. You’re quick on your feet to understand concepts, and your clients love you.”

“I suppose money management is only one half of the equation -- the other is people management. I think they’re equally difficult.”

“That’s why we need more women in the finance industry. I think women are generally great with the relationship-building. It’s not all about the numbers, and if you can get people to trust you, you’re already halfway there.”

The waitress returned for his credit card. “I’ll be right back,” she said.

“Well, you’re right,” you said, going back to your conversation. “I’m just here to make things work, and it’s all a work in progress currently.”
“That’s fair.”

“But I think spending the weekend talking about work kind of defeats the purpose of time off, don’t you think?”

“Oh, sorry,” Ryohei said, his cheeks turning pink. “I guess I do talk a lot about work, huh?”

“It means you’re passionate. I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

“Well, we don’t have to talk about it anymore! I’m actually more interested in learning about you outside of work. Why don’t we go for a walk after this?”

You nodded. “I like that idea.”

“These insects don’t seem to be concentrated on anyone in particular,” Yusuke said. “They’re just buzzing around like the losers they are.”

“They’re following a genetic program,” Kurama said. “We’re watching for outlying patterns in their movement, their tendencies, anything that might be out of the ordinary.”

“I feel like we’re searching for a needle in a haystack.”

“It does seem like that, doesn’t it?” Botan sighed. “I’m sorry, boys. We’re doing the best that we can.”

Kurama looked toward the lake. It was a beautiful blue, the water rolling with the wind that carried the autumn chill. Children played with one another, laughter in the air, some of them flying kites, others kicking soccer balls around. Joggers came through, some of them with dogs, some of them running in pairs. Couples, many elderly, came through for a leisurely walk. He saw a younger couple out of the corner of his eye, a young man -- why, that was Ryohei! And, with him, _____.

For a moment, Kurama thought to continue along his way. There was nothing to see here. The romantic lives of others did not interest him.

But he couldn’t quite look away. It was different than watching Yusuke and Keiko, hand in hand, running along the beach. It was different than watching Yukina heal Kuwabara after an arduous fight, the chemistry a clear match between them. It was different than watching his mother and now-stepfather on their wedding day, exchanging vows and golden rings.

He didn’t quite understand why it was so different, but it made him feel a sense of longing.

A mischievous glint came alive in Yusuke's eyes as he crept up behind Kurama. “Isn't that the cute girl from your office?”

“Your observation skills are keen.”

“Hey,” Kuwabara said, draping an arm around Kurama’s neck. “You’re right! She is cute!”

“For the record, I never said that.”

“Oh, really?” Botan said, immediately interested, unable to resist the opportunity to be involved in her friends’ love affairs. “She is pretty, isn’t she? But who’s that young man she’s with?”

“Another one of my advisors,” Kurama said. “They seem to be on a date.”
“On a date? I thought you were wooing her,” Kuwabara said. “Looks like you’re going to need more help than you let on.”

“Maybe not,” Botan said. “She doesn’t seem all that interested in him.”

“What makes you think that?” Yusuke said. “They’re walking right next to each other, practically shoulder to shoulder. She’s smiling.”

“But it’s not a real smile,” she replied. “She’s not making eye contact -- she’s focused on the lake.”

“So? She might just want to look at the stupid lake.”

“Oh, come on, Urameshi!” Kuwabara said, a disapproving expression on his face. “Botan’s right! Your girl skills are seriously defective. I’m surprised Keiko puts up with you at all.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Since when did you become the female expert?”

“Since way longer than you, bonehead!” Kuwabara puffed up, gesturing toward the couple. “Just look at them! They may be walking next to one another, but her body’s angled away from him. He’s just talking at her. She’s not interested in him.”

“Well, Kuwabara. I have to get your some credit -- sounds like you learned from experience.”

“Damn it, Urameshi! Just because I’m better at you at understanding the girls doesn’t mean that you can just stick your nose up to my advice!”

“Quiet now,” Kurama said. “Let’s not attract too much attention. We’ve wasted enough time already.” He continued walking, turning away from the topics of conversation. Hopefully, the others would follow and leave his personal life in peace.

“Kurama’s right,” Botan said. “Come along, boys. We’ve got plenty of searching to do. Kuwabara? What’s wrong?”

“That girl,” he said, his stare intense. “The moment she sat down, those insects swarmed around her. That’s not quite right, huh?”

“It is unusual.” Botan pursed her lips, following Kuwabara’s example. “But the Makai insects haven’t dispersed yet. That means she can’t be the person they’re looking for. Her energy print doesn’t match up with the one in their programming.”

Kurama rejoined the conversation, now interested. “I noticed that in the office,” he said. “The swarming did not happen to this degree, but that could be attributed to location. Is it possible that her energy print is merely similar to that of the target?”

“I suppose. I’ll have to take that up with Koenma to see what he and our Spirit World scientists know, but I wouldn’t count it out as a possibility. It is a little odd that she’d have energy prints similar to that of a demon.”

“Well, get out of here,” Yusuke said. “Sounds like we might have a lead. Let’s see if that pint-sized prince can use this information.”

“Right,” Botan said, an oar appearing from her fingertips. “I’d best leave now. Toodles!”
You were glad to be home, on your doorstep at least. It was late in the afternoon, a bit longer than you wanted to be out this Saturday.

“I had a great time, _____,” Ryohei said. “I hope you did, too.”

“I always enjoy the lake,” you said, reaching for your keys. “Thank you for inviting me out.”

“Thanks for coming.” He adjusted his glasses, looking away. “So, I was wondering… um… well, I talked with Shuichi yesterday.”

“What about Shuichi? He’s our boss, so I’d hope you’d have a word with him every once in a while.”

Ryohei chuckled. “Well, yeah. I was really concerned about employee policy.”

“Employee policy?”

“For, you know.” He looked uncomfortable. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that I really like you. You’re the most interesting woman I’ve ever met.”

“You must meet a lot of boring people, then,” you thought, your heart beating quickly. You knew you couldn’t return his feelings, and at this point, you wanted to be honest about it. “I’m not really sure what to say, Ryohei. That’s sweet of you to think that about me, but I don’t know if that’s true.”

“But it is!” he said. “I told you this earlier, but I’ve never met anyone else like you.”

“Oh, come on. I’m not that unique,” you said, the cogs in your head turning. How could you save him some embarrassment while getting your point across? “I’m sure I’m not the only person out there who isn’t looking for a relationship right now.”

“O-oh, I-I guess that’s a legitimate way to feel.” He gave you a small, awkward smile.

“So what did you want to tell me about your conversation with Shuichi?” A chance to rescue himself.

“W-well, I-I, um.” Ryohei paused for a moment. “I-I asked him about friendships at work and if he thinks they interfere with our services to clients. We have good conversations, but if we’re neglecting our clients, I suppose we need to tone it done.”
“That’s all?” you said, twirling your keychain around your index finger. “I don’t think it’ll cause a problem, Ryohei. I’ve always believed that the better friends you are with you coworkers, the better you collaborate.”

“I guess that’s true.” He cleared his throat, touching his glasses again, though they didn’t need any adjusting. “I should probably get going, _____. Have a good night.”

“Goodnight, Ryohei.” You unlocked your door, stepping inside and shutting it. Your back to the door, your breathed a sigh of relief. At least, that was over. You felt bad that you couldn’t return Ryohei’s feelings, but you were relieved that he understood.

Yugen sat in front of you in greeting, his bottom on the ground, tail wagging slowly back and forth.

“Hello,” you said, kneeling down to pet him around the neck. “Oh, you’re such a good boy. What would I do without you?”

He seemed to smile back, his eyes reflecting a genuine love and concern.

“We don’t deserve dogs, do we?” You ruffled the fur on his head. “Come on, let’s go crash on the couch!”

_____________________________________

“Well, hello! Have you got room for one more?”

“Botan, hey! You’re back!” Kuwabara scooted into the booth, taking his burger with him. “How’d you find us so quickly?”

“I figured you’d be hungry, and this was the nearest bistro. It’s not hard when you’re following someone beholden to his stomach.”

“What did you discover in Spirit World?” Kurama asked.

“Koenma confirmed your theory, Kurama. It is completely possible that the Makai insects are honing in on our lady because her energy is similar to that of the target.”

“And what can cause that?” Yusuke asked. “Are they related?”

“Energy doesn’t quite work that way,” Botan said. “When you look at a human’s DNA, you’re looking at biology -- the natural science of living organisms, including chemical processes and molecular structures. Energy is different. It’s not biological -- it’s metaphysical, whether we’re talking about spirit, demon, or even celestial energy. You wouldn’t necessarily have energy similarities with your mother or father, or even a twin sibling.”

“Then how is knowing that this chick’s energy is similar to what the insects are looking for useful information?”

The waitress came by, noticing that Botan had arrived. “What can I get you, sweetie?” she asked.

“Oh, just a strawberry milkshake, thank you!”

“Be right back, sweetie.”

As soon as the waitress was out of earshot, Kurama said, “There are other phenomena that explain similarities between energy aside from chance, the most likely being exposure. If you spend significant time around someone, it’s possible that some of his or her energy could rub off, so to speak, on you. The amount of energy is usually modest, but it looks like these insects are
especially sensitive, and as we all know, one thing leads to another. That may also explain why her energy print has traces of demon energy.”

“Bingo!” Botan said. “There must be a demon in her life or something else going on. Ever since the kekkai barrier came down, there are sure to be demons hiding in Living World. So, really, we need to hone in on our lady to find our next lead.”

“Well, Kurama’s all over that,” Yusuke said with a grin. “Now he’s got an excuse to go on a date.”

“I will not date her to merely use her,” Kurama said, his tone firmer than usual.

“You don’t have to, fox boy. Date her because you like her. Maybe because she deserves someone like you. She clearly didn’t like that other guy.”

“Kurama,” Botan started, an especially nosy look on her face. “You wouldn’t be opposed to telling us her name, would you? I’m tired of referring to her as our lady, and Yusuke calling her a ‘chick’ seems a little demeaning.”

“Her name is _____,” he said. “Respect her. She doesn’t deserve to get involved in this.”

“I see you already have a soft spot for her,” Kuwabara said, while shoveling french fries into his mouth.

“The same respect I’d have for any human being.”

“Well, someone needs to learn about who she might be associated with,” Botan said. “You certainly don’t have to ask her out, Kurama, but I think we can all agree that you’re in the best position to procure information.”

“I agree,” he replied. “And I will.”

The waitress arrived with Botan’s milkshake. “Here you go, sweetie. Enjoy.”

“So what’s the deal?” Kuwabara asked. “What’re you going to do?”

“Find some common ground, I suppose,” Kurama said. “Pick her brain. Follow her around, if need be. Discreetly, of course.”

“You know where she lives?”

“As her direct supervisor, I have access to that information, yes.”

Kuwabara giggled, much like he did in junior high. “The way you say that sounds kinda naughty.”

“I won’t abuse it,” Kurama said, feeling a little indignant at the implication.

“We know you wouldn’t,” Botan said. “I wish you luck. I suppose you’ll start on Monday, then?”

“The secret to getting ahead is getting started.”

“You sound like you’re excited for your first date,” Yusuke said.

As his friends laughed among themselves, Kurama wondered if he should share with them the origin of that quote. “No,” he thought. “They wouldn’t appreciate it.” His thoughts fluttered to _____ . It was a warm feeling.
Yugen walked besides you in a perfect heel, trotting as you moved briskly, allowing the morning air to fill your lungs. You didn’t need a leash for your dog as he never strayed, but it was required by law, so you kept a loose one on his collar, letting it merely loop around your fingers.

The autumn leaves crunched beneath you feet as they had not yet been swept away by wind or broom. No one seemed to mind, the colors a beautiful palette among the park’s paved paths. Cyclists raced through, sending the leaves away in a flurry, while children squealed as they chased one another in avid play.

As you walked, Yugen’s ears perked up, and he turned his head to the left. You noticed that he had slowed down, and you looked to see what had caught his eye. You saw two people sitting on a bench, one of whom you recognized: Shuichi and a lady friend. Their hair colors brightly contrasted one another.

You considered moving on, but it seemed that Shuichi has already saw you. 

“Oh, hello,” you said, heading in their direction. “What are you doing here?”

“Good morning, _____,” Shuichi said. “What a coincidental meeting. My friend Botan came for a visit this weekend. I was showing her the beauty of Green Acre Park. I remember you saying that you had an Akita mix -- Yugen, was it?”

“Yes, that’s his name. You remembered. I’m sorry, but he’s actually not too friendly with people, so you probably don’t want to pet him.” You touched your dog’s neck -- he seemed to relax now that he understood that these strangers were okayed by you. “He was the one who noticed you, actually. I’m afraid I would have walked past the both of you. I’m _____, by the way.”

Botan accepted your outstretched hand, a welcoming smile in her eyes. “Hello, _____! It’s so good to meet you!”

“Your hair,” you said. “It’s so unique. How did you get such a wonderful shade of blue?”

“Oh, I like you already!” she said. “Shuichi and I were just about to get some coffee. Would you like to join?”

“I wouldn’t want to impose--”

“No, no! No imposition whatsoever! Shuichi was actually talking to me about his work and how he has such a keen advisor named _____ on his team.” Botan had already begun to corral you toward the nearest park café.

You looked at Shuichi. “You were talking about me? Good things, I hope.”

Shuichi gave you a small smile. “I didn’t have anything negative to say. Your attention to detail is impressive.”

“I learned from the best, so you're actually complimenting yourself.”

“If I remember correctly, Ryohei did most of your training.”

“He did. I learned a lot from him.”

“Did you ever discover why he seemed so anxious?”

You looked at Yugen, thinking quickly. “Yes, actually. Ryohei had a new tax strategy in mind, and
he was so excited about it. You know how he gets when he's about to implement something like that.” Your outing yesterday together was Ryohei’s story to tell, not yours. You certainly wouldn't want to embarrass him.

“I see.” Shuichi looked pensive for a moment. “That is quite like him.”

Botan walked on your right side, leaning close to you. “So where are you from, _____?”

“I'm actually from here originally. My family moved to a small town called Naiyukima south of here when I was just a toddler. You've probably never even heard of Naiyukima. It's primarily a farming village. My father is a well-known produce broker, and he wanted to spend some time away from the city, overseeing the agriculture.”

“Oh wow,” Botan said. “You went to school there?”

“Well, Naiyukima isn't known for its academics. I was homeschooled when I was young, and as soon as I was old enough, my parents sent me to Kokoroma for junior high and onward. I lived with my mom's best friend.”

“Interesting upbringing. You must have met a lot of people!”

You were caught off guard by her strange comment. “I suppose so. I know people from both Naiyukima and Kokoroma. Where are you from, Botan?”

“Oh, I live here, just on the other side of town. I don't usually get to see Shuichi and decided that this was a good weekend to visit.”

“I'm sure you're having a wonderful time. I love this area. How did you meet?”

“We're old friends,” Shuichi said. “We've known each other since junior high. You remember Yusuke, don't you? He introduced us.”

“Oh, yes! The one with the noodle cart!”

Botan laughed. “He does love that cart, doesn't he? His father-in-law wants him to inherit the restaurant, but Yusuke just can't stand being inside anywhere for too long.”

“I can't blame him. I'm sure it's hot and sweaty in those kitchens. But more importantly, he’s doing something that he enjoys.”

“Do you enjoy your work, _____?”

“You’re asking me this in front of my boss?”

“No, you're welcome to stay,” you said. Turning back to Botan, you gave her a cheeky grin. “He's dreadful. Absolutely dreadful. Gives me too much freedom, solid advice and guidance, and, well, he hired me. That's a complete error in judgment right there.”

Botan giggled. “You know,” she said, “for the time that I've known Shuichi, I don't think I've ever heard him say or do the wrong thing. In some ways, I suppose you could say he's Mr. Right!”

Shuichi redirected the conversation gracefully. “I don't believe Botan has had her morning coffee yet. There's the café up ahead.”
“He’s a spoil-sport, too,” Botan whispered to you.

“I heard that.”

Botan laughed sheepishly. “And has incredible hearing!”


“Hot with plenty of sugar and milk, please!”

“Yes, tea would be wonderful. Whatever they have is fine,” you said.

Shuichi nodded and headed into the cafe, while you and Botan found a small table on the patio.

“So you’ve known Shuichi for a long time, haven’t you?” you said.

“Oh, yes, we’re close.”

“I see.”

“But not like that!”

“Like what? I wasn’t implying anything.”

Botan waved her hand casually. “Oh, you know what I mean. Shuichi is a private person. He says very little about his personal life, but he speaks highly of you.”

You looked away, petting Yugen on the head. “That’s nice of him. I think our relationship is purely professional.”

“You said he was a dreadful boss,” she joked.

“I do like his easy-going sense of humor.”

“But, really, what do you think of him?”

“Me?” You were taken aback. Here was a complete stranger asking about your feelings toward your supervisor. Whatever you said now would probably make its way back to Shuichi, so you chose your words carefully. “I like working for him. He’s better than other bosses I’ve had. He’s fair and well-spoken, and he’s intelligent. We can have interesting conversations. I’ve noticed that he’s also compassionate and respects everyone in the office, no matter their position. I really value that in a person.”

“You’re right,” Botan said. “We have a pretty jolly group of friends, and I’m sure we all think of him the same way.”

“Your group of friends sound close to one another.”

“We are. We’ve been through a lot together.”

You smiled. It was a touching sentiment, the way she said it. “So what do you do for a living, Botan?”

“I’m a guide of sorts.”

“What does that entail?”
“Um, well, I help people find their way when they’re lost. Hehe!”

“What Botan means to say is that she’s a tour guide for the capital,” Shuichi said, returning with a small tray of steaming drinks. He handed Botan her coffee, and placed the tray on the table. “I ordered a blackberry jasmine and a classic oolong. Your choice, _____."

You looked at the two cups before you. “Oh, wow! They both sound great. I’d be happy with either -- what would you prefer?”

“I’m in the same boat as you are.”

“I’d like to try the blackberry jasmine, if you don’t mind,” you said, reaching for it. “I’ve never heard of such a combination before.”

“Be my guest.”

Botan sipped her coffee, holding it between her hands to ward away the cold. “So do you live with anyone, ____?”

“Just Yugen. Friends come over from out of town every once in a while, but otherwise I live by myself. It’s a nice one bedroom apartment. Small, but cozy. It’s close to work, so the commute is short.”

“It sounds like you’d prefer not to have a roommate,” Shuichi said.

You shrugged your shoulders. “I do enjoy the privacy. I got along with my roommate in college, but not everyone is as respectful as her. I’m not opposed to a roommate -- I just have to find the right one. Do you live by yourself?”

“Yes, I have an apartment to myself. My step-brother comes to visit sometimes, especially when he’s interested in my work. He’s still trying to decide whether to follow in his father’s footsteps or strike off and find his own career.”

“I suppose a lot of young adults come to those crossroads at some point.”

“Speaking of children and their parents, do you see your family often?” Botan asked.

“I go back and visit them from time to time. Obviously, I don’t really have the room to host here, so I have to head back to Naiyukima to see them. They have an amazing house in the countryside there. Even though I love the city, I also like the simplicity of Naiyukima. It’s a slower lifestyle.”

“It sounds lovely. I do love being surrounded by nature.”

“What about you, Botan? Do you see your family?”

“Oh, no. I don’t really have much family.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be! I prefer to spend time with my friends.” She playfully bopped her fist against Shuichi’s shoulder. “Like I said, we’re a pretty jolly bunch!”

“No offense, Shuichi,” you said, “but you don’t really strike me as jolly.”

“Be curious, not judgmental.”
“I’m not being judgmental!” You set your tea down, looking at him from across the table. He didn’t look offended -- instead, there was a reserved mischief in his eyes, almost like he was issuing a challenge. “Walt Whitman,” you finally said, recognizing the quote.


“American poet, essayist, and journalist.” Shuichi looked impressed, and you both shared a knowing glance.
Many thanks to Kitsune_to_tenshi_chan and Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What for their comments! :) I love reading your thoughts!

I never really mentioned this, but this chapter mentions a year, so I figure I'll address it right now: I know the YYH anime was created in the 90s, but to my knowledge, it's not really defined. I'm envisioning this story to be a little more modern, just to simplify things. After all, you, the reader, are involved, so it may as well be closer to the present.

I also touched a bit on dog training, which is one of my passions. :'D

Please enjoy! Your thoughts are always welcome!

You stayed with Shuichi and Botan longer than you had intended. Although Yugen gave no signs of wanting to leave, you knew that he much preferred being alone instead of on the patio of a bustling café. You had a walk to finish and the remainder of your Sunday to rest and recuperate before work tomorrow.

“I need to get going now,” you said, pushing in your chair. “I had a wonderful time with you two.”

“So did we!” Botan said, speaking for Shuichi. “We should do this again. Maybe you’d like to meet the rest of our friends?”

“Sure,” you said. “Just let me know when you’d like to get together.”

“See you tomorrow, _____.’” Shuichi said with a wave of his hand.

You waved back. “Bye for now.” You then left with Yugen by your side, heading off to continue your walk. It would be a quick jog before you returned home.

As soon as you were out of earshot, Botan turned turned to Kurama and grabbed his arm with both hands, shaking him excitedly. “Kurama,” she said, a trill in her voice. “She’s perfect for you! I love her already, and you should, too!”

“The dog,” he said, not even looking at Botan.

“What?” Perhaps she would have been more disappointed at him ignoring her efforts at matchmaking, but she was much too surprised.

Kurama stared after _____ and her Akita mix. “The dog, Yugen. There’s something about him that is not quite right. There’s a glint in his eyes that speaks to more than beastial sentiency.”

“How do you know? He looks like an ordinary dog to me.”

“It’s a suspicion, nothing more,” he said.
“If you’re suggesting that he might be the demon we’re looking for, I didn’t sense a single drop of demon energy from him. The Makai insects certainly aren’t interested.”

“It’s possible he could be obscuring it, shielding it from detection. There are ways, Botan. That is how A-class and S-class demons slipped past detection to Living World to fetch Yusuke, Hiei, and me while the kekkai barrier was still in place.”

“You may be right. But what reason would a demon have to come to Living World, merely to live as a dog?”

“That, I don’t know. We need to get closer. It seems that the dog never leaves _____’s side, much to our disadvantage. If our suspicions are true, she is likely unaware and is understandably unable to hide the energy to which she is exposed by association.”

“She could be in danger,” Botan said quietly.

“She could also be involved.”

“You can’t be serious! She looks like she wouldn’t harm a fly.”

“Do I look like a threat? Looks can be deceiving. It’s best not to assume.”

Botan folded her hands together, elbows on the table. “But you can’t believe that. What reason would she have to hide a demon in her own home? Clearly, she thinks he’s her lovable pooch!”

“It’s unlikely that she’s involved, I’ll admit. But I will not throw that out as a possibility. Guilty until proven innocent.”

“You do know the best way to get close is to ask her out, right? And if you’re dating, she may invite you into her apartment.”

Kurama sighed. “Does Koenma know that you’re playing matchmaker on the clock?”

“Oh, he couldn’t stop me if he tried!” she said with a giggle.

Monday morning, you arrived at work -- it was a busy day, and you started immediately with your appointments, followed by building financial plans.

When lunch rolled around, you heard a familiar knock at your door. You dreaded it, pausing for a moment as you stared at the documents on your desk. “Ryohei,” you thought. When you looked up, however, Shuichi surprised you -- you hadn’t seen him all morning. “Oh, Shuichi,” you said. “How are you?”

“I’m well,” he replied. “How are you?”

“Swamped. On Friday evening, I thought I’d leave some work for Then-Future-_____. Now-Present-_____ is regretting her decision.”

He gave you an amused look, sighing a short laugh. “Would Now-Present-_____ enjoy some lunch?”

He had never asked you out to lunch before. Many of your coworkers did, but Shuichi rarely came along -- and if he did, it was with a group of people, never a single employee.

You didn’t want to be rude, but you weren’t lying. “I’m so sorry. I’m up to my neck in work,” you
“That’s hardly an excuse to skip meals. You’ll work far more effectively with a short break and sustenance.”

“I suppose so.” You set your pen down. You didn’t realize how hungry you were until he brought up the possibility of lunch. “Where would you like to go?”

“There is a new sushi bar in the marketplace. What do you think?”

“Sold.” You stood up, grabbing your purse and jacket. “You’re really twisting my arm here, Shuichi.”

“To get you to eat? Small price to pay.” He led you out the front door, opening it for you.

As soon as you stepped in the autumn air, you felt less anxious about the amount of work you had. “So is Botan back to work today?” you asked.

“Yes. She enjoyed your company yesterday. It was fortunate that we ran into you at the park.”

“I like her, too. She’s so friendly, though. I wonder if there are any people she doesn’t get along with.”

“You’d be surprised,” Shuichi said. “Everyone has limits.”

“I guess that shouldn’t come as a surprise.” As you walked, you looked up at the sky. It was a clear blue but for a single cloud. “It’s going to rain today.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I could make up something about studying cloud patterns and humidity, being able to read the winds and all that, but, really, I heard it on the news this morning.”

“You shouldn’t have told me that last part. I may have believed you.”

“Absolutely not,” you said, giving him a teasing glance. “You’re so perceptive. I’m pretty sure you can smell out lies.”

Shuichi gave you sly glance. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s what everyone thinks. That’s why your staff is so honest.”

“Out of fear or respect?”

“Would you prefer I say one over the other?”

“I prefer the truth, if you’re not opposed.”

“Well, I suppose can’t speak for everyone, but I respect you.”

“I knew I made a good decision hiring you.”

The bustle of both foot and vehicle traffic in this area was good for business, but this also meant that restaurants and food stands were particularly busy during lunch time. You and Shuichi arrived at the new sushi bar, only to be met with a long line of waiting customers. Clearly, many people were curious about the food.
“I’m okay with waiting if you are,” you said. “My next appointment isn’t until 2:30.”

“That should work. I am appointment-free for the remainder of the day.”

“The good thing about a crowded restaurant is in its quality, right? That means that there's a quick turnover of the food -- everything is fresh.”

“I agree. There’s certainly a reward for patience.”

“You’re one to talk. You’re one of the most patient people I know.”

Shuichi chuckled, giving a small shake of his head. “It’s an acquired skill. It doesn’t come easily, but you learn that patience pays the highest dividends. Speaking of which, you seem to be a patient lady yourself -- it takes a lot of effort to train a dog as well-behaved as yours.”

“I’ve barely had to. I know I’ve told you before that he was a stray, but he came perfectly behaved. I didn’t have to do anything.”

“Really? My understanding is that you do have dog training experience.”

“Sure. I grew up with animals, and I enjoy it. I’ve always liked training the dogs.”

“What sorts of techniques do you use?”

“Only humane ones. I follow the LIMA hierarchy -- Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive.”

“I’ve never heard of that.”

“Most people haven’t,” you explained, “but I’m a little bit of a nerd when it comes to dogs.”

“What does LIMA entail?”

“It’s competence-based, meaning that it requires trainers who abide by the LIMA to constantly pursue modern methods based in animal behavioral science. You are required to maintain competence through continuing education and hands-on experience. The hierarchy itself is simple to understand. When evaluating any situation that requires training, you start with wellness, including nutrition, exercise, medical necessities, and environmental factors. From there, you move to positive reinforcement, humane and effective methods, where most of the behavior modification takes place. Only when you have exhausted the dozens of different techniques should you move onto more intrusive possibilities. This ensures that dogs are treated with compassion and that punishment is never utilized in lieu of other effective strategies.”

“You seem very knowledgeable and passionate about this. Should I ever gather the courage to bring a dog home, you’ll be the first I contact.”

You laughed, perhaps a little sheepishly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bore you there, but I did answer your question.”

“Not at all. You answered my question very thoroughly.”

“She’s not involved,” Kurama said.

The gang was gathered at his apartment that evening. They had ordered pizza for an easy dinner, and they gathered around the pies with paper plates and red pepper flakes.
“What did I tell you?” Botan said. “There’s no way that someone with a disposition and face like hers could possibly be involved with a demon.”

“Says the one who seems most interested in setting us up,” Kurama replied.

Botan sighed. “You know what I mean. The appearance of these specially engineered Makai insects invading Living World is always a bad sign.”

“So let me get this straight,” Yusuke started. “You think we’re looking for a demon that has hidden himself in our world in the form of a dog.”

“That seems to be the best lead we have so far.”

“So he just chooses to be a dog?”

“There are shapeshifting demons, Yusuke,” Kurama said. “I was one of them.”

“Well, I suppose if you can turn into a fox at will, a dog isn’t far off, but ain’t that convenient that a demon can turn into man’s best friend and hide his demon energy.”

“There’s a special class of demon that can shapeshift into whatever they desire -- this includes humans, demons, animals, and even inanimate objects. Do you remember Yanagisawa? A shapeshifter’s ability functions very much like his copy technique. He can assume his target’s physical appearance, down to biology, acquire memories and skills, and even energy print.”

“He sounds dangerous,” Kuwabara said. “If he can copy anyone, then he can hide nearly indefinitely in Living World.”

“He doesn’t have to copy either,” Kurama explained. “He has the option to, of course, but skilled shapeshifters don’t require a target. They can create their own persona at will.”

“That really does make him impossible to find. Good thing you already found him, Kurama.”

“Now, really quick,” Botan said. “I’m curious about how you know _____ isn’t involved. We all knew it was highly unlikely from the beginning, but you say that for certain now. What made you realize that?”

“I asked her about Yugen and how she trained him--”

“Were you at least on a lunch date?” Yusuke interrupted with an impish expression.

“That’s irrelevant.” Kurama noticed his friends frowning but ignored them. “At any rate, I asked her about her training technique. She went into great detail about dog training methodology. If she were aware of being involved with a runaway demon, she wouldn’t be so educated about dog training. She spoke to a hierarchy called LIMA -- LIMA wasn’t established until 2014, and she was in college at the time where she did not have a dog. Yugen was her first animal since college. Even though he was well-behaved from the beginning, she was sincere in researching modern training techniques when she took him in. She has no idea about his identity.”

“Smart,” Kuwabara said. “Smart and smooth. Too bad she’ll never know how much you’ve thought about her recently.”

“Wow!” Botan said. “That seems like sound logic to me! What do we now, then? If _____ isn’t involved, she’s not going to be able to help us.”
“We have several options,” Kurama said.
Much thanks to Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What for the wonderful comments! ^_^ As always, I appreciate the kudos!

Slow burn is going to pick up a little bit. Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was important to Kurama to lessen the impact on her. Surely, if anything happened to Yugen, she would be crushed. She loved that dog.

But would she love him just as much after discovering his identity?

What was worse? The truth? The fact that her beloved dog was a demon, who cuddled in her lap, slept on her bed, knew all of her intimate habits and musings?

Or was losing her best friend the worst tragedy? Would it be better if Yugen simply disappeared from her life? Would she search for him? What if she never knew what transpired? Sometimes, lies were told to protect.

Kurama longed to shield her from the most devastating realization, whichever it was. He had to figure it out.

His friends didn’t understand.

Kuwabara thought it was unconscionable to let the demon stay with her even one more night. He opted to march over to her apartment and strangle Yugen with his own hands. Of course, Kurama refused to provide an address.

Yusuke was indifferent to the tactic. He recognized that _____’s cooperation would make the task easier but also thought that she could become a liability if she were involved.

Botan was convinced that she wouldn’t believe anyone who told her that Yugen was actually a demon, so while cooperation was ideal, it wouldn’t work.

So, really, what options did they have?

The underlying assumption: Yugen was a demon hiding in Living World.

1. Act without her knowledge.
   a. Yugen may be apprehended easily, which solves part one of the case, at least.
      i. He would likely disappear from _____’s life. She would be heartbroken.
   b. Yugen may escape, either back to Demon World or hide again elsewhere in Living World.
      i. He would likely disappear from _____’s life. She would be heartbroken.
   c. Apprehension may go poorly, in which case _____ discovers that Spirit World is after Yugen.
      i. Her cooperation at this point is highly unlikely. She would go out of her way to protect Yugen, endangering her own life.
      ii. She may cooperate if Yugen is revealed as a demon. This may or may not happen. Proof
would have to be deliberate and definite. Tricky to accomplish with a shapeshifter.

2. Tell her the truth.
   a. She may believe them, in which case, approaching Yugen would be easy.
      i. Depending on the nature of Yugen’s secret, he may be cooperative.
      ii. Yugen may not be cooperative. He could endanger her life.
   b. She may not believe them, in which case, the task becomes more difficult.
      i. She may leave the city to go into hiding or she may stand her ground.
         1. Any attempt to apprehend or destroy Yugen would be near impossible without jeopardizing her life.
      c. She may go to law enforcement.
         1. Living World involvement would complicate matters as Spirit World operations are meant to be carried out in secrecy.
         2. Her life could remain jeopardized as long as this demon was in her life.

Kurama’s mental notes complete, he closed his eyes. No matter the choice, _____ could be endangered. If he acted without her knowledge, she would likely end up with a broken heart. He did not want that for her.

But she’d be safe. Was that the priority? Her safety and physical well being? Was happiness not equally important? Kurama knew all too well.

There was one scenario in which there was a potential for a happy ending: The truth.

In order for the truth to work, there would have to be trust.

““You’ve come a long way to see me, Kurama,” Koenma said, hands folded over his document-ridden desk. “You said it was urgent. What do you wish to tell me?”

“I need more time.”

“More time? What for? Botan has reported that you have a suspect.”

“We do.”

“Then what’s preventing you from taking action?”

“I am afraid of the collateral damage it might cause.”

“I know humans like their dogs -- they’re man’s best friend, the ultimate companion. Even I sometimes wish I had a dog, but all I get is a blue buffoon.” (Jorge frowned.) “I don’t see why removing the prime suspect would be so damaging to a single person that you’d sacrifice the safety of humanity.”

“If you look at it that way, then it doesn’t make sense,” Kurama said, his voice its usual calm. “But remember that we are at a stalemate. The operating assumption is that our suspect is rightfully a demon. We have not confirmed this, and the Makai insects have not confirmed this. Clearly, given the situation, the suspect is not going to reveal himself, and Makai insects are doing no harm buzzing about in Living World.”

Koenma leaned back in his seat, arms crossed. “I have a feeling you’re doing this because you care for the human girl.”

The screen behind Kurama lit up, and he turned around to watch the scenes that would play out.
“I understand why you’d want to make this as easy on her as possible,” Koenma said. “______, age 24. She was a good student, an active participant in her childhood community. She’s volunteered all her life, working with charities to raise money for social causes, including women’s shelters and animal rescues. She’s a good human being, her past and current deeds enough to grant her a passage to a peaceful afterlife.”

Kurama saw her as a child, collecting stray kittens and bringing them home. As she grew older, he saw her defending smaller children from bullies, even taking a few blows before she finally fought back. He saw her as a teenager, giving her umbrella to a homeless man on a rainy day, skipping off as she was soaked to the bone. In more recent years, he saw her service at an animal shelter, plucking ticks off an emaciated dog’s skin before bathing him in solution.

“I like her,” Koenma continued. “I can see why you’d want to spare her the pain of losing her beloved dog, but I don’t think her attachment to our suspect should take priority.”

Kurama nodded. “I understand your reservations. I am not suggesting that her relationship with the subject takes priority over the mission by any means. I am merely asking for time so that we may make this as safe and painless as possible for everyone involved.”

“What do you plan to do?”

“I will ask her to cooperate.”

“You think she would believe you?”

“She may. If not, we will continue with the apprehension of the subject. At the very least, I think she deserves the chance to make a decision.”

Koenma sighed. “You realize I’m not opposed to humans learning the existence of demons. It’s inevitable sometimes, and if humans and demons are to ever live peacefully together, it’s necessary. But it can be a burden knowing about Demon World and its inhabitants at this stage. Do you think it’s possible that _____ is better off not knowing?”

“We’ll find out,” Kurama said. “If my attempts go south, there are ways.”

“I see.” The Spirit World Prince did not favor this tactic. However, Kurama was a trusted resource and operative in Living world who had never failed him before. Most importantly, he was right about the stalemate. The risks in waiting seemed to be minor. “Very well,” Koenma said, reluctantly. “Do as you see fit. Botan will still be down there monitoring case progress.”

Kurama bowed his head in gratitude and left.

__________________________________________________________________

It was Tuesday. You came into work feeling refreshed.

As soon as you walked through the doors and past Shuichi’s office, he called out to you. “_____, may I see you for a moment, please?”

“Oh, of course,” you said, stepping inside. “You want the door closed?”

“Please. And good morning.”

“Good morning to you, too, Shuichi. What’s this about?”

He sat at his desk, green eyes alight. “I’d like to run something by you, if you have a few minutes.”
“My first appointment isn’t for another hour,” you said. Shuichi didn’t usually call you into his office, and certainly not first thing in the morning when advisors were eager to answer voicemails and check their emails.

“There is a financial advisor conference in Inoji starting tomorrow through the rest of the week, and optionally through the weekend,” he said. “I understand this is last-minute, so we’ll need to find coverage for your appointments, but I’d like for you to represent our firm.”

“Me?” Inoji was a small island to the south of the main continent. It was a popular tourist destination because of its pristine waters and beautiful sights. A high-end luxurious business conference was a norm on the island of Inoji. “If you don’t mind me asking, why choose me? Other advisors certainly have seniority.”

Shuichi gave you a small smile. “As the newest member of our team, I think you have the most to learn. You’ve worked hard, and the networking experience could prove invaluable. Trust me -- the others have had plenty of opportunities at conferences and symposiums, and there will be many more. All of your business-related expenses will be covered, should you choose to attend. What do you think?”

“I’d love to,” you said. “It sounds like an amazing opportunity. I guess I’ll just have to find arrangements for Yugen.”

“What do you usually do when you’re away?”

“I don’t want to sound like one of those people, but I take him everywhere with me. But don’t worry! He doesn’t have to come along. I have friends at the local shelter who might be able to drop in on him and give him walks. At least, Yugen recognizes them.”

“Let me know if that doesn’t work out. Botan is in town.”

“I wouldn’t want to burden her so early on in our relationship.”

“She enjoys animals. As a business expense, the company would pay her for her trouble.”

“That’s kind of you, but I’m sure I’ll be able to find someone.” You pulled out your phone, looking at your calendar. “I don’t have any plans, so I should be able to stay through the weekend. Is anyone else from this office coming?”

“Other than me, no,” Shuichi said. “I have a presentation I’ve been asked to give on the evolving financial landscape. Aside from that, I’ll be attending as you are.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Thank you for sending me!”

“I expect you to use this opportunity to learn and fine-tune your skills. You’ll be asked to summarize your experience next week upon your return.”

You nodded. “I can do that.”

“Then you’re dismissed. I’m sure you have preparations to make.”

Later that night, Kurama sat in his living room and dialed Botan’s number.

“Hello, Kurama!”

“Good evening, Botan,” he said. “How was your day?”
“Oh, you know, the usual! Guided a few newcomers to Spirit World to render judgment on the rest of their lives. What did you do today?”

“I, like most human beings, work for a living.”

“How boring!” Botan joked. “Any progress?”

“Yes, and I’m hoping you might be able to assist.”

“Of course! What can I do for you?”

“I convinced _____ to leave with me for an advisor conference on Inoji.”

“Inoji? That’s quite a trip. Is this what financial advisors do all day? Clearly, I need a new job with these perks.”

“It’s not the norm. Inoji is the most posh location they’ve chosen in the years I’ve been attending.”

“It’s not at the Inoji Sovereign Resort, is it? If so, I’m jealous and wish you would have invited me.”

“It is,” Kurama said. “I originally hadn’t planned on attending this year. They had requested that I make a presentation, and I politely declined. But with this mission underway, I made a few calls, and they’re glad to have me.”

Botan clicked her tongue. “I suppose it is a rather romantic destination. You are trying to woo her, aren’t you?”

“I’m giving myself an opportunity to earn her trust, to build a relationship outside of the office. It is the safest way to apprehend our demon friend.”

“And you get a pretty girlfriend out of it!”

Kurama ignored her comment. “I need to ask a favor.”

“Oh, yes! Sorry, I got off track.”

“_____ has found a dog-sitter for Yugen Wednesday morning through Saturday evening. She would like someone to check in on him Sunday morning.”

A moment of silence passed. “...you want me to look after the demon dog?” Little by little, Botan’s voice became louder. “Aren’t we concerned about this demon? Isn’t that why we’re investigating this with plans to apprehend him?!”

“He’s not in a position to roleplay Cujo. Remember we are at a stalemate. We must assume he is clever; otherwise, he would not have kept from detection for so long. He would be a fool to harm you because by doing so, he’d force our hand. He gains nothing from it.”

“I hate it when you’re right.” She sighed. “All right. Text me her address and instructions.”

“She’ll leave an extra copy of her apartment key at the office. Our receptionist will gladly give it to you anytime this week -- she generally leaves around 5:00 every day.”

“Kurama, you owe me.”

“How would you like me to repay this debt?”
“The juicy details. All of them.”

“We’ll see.”

“If anything happens, I want to be the first to know~!” Botan’s sing-song voice returned. “Have a fun conference, and don’t forget to bring--”

Kurama disconnected.

Chapter End Notes

:'D I love Botan. She's going to drive Kurama insane. Anyone want to take a stab at what she's reminding him to bring? Teehee!
You were finally all packed. Under any other circumstances, you might have been able to get away with a single suitcase. However, with all of the business clothes, you needed some extra room. You would have plenty of ironing when you arrived at the resort, but that was a small price to pay for the experience.

“I’m sorry you can’t come along, Yugen,” you said as you pulled on pajamas for the evening. “I hear it’s absolutely beautiful there.”

He perked up at your voice but lay his head back down between his paws.

“Aimi will be coming by to feed and walk you through Saturday.” No problems there -- he was quite familiar with Aimi as she was a good friend. “Botan will be here on Sunday morning. You remember Botan, right? Don’t worry -- I already told her not to pet you. You don’t even have to walk with her if you don’t want to, but be nice to her. She’s doing us a favor.”

You knew it was silly talking to your dog. Being a lover of all animals, you had always talked to your pets. Even if they couldn’t understand the words, you knew they appreciated the conversation, the involvement in your life.

After you brushed your teeth and climbed into bed, you lay there awake, wondering what the Inoji Sovereign Resort was like. It was a famous five-star accommodation that you would never consider affording. Shuichi said this was a nationwide conference, its first time on Inoji Island. However, it seemed that this past year had been particular affluent for the industry, and the organizers splurged a bit. Of course, tickets to the conference did not come cheaply either, but your firm was paying, so you had no complaints.

You drifted off to sleep easily, wondering what amazing sights awaited you tomorrow.

When you arrived the next day, you were dropped off in the lobby of the resort. It was the most beautiful place you had ever been in -- spacious with sunlight filtering through the ceiling windows, travertine floors polished till they gleamed. Each of the lobby tables had fresh flowers in glass vases at the center, and the staff were dressed appropriately in suits or skirts.
“Welcome!” the host greeted, taking your bags. “We’ll take this up to your room for you.”

“Thank you,” you said, taken aback by the sudden hospitality. You knew that this resort was highly regarded, but you weren’t used to being served like this.

A server was already at your side, offering you a drink. “Strawberry mojito or piña colada?”

“Oh, thank you.” You selected your beverage of choice and continued to the open doors in the back. They were pushed wide open, the ocean breeze drifting through the sheer drapes that modeled an air of relaxation. As soon as you stepped through the doors, you were greeted by sun and blue water as far as the eye could see.

“Welcome, _____.”

You turned around, only to see Shuichi. He donned a button-down shirt with rolled sleeves -- no tie or suit jacket. You had never seen him dressed so casually before. Admittedly, you were so surprised at his stellar fashion sense you almost choked on your drink. “Shuichi! Hi!”

“I hope the flight was comfortable?”

“It was! It’s been a while since I’ve flown, but it was fine.”

Shuichi looked at you, tilting his head to the side. “I suppose I never spoke to Inoji dress code.”

“Too formal, huh?” you said, looking down at your pencil skirt and suit jacket. “It’s my fault for not asking.”

“Let’s head upstairs. We’ll find something that better suits you.”

“O-okay.” You went along with it.

After finding your suite, you opened the door with your key card, only to find your luggage standing neatly next to the luxurious king-sized bed. The sheets were a stunning white, the gold standard, curtains pulled open to reveal an ocean view. Light poured into the room.

You pulled one of the suitcases onto the bed, unzipping it. “I suppose I should settle in and get everything ironed.”

“That’s probably not necessary,” Shuichi said. “The business culture here is far more lax than anywhere else. A wrinkle isn’t going to make or break you.”

“But not everyone is from here.” You began laying out your selection of clothes.

“You are right, but I imagine they all wish to fit in.”

“Hm.” You frowned as you studied your clothes. “I did pack all my formal things, huh? This is most everything I’d wear to meet clients.”

Shuichi looked over your shoulder. “What about this?” He had selected a small, sleeveless dress.

“That? I was hoping to wear that on the beach.”

“Well, that’s where we’re going, isn’t it? The official introduction doesn’t begin until 11:00 a.m. While you’re here, you might as well enjoy Inoji’s pristine waters.”

You looked at him, noticing his green eyes. They were usually sharp and perceptive, but they now
softened, gleaming with a reserved gentleness. “Um…”

“Yes?”

You looked away, staring at your small collection of clothes. “I guess I should just pick something.”

“You sound reluctant.” His expression didn’t change. Instead, he picked up the sundress, by the two straps, holding it up to you. “I think you would look lovely in this. Honestly.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

You took the dress from him. “Okay,” you said, staring at it.

“Here,” Shuichi said, placing the dress on the bed. “Let me help you.” He began by taking your suit jacket; he hung it up on one of the closet hangers, quite expertly you might add.

You stood, looking at him, almost shyly. He was so handsome, absolutely gorgeous, in fact. The casual clothes helped make him seem more… touchable, you supposed. Shuichi had always seemed so perfect, his suits ironed, his shirt collars pressed, his tie straight -- even his red wayward hair was chaotically perfect. Maybe it was the way he carried himself with such grace and precision.

And you didn’t know why, but you felt… aroused.

He seemed to have read your expression, and he touched you, just gently on the side of your face, smoothing stray hairs behind your ears.

You shuddered at his touch, not because you wished to repel him, but because you were caught off guard by the visceral nature of the sensation. It was like you felt a spark at the tip of each of his fingers.

“May I kiss you?” he whispered, his voice reminding you of the calm water in a hidden spring.

You didn’t even think about it. You nodded without saying a word.

Shuichi leaned in, his lips brushing yours in a tender kiss. He seemed to pause there, waiting for some sort of feedback. You kissed him back, the response he was looking for, and he deepened the kiss. His hands were on you, one on your upper back, the other supporting your head at the base of your neck.

You felt a tingling in your core. The next thing you knew, you were on the bed, lying on your side, right next to him. “You’re wrinkling my clothes, Shuichi,” you said breathlessly.

“The ones on your body or the bed? We can fix either.”

You blushed, feeling your cheeks flush with color. “Don’t you think we’re moving a little quickly?”

“Are you implying that we’re dating?”

His question made you think twice. Were you actually dating? You were quite literally in bed with Shuichi. You had just kissed Shuichi. For all intents and purposes, you might as well be dating him.
You responded by kissing him again, this time with more certainty. You touched him, his hair, his neck, his chest. Your fingers found the buttons of his shirt, and you undid them one by one.

Shuichi was quick to respond, and piece by piece, you both stripped one another of your clothing until you were in your undergarments.

Perhaps you would have been more self-conscious, but you felt a feverish desire like never before. It had started when you saw him on the beach, so relaxed and handsome. The moment you were alone with him, the feeling grew, burning brighter at your core. When he helped you remove your jacket, you felt it flare. And when, finally, he kissed you, you knew what you wanted today.

Right now.

Shuichi kissed your neck, trailing his lips across your warm skin as if to tease you.

You couldn't help but let out a small cry, the sensation making your heart pulse even faster.

It was all a blur.

Soon, your bra and underwear came off, tossed to the side with your other clothing.

He was naked as well.

“Are you sure you want this?” he asked, a sincere longing in his gaze.

“I do,” you said, the very words sweeping you into a daze of desire.

He kissed you--

Your alarm went off, and you awoke feeling rather hot and bothered.

You shook the sleep away, rubbing your forehead as you came to consciousness. “What just happened?” you thought. “Oh my god.”

Yugen stared at you as if you were crazy. He yawned, his tongue slipping out of his mouth as he curled up again to sleep.

“Oh my god.” You slipped out of bed, running to the bathroom. You splashed water on your face, letting the cool temper the heat of your embarrassment. “I can’t believe I just dreamed about… that.”

It was insane.

You took a deep breath.

“Why is it insane?” you asked yourself. “Isn’t it normal for people to be intimate with each other?”

Maybe it wasn’t so crazy, now that you thought about it. You began to strip, thinking that a shower would help you sort through your feelings. You turned on the water, breathing in steadily as you let it heat up.

Shuichi was just another human being, as you were. He was your supervisor -- clever, perceptive, handsome. But beneath the facade of professionalism, you wondered if there was something more. Supervisor was his profession, not who he was. Part of you wanted to seek out the person beyond
the suit.

Your thoughts fluttered back to your dream. You remembered how you felt, the touch of his hands on your face, your body. With a shudder, you stepped into the shower, the water flowing, enshrouding you in warmth.

The warmth was familiar.

It was comfortable.

You saw his eyes, verdant like a forest; his striking red hair, unruly in its perfection; and his wry smile, a secret hidden behind his very words.

You stood in the shower, letting the steaming water pour over your body. You only half-heartedly soaped and shampooed -- no matter how hard you tried, you could not take your mind off of Shuichi.

“He sure must be a good kisser.”

Chapter End Notes

lol, I'm sorry. I had fun with this one. XDDD;; I'm curious if anyone expected this to be a dream sequence?

I figured the RC needs a kick in the rear to spark her interest in Kurama. I love me some slow burn, but I already have the plot etched out, which is time sensitive, so she needs to get her feelings sorted.
When I first started this story, I was nervous about writing Kurama. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do his character justice. He's so complex and sophisticated, the inner workings of his mind an enigma. Now that I have had the chance to write him and our reader character, I think I have a good grasp on how their relationship is going to develop.

I'm very excited to show you what I have planned. ;)

A big thank you to Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What and Kouryuu for their thoughts and feedback!

Like most fanfiction writers, I thrive off of your support. Your kudos are wonderful, of course, and I love reading your comments. I will respond to every single one, I promise, so if you're feeling up to it, leave me some feedback! <3 It would be inspiring for me and very much appreciated! I welcome to you tell me what you like, what you don't like, how you think the YYH gang is in character or not, how you relate to the reader character, what you think is going to happen next, whether you actually think Yugen is a demon or not, etc.

Please enjoy! :}

After attempting to wash away your embarrassment, you selected your outfit for the day. Although your dream seemed to tease you for arriving in business formal clothes, you would much rather be overdressed than underdressed, and you doubted that anyone would hold that against you. Nevertheless, you managed to shove a few more casual selections into one of your suitcases.

You went for a quick walk with Yugen around the neighborhood to give him some respite from the apartment. As you removed your jacket, scarf, and shoes upon returning, you thought it was interesting how the chill of autumn would vanish as soon as you arrived on the island.

By the time you returned to your apartment, it was 5:30 a.m. You were to meet Shuichi at the airport by 6:30 a.m. Your flight would depart by 8:00 a.m. and would arrive on Inoji by 9:45 a.m. You would both take a taxi to the Inoji Sovereign Resort, check into your rooms, and be ready for the introduction by 11:00 a.m.

You had better call a cab -- it would take about 45 minutes to traverse to the airport.

“Bye, Yugen,” you said as you knelt down to pet him. “I’ll be gone for a few days, but you’ll be a good boy, right?”

He grunted, leaning his face into your hand.

“That’s a good boy. I’ll be home before you know it.” You kissed him on the head, gathered your suitcases, and stepped outside to wait for your taxi.
You checked in your bags and had just made it past airport security. You were standing in line at a café for a small breakfast and some tea.

“Good morning, _____."

His familiar voice made the butterflies in your stomach flutter excitedly. “Hi, Shuichi,” you said, turning around to see that he had slid in line right behind you. “Traffic wasn’t too bad?”

“Not at all. We both left home before the majority of the city has woken.”

Despite it being early, he looked polished -- you wondered how he was when he rolled out of bed in the morning. He was donned in a button-up shirt and suit jacket, pants pressed neatly for his tall figure. You were glad to see that he had chosen to dress business formal. At least, you wouldn’t be alone.

“Are you excited for your first conference?” Shuichi asked.

“I am. I don’t really know what to expect.”

“I think you’ll enjoy it. Most advisor conferences happen over the course of one or two days. This one will take place over five days -- it allows for more participation from the attendees, and it gives everyone more time to process the content and learn.”

“That’s probably for the best. At least, I know I’ll have the time I need to absorb what I learn.”

You were next in line, and you put in your order of choice. Shuichi did the same, opting for hot tea and fruit.

As you both waited for your orders, you glanced at him from the corner of your eye. You thought back to your dream last night, and you felt the heat rise in your cheeks. “Hopefully, he won’t see.”

But see, he did. Shuichi made eye contact with you. “I’m glad you’re able to stay for the whole duration of the conference,” he said. “I heard that Inoji Sovereign Resort was selected this year, partially because of a rare phenomenon that occurs on the island.”

“Really?” You took a deep breath, trying to exhale the awkwardness. “What kind of phenomenon?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“I could just Google it, you know.”

Shuichi chuckled. “If you’d rather not be surprised, then go ahead.”

“I suppose I’ve never been a huge fan of surprises. I prefer to be able to plan for things.”

“Well, I’ll tell you that there’s not much planning required for this one. You’re either at the resort or you’re not.”

“That’s fair,” you said as you fetched your drink. “If you think it’s worth being surprised over, then I suppose I’ll hold off on Googling.”

“I don’t think you’ll regret it.”

“I’ll hold you to it, Shuichi.”
After he received his order, you both headed toward the gate. Fortunately for you, you had checked both of your suitcases, leaving you with only your purse. It was easier to navigate a busy airport that way.

Shuichi carried a laptop bag with him. He pulled out his computer, finishing up his presentation. This gave you a chance to catch your breath as you went for a walk in the terminal.

It was worse than you imagined. You had always thought that your supervisor was attractive, but after last night, you couldn’t help but be reminded of it every time you looked at him.

There was just no way. A relationship with Shuichi would be unprofessional. He was your boss, and that meant that there was a power dynamic at play. You doubted that Shuichi was the petty type, but if your relationship ever went south, your career could be in jeopardy. Besides, you weren’t sure how you felt about dating your boss. You saw him every day at work -- would you want to spend time together afterwards, too? Would he drive you insane?

From a personal standpoint, you also thought about your relationship with Ryohei. How would he feel if he knew that you and Shuichi were dating? His opinions weren’t a priority, of course, but you did tell him that you weren’t looking for a relationship right now. Would he feel betrayed? He had been working with Shuichi for years now. Would he be upset with his boss, too? Would he wish to work elsewhere?

As you walked through the airport, looking through the expensive gift shops and local wares, you sighed.

Why were you even having these thoughts? Would Shuichi even be interested in you?

And what kind of relationship would you have with him?

Truthfully, you knew very little about him. He seldom spoke of himself, providing mostly professional guidance when you needed it.

Maybe you would learn more about him this week at the conference.

You hoped that your emotions would settle. Of course, you’d had crushes before, but this time, it was different. This infatuation, brought on by a mere dream, would cause far more trouble than good, you thought.

A little before departure time, you walked back to the gate, having had some time to clear your head.

“Ready, ____?” Shuichi asked.

“The sooner we get there, the sooner I get to see what this magical phenomenon is you’re talking about.”

“You’re right. The island of Inoji has many noteworthy attractions.”

“I’ve never been.”

“I went once when I was a boy. My mother and I took a vacation together.”

“Just you and your mom?”

“My father died when I was a toddler.”
“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I barely remember him. My mother speaks fondly of him, but I’m afraid I was too young.”

You gave him a sad smile. “It must have been hard on your mother. Being a single parent is never easy.”

“She made many sacrifices.”

“But I see she did a great job.”

Shuichi stood up as your boarding group was called. “She did all that she could. She’s an amazing woman.”

“She sounds like it.”

“Perhaps you’ll meet her one day.”

You were taken aback. You wanted to ask Shuichi what he meant by that, but boarding began. Person by person, the attendants let all passengers onto the plane.

You and Shuichi settled in business class seats. It must have been nice being able to write off the cost of the tickets as business expenses. You had never flown business class before. An attendant came by to ensure that everyone was buckled in, and before you knew it, the plane was in the air.

“At least it’s a short flight,” you said, barely able to hear yourself.

“We’ll be there before you know it,” Shuichi said, taking his laptop out again.

“You sure have a lot of work.”

“Comes with the territory. Since I volunteered to make a presentation, I suppose I should have expected to put some time and effort into it.”

“When is your presentation?”

“Friday, so I have two days to finish it.”

“You never struck me as a procrastinator, Shuichi,” you teased.

“And I never thought you’d be the one to give me a hard time about it.”

“Someone has to do it.”

“Hm. I’ll have to remember that come mid-year evaluations.”

“And what are you going to write? ‘_____ scolded me when I procrastinated on my presentation’? Sometimes people need a good nudge.”

Shuichi chuckled. “You’re not wrong.”

The flight landed shortly on Inoji. You and Shuichi gathered your luggage and left the airport, calling for a taxi. As soon as you stepped outside, the air was far warmer than home, and you could smell the ocean breeze. It had been so long since you had taken a vacation.
Shuichi must have noticed the expression on your face. “Enjoying the weather already?”
“I love autumn, but it’s fascinating that a little farther south we can have this kind of climate!”
“Inoji is like this year-round. The locals say that’s one of the reasons why they stay.”
“The real estate must be expensive.”
“It is. It’s an ideal vacation destination. Many of the wealthy have rental properties out here. Obviously, the closer to the ocean, the more valuable the real estate.”
“What a blessing to have rental income, especially in retirement. These people sure did something right.”
“Unfortunately, not all rental properties are profitable. Many of them are money pits.”
“I’m assuming that the vast majority of rental properties here on Inoji fall into that profitable category.”
Shuichi nodded. “You’d be right.”

The taxi arrived, and without a word or request from you, Shuichi helped you lift your suitcases into the trunk. “Thank you,” you said, admiring how much of a gentleman he was.

“Of course,” he replied smoothly. “It’s my pleasure.”

The ride to the resort was a relatively quiet one with only the occasional conversation. You were too busy admiring the sights of the island. The skies were clear, the air crisp. The city slowly dissipated behind you as you exited the main island via a large bridge. The ocean went on for as far as the eye could see, and you had never seen the waters so blue. You admired the palm trees as they swayed in the wind -- how could they bend so easily without snapping?

The Inoji Sovereign Resort was not far after you crossed the bridge. Your taxi pulled up through the drop-off area, where attendants opened the car doors for you.

After they fetched your luggage from the trunk, Shuichi paid the taxi driver, leaving him with a generous tip.

You liked a man who tipped well -- you may have swooned a little on the inside.

“Let’s go,” he said. “We have a short time to check-in before the introduction.” He gestured for you to go first.

“Oh, thank you.” You headed up the sloped path, briefly admiring the exotic flowers in planters along the way. They were vibrant, colored in shades of reds and oranges, their petals soft and sleek. “These are beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like them.”

Shuichi was close behind. “Crocosmia,” he said.

“Crocosmia?”

“Yes, that’s what they’re called. And those over there are firecracker ferns. The yellow ones are common mulleins.”

“I had no idea that you were so knowledgeable about flowers!”
"A mere hobby."

"I’m impressed."

"It’s nothing," he said well-naturedly. "Just a some practical knowledge when helping my mother with the garden."

"You must have quite the green thumb. I’m afraid I don’t share that talent. I’ve killed most plants I’ve been responsible for." You let out a nervous laugh.

"An innocent misunderstanding of plants, I’m sure."

You made it to the lobby, the polished sliding glass doors opening as soon as you stepped close enough. "Innocent, yes. As for the misunderstanding, I’m unsure of what there is to understand."

"You’d be surprised, _____. Plants are alive, like you and I. They need varying levels and types of care."

"Well, clearly you know more about this than I do."

"If you’re interested, I can teach you."

"We’ll see, Shuichi. If you knew how many plants I’ve murdered to date, you might change your mind."

"If I recall correctly, in your interview, you described yourself as a quick learner."

"Don’t you be using my interview against me."

"Not against. Just as a supplement in an attempt to understand you better."

You looked at him, an amused expression on your face. "I don’t think it’s that complicated -- I’m just bad at plants. I mean, isn’t there something that you’re not-so-great at?" The moment the question came out of your mouth, you realized how silly it sounded. You were certain Shuichi was good at everything.

He was quiet for a moment before finally closing his eyes and exhaling in a short laugh. "Women, I suppose."

You were taken aback by his response. "Don’t sell yourself short, Shuichi."
I really love this chapter, you guys. <3 I hope you do, too.

I want to say a warm thank you to Tressa_Rose07, FannibalToast, xXMoonFairyxX, and Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What for their most wonderful comments and support! ^_^ Please enjoy!

You checked in to your room in the resort lobby. “Here is your key card, miss,” the clerk said. “Room 455. Jiro will escort you and your luggage to your room.”

“Thank you,” you replied.

Shuichi finished his check-in as well, and followed after you. “Where are you?” he asked.

“455.”

“457.” He smiled. “Looks like we’re going to be neighbors for the duration of our stay.”

“Oh, no. What a tragedy.”

“Don’t sound too excited.”

“I’m just kidding, Shuichi,” you said with a laugh. “I can think of a million other people I’d rather not be neighbors with.”

“I’m flattered.”

You both followed after the concierge assistants, stepping into the elevator. The glass panels were neatly polished, and you could watch through elevator windows as you were lifted onto the floors above. It was a fast elevator, unlike the old rickety ones on your college campus.

You were guided to your rooms. The moment you unlocked the door and stepped inside, you were greeted with drawn curtains and sunshine, revealing the unrelenting blue of the ocean. Palm trees wavered outside, their large fronds dancing in the wind. You were drawn to the balcony, the warmth of the morning sun.

“Looks like you got an ocean-view,” Shuichi said as he lingered by the door.

You gestured for him to come in. “You’re the one who booked this room for me, so you shouldn’t seem so surprised. Thank you.” Ocean-view rooms were far more expensive than their non-ocean-view counterparts.

“I figured you might enjoy it.”

“That was very thoughtful of you.”

“Your first stay in Inoji should be a special one. When my mother I came, she booked an ocean-view room as well.”
“It’s gorgeous.” You admired the waves as they seemed to soar over the water, white foam gathering for just a moment before dissipating on the beach. You stepped onto the balcony, and only when you looked over the railing could you see the sun-bleached sands, the people down below enjoying the salty ocean breeze.

“I’m glad you like it.” Shuichi tipped his head toward the door. “I know you might wish to stay here and enjoy the view, but we have a conference to attend. We’ll be dismissed early, so you have all evening to explore.”

“All right,” you said, stepping back inside and shutting the balcony doors. “But as much as I’m looking forward to the conference, I think I’ll be just as excited to be done with it each night.”

“A normal reaction.” He led you down the hallway and back toward the elevator. “I think you’ll be impressed with the Inoji Sovereign’s amenities.”

“Beyond the high-speed internet?”

“How. I thought you’d prefer the bottomless mimosas and private lagoons, but if it’s high-speed internet that enchants you…”

“Did I say internet? By that, I definitely meant bottomless mimosas and private lagoons.”

Shuichi chuckled. “There are also seven world-renowned restaurants, a spa, and several resort-sponsored excursions.”

“I’m so glad you brought me along. I’m really excited for the rest of this week!”

You both made it to the banquet hall, converted for the advisor conference. Notebooks and pens were placed in front of each seat at the tables. A hot brunch spread was laid out, filled with all of your favorites, including eggs, bacon, french toast, and fresh fruit. Those who had already arrived were donned in both business suits and flowered shirts -- it seemed that the dress code was quite lax.

As you stepped into the hall, staff members welcomed you with leis, placing them over your heads as they greeted you warmly. “Welcome!” they said.

You found your name tag and began a day of seminars and networking…

For the first night, dinner was served in the banquet hall, plated meals that came out with graceful waiters who seemed to glide across the floors. The conversations evolved from financial topics and careers to general merriment and laughter. The wine certainly didn’t hurt.

Shuichi sat on your right, while another man, young and handsome, sat to your left. “Noboru,” he said, introducing himself to you.

“_____,” you replied, shaking his hand. “Who do you work for?”

“Tadamitsu Financial. You might have heard of us.”

“I certainly have. The largest provider of investments in the Pacific Northwest. What is it that you do for them?”

“I’m a fund manager.” He seemed to puff up with pride.

“Wow. That’s impressive.”
Noboru laughed. “When you get it right, it can be. Otherwise, it’s just a fancy title. You have to be able to walk the walk!”

“Well, competence is important. You can have a vision and a plan, but if you can’t execute, you won’t succeed.”

“True. If you’re here, I’m guessing you’re pretty competent yourself.”

“I’d like to think I have a lot to offer my clients.”

“I’m sure you do.” Noboru looked at you with eager eyes that made you uncomfortable.

Luckily, Shuichi came to your rescue, easily transferring his conversation with the professional to his right to include you. “______,” he said, “I was just telling Taichi about your unique method of segmenting clients. Would you mind sharing your thought process with us?”

You diverted your attention gratefully to Taichi, a senior wealth manager at a well-known financial institution. Unlike Noboru, Taichi seemed legitimately interested in your career, listening to you describe your practices.

He then talked a little about his own business and finance methodology. You were fascinated by his experience and expertise.

You networked with the rest of the table, discussing some of the seminars and theories that took place earlier during the day. There was so much for you to learn from those around you.

After dinner, you excused yourself from the table. There was an open bar on the outdoor patio, stocked full of popular liquors, wines, and beers. Fairy lights glowed, strung from post to post, providing the only light after the sun would set. The most stunning part was the full view of the ocean, the waves breaking on the beach with each pull of the tide.

Many conference attendees were outside mingling, drinks in their hands. Waiters walked around with appetizers on silver platters, offering delicacies to chattering guests. You noticed that some of them were no longer in their business clothes. Instead, they had opted to change into something more comforting and appropriate for the mild climate.

You stepped outside, enjoying the briny ocean air. It smelled of salt, sand, and seaweed -- in any other circumstance it might be unappealing, but on the beach, it was perfect. The scent was comforting, the pending night subject to the balmy winds.

“So you enjoying this place?” Noboru said, stepping up next to you.

“I’ve never been here before, so it’s a new experience for me.”

“It’s definitely the best resort on Inoji, perhaps even on this side of the Pacific.”

“It sounds like you come here often.”

“There’s nothing wrong with enjoying luxuries, if you can afford it.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m surprised a pretty lady like you doesn’t come here more often. You got a boyfriend who can treat you to nice places?”

You declined to respond. “I think I should get going.”

“So soon?” Noboru smiled at you, revealing a set of perfectly whitened, straight teeth. “Don’t you
want to enjoy the night?”

“Maybe,” you said. “I think I’d like some time to myself first. I need a bit of rest and relaxation after today.”

“I’ve got an in-ground jacuzzi in my suite, sweetheart,” he said, inching closer. “Imagine a private experience with some warm water, powerful jets, and whimsical bubbles.”

“And you, I imagine.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“I think I’m good, thank you.”

“What is it, babe? Is it your boss? Shuichi Minamino? I know he’s a hotshot in the finance world, but you can do better.”

Do better than Shuichi? “Maybe,” you thought, “but certainly not with this guy.” You stepped away from him. “Look, I’m flattered that you’re interested, but I’m not. Now, if you’ll excuse me…”

Noboru looked after you. “What a woman,” he said under his breath. “They all like to play hard to get these days.”

Kurama watched from afar. Many people had come up to him, trying to make conversation, asking him about his recently published paper on the financial landscape and economic outlook. He had barely been able to follow _____ with the amount of interest in him and his work.

“What irony,” he thought. “I whisk her away from the most immediate danger, and she is surrounded by predators here. Among the worst kind.”

There was an ire hidden beneath his calm exterior, pacified for now, as she walked away from the philanderer. Noboru did not follow her, instead choosing to harass other women at the resort. “Good.” Although Kurama was not particularly keen on Noboru’s behavior, at least _____ was no longer his victim of choice. He would deal with Noboru later, if necessary.

For now, Kurama made his way upstairs, politely dismissing himself from conversations. Once in his room, he changed into clothes fitting for a beach excursion.

He opened his door, stepping right across the hallway to knock on _____’s door.

You perked up at the knock, hoping that it was not Noboru -- if it was, you’d make up an excuse about going to bed. “Who is it?”

“It’s Shuichi.”

Your heart fluttered excitedly. “Just a second!” You shoved your dirty laundry, the clothes you had just taken off, into a drawer. Even if you were a slob, Shuichi didn’t have to see it.

You opened your door. “Hi,” you said, taking note of his casual clothing. He was no longer covered from head to toe as he usually was at the office. He donned a light collared, button-up shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and shorts that came down his knees. “It’s nice to see you in something other than a suit.”
“You, as well,” he said, nodding toward your shorts, tank top, and thin cardigan. “I’m surprised you came up so early.”

“I really just wanted to change. I’ll be down again.” You decided against telling him about your run-in with Noboru. If anything, you were sure that he already knew as he had seen your interaction with him at the dinner table.

“To network?”

“To something.”

“You still haven’t been to the beach.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“The sun is nearly set. Perhaps you’d like to?”

“I thought wouldn’t mind going alone, but I think I’d like it more if you came with me.”

Shuichi smiled. “That can be arranged.”

You made sure you had your hotel keycard on you as you left your room. “Mind if we take the stairs?” you said.

“Are you avoiding networking, too?”

“It’s silly, isn’t it? I’m not nearly as popular as you are.”

“You haven’t been in the industry as long as I have.”

“I’m sure many have been in the industry much longer than you have without half your credentials.”

“Credentials only matter so much. You’re young and have many opportunities ahead of you, _____ . You have plenty of time to shine.”

“That’s nice of you to say.” You studied him. “But you can’t be much older than me.”

“No?”

“No. Unless you age infinitely better than the rest of the human population.”

He chuckled.

As the both of you made it to the lobby, Shuichi led the way to the back of the resort, opening up the doors to the beach. There were far fewer people here now that the sun was just about gone. It seemed that most of the guests had gone up to their rooms or visited one of the restaurants for a first class dining experience.

You kicked off your sandals, leaving them near one of the lounge chairs on the patio. The sand felt fine beneath your bare feet, just lightly warm from an afternoon of sun.

The ocean called to you, the cries of the seabirds long gone. You heard the waves crashing upon the water, sliding up in foamy streams. You walked closer, feeling the seawater pool around your ankles, only to be swept away by the tide.
The skies were like a painter’s palette, colors blending in perfectly with one another, from glowing oranges to wispy lavender clouds. You saw the light of the setting sun streak through the horizon. “It’s beautiful,” you whispered, sincere admiration in your musings. The glow of the city back home would never allow you to view such unadulterated sky.

“Inoji is known for its picturesque sunsets,” Shuichi said.

“I can understand why. I’ve never seen anything like it, except in photos.”

“The island is known for many things. Hopefully, you’ll be able to enjoy them before the weekend is over.”

“You said something about a rare phenomenon earlier today.” You began walking again, Shuichi at your side.

“I did.”

“When is it going to happen?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“You still won’t tell me?”

“I’m sure Google will, if you’re that curious.”

You laughed. “I’m just being difficult. I’m going to trust you to surprise me.”

“Oh, so you trust your direct supervisor? I’m honored.”

“Shuichi, can I ask you something personal?”

“You can always ask. I may not answer.”

You decided to take a chance. “Earlier when we were talking about what we’re not-so-great at, you mentioned that you were bad with women. Why would you say that?”

He was quiet for a few moments, gathering his thoughts. “I’ve never been in a serious relationship.”

“Stop.”

“It’s true.”

“Why is that?”

“There are risks associated with every choice you make in your life, _____. Always ask yourself what prizes are the ones worth having, the ones worth the prospect of uncertainty.”

“I think there’s always a reasonable amount of risk when it comes to relationships -- any relationship.”

“Of course. You must decide which risks are most, not reasonable, but worthwhile, because nothing in life worth having comes without it.”

At this point, the stars were starting to twinkle into the night sky, greeting you with a playful wink.
“I’ve never heard that perspective before,” you said. “It makes sense. I just don’t think I have your unbiased, intellectual ability to sift through the possibilities. Whenever I commit myself to a relationship, I want to believe that it’s worth everything, that no matter what happens, love will prevail. I know that’s not the case, but the naive dreamer in me wants to believe differently.”

“Perhaps I need to take your advice, then,” Shuichi said. “Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.”

“Hold fast to dreams, for when dreams go, life is a barren field, frozen with snow.” You smiled at him. “Langston Hughes. One of my favorites.”

“You are a wonder.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Must I repeat myself?” He looked at you, alluring amusement in his eyes.

You felt yourself flushing at his compliment. Hopefully, by the light of the moon, the pink on your cheeks wasn’t quite so apparent. You didn’t know how to respond.

Shuichi glanced back toward the beach, tracing the edge of the lapping waves. “Shall we continue?” he said.

You nodded. “We have a lot of ground to cover, don’t we?”

“That depends on how late you’d like to stay out. This beach stretches for several miles.”

“I’m feeling pretty awake.”

“Well, I’m happy to stay as late as you’d like.”

“Maybe we can walk until we feel tired and then make our way back? I saw that there’s a decent selection of movies available.”

“Don’t forget that the conference begins early tomorrow--” Shuichi saw the coy expression on your face, and his eyes softened. “But one late night certainly wouldn’t hurt.”
Warm

Chapter Notes

So I wrote and rewrote parts of this chapter a couple of times, which is why it's taken so long. I think I'm finally happy with it. :D Sorry! I hope you enjoy!

A warm thanks to Kactuskat16, FannibalToast, and Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What for their comments! I appreciate you and your feedback! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She fell asleep next to him, her breathing steady, her lips slightly parted. Her forehead just touched his shoulder. If she leaned any farther, she might have fallen in his arms. Kurama watched her as their movie selection came to an end and the credits began playing, orchestral music filling the resort room.

They were already in bed, backs supported by the superfluous pillows, legs stretched out in front. Kurama could slip out of bed, spread a blanket over her, and leave her to a night of peaceful dreams.

But something nudged at him when he looked at her, made him feel alive, tugged at his heartstrings in a way that he never quite anticipated.

He hired her because she was competent. Pretty, sure, but Kurama never held physical appearances high on his list of values. It seemed that the young men in the office were enamored with her, perhaps far more than she was willing to recognize. She never took advantage of that even though many of them flocked to her office -- she only asked for help when she needed it, and she took all the advice and guidance seriously as she began to build her own book of business.

In particular, he was impressed with how she handled Ryohei. He was shy and sensitive but the most forward with his feelings, Kurama suspected, as he was the first of the men in the office to take action. And even after she gently turned him down, she said nothing about it. Even when Kurama asked her about the situation at the park, she brewed up a thinly veiled lie about Ryohei’s excitement around taxes to explain his odd behavior.

He smiled at the memory. That day, he learned she was a horrible liar, but her compassion and respect for the feelings of others was unmatched.

He remembered what Koenma had to say about her, privy to a childhood that she had never shared. She had a soft spot for animals, the defenseless, and the weak. Not only did she empathize -- she acted.

She really was a wonder, the part of humanity that was worth protecting.

Kurama reached out, brushing her hair from her face. He was glad that he brought her here. Even though she never noticed the Makai insects, she was plagued by their constant presence. It seemed that they did not follow her here; they really were contained to the city. He could look at her without seeing her surrounded by the pests. She was beautiful.
It was getting late, past midnight now. While Kurama could use the rest, he could not bring himself to leave. His lack of will surprised him -- he was usually so good at delaying gratification.

You stirred, blinking awake. It took a moment, but you soon realized that you were leaning against Shuichi. "O-oh, I’m sorry!" You pulled yourself away, sitting up in bed.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I thought you might have been tired.”

“I didn’t realize I was falling asleep.” You looked toward the TV. “I even missed the ending.”

“They lived happily ever after.”

“It’s that simple, huh?”

“Mm.” Shuichi slipped out of bed, straightening his clothes. “I should be off,” he said. “We both need sleep tonight.”

“You’re right. I think I’m going to shower really quick before bed.” You got up, walking Shuichi to the door. “I had a good time tonight.”

“I, as well.” He had one hand on the door, as he tilted his head to the side. “Maybe next time I won’t bore you to sleep.”

You sighed, feeling a little sheepish. “That wasn’t you. The bed was so comfortable, and I was up so early this morning.”

“I know. I’m just teasing.”

“The movie wasn’t particularly interesting either.”

“If I recall, you were the one who chose it.”

“We can’t all be perfect, Shuichi.”

“No. We are only human, after all.” His hand left the door, and he stepped toward you.

Your heart fluttered in anticipation at him being so close. You didn’t budge, mesmerized by his intense green eyes -- they reflected an expression, a calm yearning that you had never seen in him before.

Shuichi kissed you on the cheek, his lips barely brushing your skin, a quiet and modest offer of his affections. “Goodnight, _____. Sleep well.”

“Goodnight,” you whispered as you watched him open the door.

He looked back at you, exchanging only a brief, demure glance, before leaving.

You couldn’t believe it. It was only a kiss on the cheek, but you felt overwhelmed with a reluctant joy. You ran into the bathroom, deciding that a shower was in order. The running water would help you think.

Kurama walked across the hall, feeling a rather potent mix of emotions.

On the one hand, he was frustrated. Could he not control himself? He was normally so calm and
calculated, three steps ahead of everyone else. He acted on impulse -- that kiss was complete impulse. He was here to earn her trust, not to woo or flirt.

On the other hand, he felt… happy.

He was no stranger to contentment.

He had felt content with his circumstance for much of his human life, having been fortunate enough to know his mother.

He had felt content in his past life, a clever thief stealing artifacts and treasures. The gleam of a rare jewel was enough to placate his wily soul.

But genuine happiness… well, that was something else.

When he was with _____, his heart felt warm.

He hadn’t planned beyond that because he didn’t think it would be an issue. He relied on his intellect and cunning in any given situation. _____ seemed to tap into a reserve of emotion that tampered with his ability to rationalize.

What a gift she had.

He sighed, scanning his key card and opening the door. The bed was still made, untouched throughout the day. He thought it was rather ironic that he left a warm bed in exchange for an empty and cold one.

But tonight, his head was full of musings. He would be lucky if he got a few hours of sleep at all.

You stepped out of the shower, dripping in water. You grabbed a towel, dabbing yourself dry as you replayed the memory of saying goodnight to Shuichi in your head.

You had been over this with yourself at least half a dozen times already. He was your boss. It wouldn’t be appropriate to start a relationship with him.

But, then again, he didn’t seem to have a problem with it.

It wasn’t like you fell head over heels the first time you met. You had known Shuichi for over two months now. You acknowledged that he was handsome, intelligent, and kind, but you hadn’t yet developed feelings for him up until recently.

Objectively, you were taking it slowly, not rushing into anything. Perhaps it didn’t matter what decision you made as long as it was done deliberately and carefully.

Really, you needed to talk with Shuichi. You could exhaust yourself with hypothetical situations and ifs, ands, or buts -- ultimately, you just needed to sit down and have him answer some of your questions.

You completed your evening rituals, slipping under the covers. You felt a little silly as a thought came to you. You rolled over to the side where Shuichi had been, taking a deep breath as you pressed your nose into the pillow.

It smelled of roses. A whole bouquet of fresh-cut roses, dew drops still on each of the silken petals, wrapped deftly to protect your fingers from thorns. You had to take another breath to ensure that your nose was working -- the sweet scent was unmistakable. How peculiar.
After a little more conclusion-less thinking, you drifted off to the perfume of roses.

In the morning, you headed downstairs to the conference, feeling somewhat refreshed from the limited sleep. The scent of fresh roses had long faded, but you dreamed of wandering a garden blooming with flowers.

It was Thursday. You took a look at the agenda for the day: Health care and long-term care in the morning; a lunch break; hybrid insurance and annuities in the afternoon. Dinner would follow, and another networking opportunity with a special event late into the evening.

“A special event, huh?” You flipped the agenda. There was no other information on the back of the card.

“Looking forward to this evening, hm?” Shuichi had sat down next to you, looking as sharp as he always did.

“Oh, hello,” you said. “Is this that phenomenon that you had been telling me about?”

He nodded. “It seems that the chairman recommended to keep the details a secret to surprise everyone.”

“Well, I’m glad I’m not the only one in the dark.”

Shuichi smiled at you. “How did you sleep last night?”

“I slept well, thank you,” you said, looking away shyly. “You?”

“Mm. I slept with the window open last night. The breeze was soothing.”

“I’m sure it was -- why didn't I think of that?” Your fingers fiddled with the agenda card. “I really enjoyed our walk on the beach. I know you said that Inoji was a prized location, but I guess I never really realized just how much until now. It really was picturesque.”

“I thought so, too.”

Others began to join your table, introducing themselves and their firms with pride. You met a financial analyst from Shuichi’s hometown. She was an older lady who had been in the business for a couple of decades, and she was proud of it. There was a professor of economics who didn’t practice in the financial industry specifically, but he was interested in conferences, so he came every year. There was a young man, fresh from college, who had gotten all necessary licenses to serve as a trust manager and fiduciary, an impressive accomplishment for someone so new to the finance world.

The conference attendees were all talented. You weren’t sure how you measured up.

After opening remarks, you attended your assigned breakout sessions.

You arrived early, taking a seat toward the back of the conference room, prepping your notes. Shuichi had chosen to go to the breakout session on small business planning and then ethics, so he wouldn’t be accompanying you in the morning.

“Good morning.” Noboru sat down next to you. “I hope this seat isn’t taken?”

You shook your head, gesturing toward the chair. “No. It’s open.”
“I’m afraid you missed all of the fun last night, _____.”

“Did I? What do you mean?”

“Party in my suite. There was champagne and music, a hot jacuzzi, and the best entertainment money can buy.”

“Is that what fund managers spend their money on?”

He grinned at you. “I think you need to relax. Come by my place tonight, and I’ll show you a good time.”

“I think I’ll pass, thank you.”

“Has working with Shuichi Minamino taken all the fun out of life?”

You had to stop yourself from rolling your eyes. “What does Shuichi have to do with this?”

“Don’t answer a question with a question, sweetheart. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart.”

“Oh, sensitive much? I know you’re an independent, strong woman, but you have to remember to have some fun.”

“I think we might have different definitions of fun. Besides, you never answered my question. Shuichi is respected in the financial industry -- his research is highly regarded. I don’t see why you’re being so critical of him.”

“He didn’t even attend college.”

You weren’t aware of that, but it wasn’t that Shuichi lied to you -- you had never asked, and if you had, you were sure you’d be met with an honest answer. “I’m not sure a traditional education would have helped him much,” you said. “All things considered, I think he’s done well for himself.”

“And what has he done with his immense talents? Wrote a few papers? Hosted a few seminars? Done a few interviews? He could be rolling in dough or living the dream -- he could have anything he wants, but he’s just a mama’s boy who visits home every once in a while. Sounds like a boring life to me.”

“You know,” you said, feeling annoyed, “for someone who doesn’t seem to approve of his life choices, you sure know a lot about him.”

“We went to the same high school. I doubt he even recognizes me now. Let’s say we didn't run in the same social circles. He was at the top of the class, always with his nose buried in a book.”

“And you?”

“I preferred more immediate gratification.”

“Well, I’d say that has an impact on success, but clearly you’re the fund manager in the room. I’m not sure why you’re so concerned about Shuichi. Maybe you should be more confident in your abilities.”

Noboru would have continued the conversation, but the speaker had arrived, starting her
presentation on health care considerations.

It was a dull breakout session. You took good notes, but most of the information you were already familiar with -- Shuichi was a good teacher, and he set you up for success with his provided resources at the office.

When the presentation ended, you gathered your things. Noboru seemed very interested in where you were headed next, and he followed you to the next conference room.

“I’ve elected the long-term care session,” you said. “Did you?”

“I was going to attend the ethics session, but I think I’ll follow you instead.”

“I think you make your elections before you arrive for a reason. There may not be enough seats for everyone who chose the long-term care session if you show up now.”

Noboru rolled his eyes. “Sounds like their problem. I’m more interested in you.”

“Me? That’s ridiculous.”

“Don’t you think you’re interesting? Maybe you should be more confident.”

“It’s not so much that I’m unconfident -- I’m doubting the sincerity of your interest in me.”

He stepped in front of you, leaning so close you could smell the morning mimosa on his breath. “And why do you think that is? I can’t like a pretty lady? A guy like me isn’t interested in smarts? Is that it?”

You brushed him aside. “While it’s certainly not my place to make assumptions, you barely know me.” You noticed the sign for the ethics session across the hall. “There’s your stop, Noboru. Better get to it.” Without waiting for a response, you picked up your speed and slipped into your own conference room.

As soon as your late morning session ended, you searched for Shuichi. You had no intention of telling him about your interactions of Noboru, but you figured that if you were with Shuichi, at least, he wouldn’t bother you.

Your boss was quite popular. He attracted the attention of many of his esteemed colleagues, and he was already sharing some of his studies with a small gathering of people a short distance from the lunch buffet.

He noticed your approach and waved you closer, introducing you as a fellow advisor at his firm. To your surprise, he did not mention that he was your supervisor -- he treated you as an equal.

You met more people, quite possibly more than you could remember. Eventually, everyone filed to the buffet for lunch.

“Well?” you said, looking at Shuichi. “Are you hungry?”

“Hungry, yes, but I think I’d prefer a different view. How about we take a walk? Inoji Sovereign Resort is known for its tropical gardens, best enjoyed in the daytime. Perhaps we can find a place to picnic?”

“I’d like that!” you said, thinking that it’d be a good opportunity to ask him about last night.
You each grabbed lunch from the buffet table before taking off. In the busy afternoon, no one even noticed that you were slipping out of the conference.

“Did you enjoy your sessions? Health care and long-term care, I believe?” he asked.

“I did,” you said. “Nothing revolutionary, but they both had good information. What about you? Small business in retirement and ethics?”

“I had a similar experience.” Shuichi led the way. After a few turns, he opened a less conspicuous, windowed door.

When you stepped outside, you saw many shades of green, accompanied by the sound of running water, like a playful babble of a stream. The garden was well-kept, trimmed and pruned so that the plants could optimally grow. Flowers grew in organized planters, brandishing shades of yellows, oranges, and purples. A man-made pond was the focal point at the end of the garden path, the water glistening in the sunlight as it flowed beneath a wooden bridge. At the center of the pond was an elegant cabana, draped in sheer white cloths.

“I guess this will do,” you said, feeling rather in awe. You were surprised that no one else was out here.

Shuichi crossed the bridge, and you followed closely after. A small side table and two cushy chairs awaited you. You set your lunch down and stood by Shuichi, who was looking out at the garden with a pensive gaze. “_______,” he started, “I want to apologize. I acted rashly last night.”

“Oh.” You looked away.

“Hm?”

“I… well, I liked it,” you said shyly. You weren't usually so forward, especially not about topics that had the potential of making others uncomfortable. Your own response surprised you.

Although he remained composed, your reply seemed to placate him. “Then I may have spoken too soon. Forgive me.”

“You seem to be taking on a rather apologetic personality today,” you said, trying to lighten the mood.

“What would you prefer instead?”

“I think I prefer intellectual Shuichi. Especially at a financial advisor conference. Seems most appropriate.”

“Yes, I have to agree.”

“But.”

“But?”

“I really don’t think I mind the Shuichi from last night either.” You felt the heat creeping up in your cheeks. “He surprised me a little… but in a good way.”

He smiled, a gentle laugh in his eyes. “Perhaps you’ll be seeing more of him.”

Chapter End Notes
Finally~! A real budding romance! I hope ya'll are as excited as I am! :DDDD
Botan sighed as she stepped through the doors of Shuichi’s workplace. It was around 12:00 p.m., and she wondered if she had come at a bad time because there was no one at the front desk. “Anyone here?” she called out.

“Just a moment!” From the hallway in the back came a young man, pushing glasses onto the bridge of his nose. He was dressed in a suit and tie. “Can I help you?”

“O-oh, hello!” Botan recognized this fellow. He was the one with _____ that day at the park, the man she wasn’t interested in. Awkward. “I’m here to pick something up.”

“Of course. What’s your name, Miss..?”

“Botan,” she said. “Botan is fine.”

“Hm.” Ryohei scanned through the day’s appointments. “I don’t show that you’re scheduled to meet with any of our advisors.”

“I was told to pick a key up at the front desk. _____ left hers here so I could drop in on her dog.”

“Did she? I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware.”

“Maybe I should come by later.”

“Oh, no, no!” A middle-aged woman rushed out from the hallway. “I was in the restroom. Please excuse me. I am well-aware of your intentions, Botan. It’s very kind of you to help _____ out while she’s at her conference.” She opened a desk drawer, pulling out a key dangling from a keychain.

“Yes, thank you!”

Ryohei took a step toward the back office. “Looks like Rita’s going to take care of you. Have a good day, Botan.”

“Thank you for your help.”

“I hope _____ and Shuichi are having a wonderful time at their conference,” Rita said. “I know Shuichi was very eager to have her join him this year. As the newest member of our advisor team, he wants her to have the opportunity to learn as much as she can.”

“I’m sure they’re having a wonderful time. They’re in Inoji, after all!”

“That’s right. When I heard that’s where the conference was this year, I thought about getting my licenses and becoming an advisor!”
“Well, it’s never too late to follow your dream. Thank you for your help today!” Botan left with the key in hand. As she walked down the street, she looked at the keychain, unable to suppress a giggle. Lo and behold, the keychain was a little orange fox. “Looks like ______ already has a thing for foxes. Boy, is she in for a surprise~!”

Lunch went quickly. The garden was whimsical, the trickling water a serene song in the background. After you mentioned how you liked Shuichi’s kiss from the night before, the topic changed, almost abruptly, to the afternoon sessions of the conference.

You wondered if it was because you spoke out of turn. Perhaps you should have just accepted his apology and moved on?

But Shuichi didn’t seem to mind your response. In fact, he was receptive. “Perhaps you’ll be seeing more of him,” he had said.

You glanced at him, trying to read the calm expression on his face. No luck. He was as composed as ever.

He saw your attempt and smiled. “What’s on your mind?” he said.

“I can’t ever tell what you’re thinking,” you said. “Not by looking at you anyway. Some people I can read like an open book. You, I can’t.”

“Is that so important?”

“No, but I feel like you’re very perceptive of me, so we’re not on an even playing field.”

“That’s not necessarily true.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No. You have a far greater advantage than you realize.”

“Clearly you’re aware of something that I’m not.”

“I’ll share tonight.”

“Why not now?”

“Because our recess is nearly over, and I’d rather you be able to focus on your next session. Having to walk away mid-conversation is never comfortable or productive.”

“While you make a fair point,” you started, “you’ll always have the patience edge on me, and that is unfair.”

“Patience is the mother of all virtues. It may do you well to practice it -- I can help.”

“By testing my patience? You’re already doing that.”


The afternoon sessions went by slowly. You almost wished that you and Shuichi did not have that conversation in the garden. Hybrid insurance and annuities just weren’t as interesting as he was. No matter how hard you tried to take notes and give the presenter your undivided attention, your
thoughts kept going back to Shuichi.

In a way, you were frustrated with yourself. It wasn’t that you hadn’t fallen in love before, but with your career just beginning, you wanted to put your best foot forward and take advantage of the opportunities before you.

You wondered if Shuichi struggled as much as you did underneath his composure. He maintained a professional office with the highest standards. Surely, making the decision to date an employee was a difficult one to him.

You were not oblivious. Shuichi cared about you. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have chosen you to come to this conference. As much as he tried to justify his decision, you knew there were more senior advisors who could also benefit from this trip to Inoji. He was under no professional obligation to bring you, considering your limited tenure.

But he did. You hoped he invited you along because he saw potential in you.

“...well, if he brought me here because he likes me, I wouldn’t complain either,” you decided.

And what about you? It started so recently, but you had feelings for him, too. You found it difficult to admit, given the nature of your relationship, but you couldn’t deny your attraction toward him. You enjoyed your conversations, the short time you spent together. You liked his sense of humor, his wisdom, the untapped depth of his character.

Were you a good match? Did you see a future?

Knowing nothing else, you had to say yes -- the naive girl in you had to believe it. You didn’t want to get your hopes up, but you had a feeling that he was going to be honest with you tonight.

Dinner was lively. The conference attendees enjoyed themselves and the company, the discussions at this point a good mix of finance-related topics and non-work-related subjects. Shuichi sat next to you, a glass of red wine in his hand -- you noticed he didn’t drink out of it often. Perhaps he was being polite.

As usual, Shuichi was swarmed with interested attendees. You figured that this would be the norm during your stay here. That was the downside of having a prolific and intelligent boss, you supposed. You wanted time with him alone, but you weren’t about to pull him away from his opportunity to network.

You excused yourself from the table, a drink in hand as you did a bit of networking on your own. You met a few financial advisors who were interested in your work and how you had liked the sessions today.

After you had enough chatting, you went upstairs to your room. Many of the attendees did the same, ready to change into more comfortable clothes for the evening. You removed your suit jacket, blouse, and skirt, trading them for a casual outfit. Although you weren’t usually too concerned with your physical appearance, you spent some time on your hair and makeup.

You heard a knock on your door. “Just a second!” You felt excited, finishing your grooming with a spritz of body mist, and you rushed to greet Shuichi.

It was not Shuichi.

“Hello, ____,” Noboru said. He had chosen to shed his business attire as well, changing into
swim trunks and an open shirt, revealing a well-sculpted upper body. “You look both lovely and disappointed.”

“Admittedly, I was expecting someone else. Can I help you?”

“Thought I’d invite you to my suite again. See if maybe you’re interested tonight. Shuichi seems to be busy with other people.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong.

Before you could respond, Noboru stepped into the room, brushing past you to the balcony doors. “You have an incredible view from here. It may not be a first class suite, but this is quite nice. Proves you really can’t go wrong with the Sovereign.”

“What are you really doing here?” you asked, feeling annoyed that he pushed his way in without permission.

“I already told you. You’re invited to join me tonight -- beautiful view, warm jacuzzi, mojito bar, even cannabis-infused chocolates. We can even go to the casino, if you’d like. I have a butler waiting on me hand-and-foot for whatever your heart desires.”

“I don’t want your amenities.”

“Women usually love the lap of luxury. Don’t tell me you’re not the least bit interested.”

“That sort of lifestyle isn’t what I’m looking for.”

Noboru walked into you, forcing you to step backwards or be smothered. “Come on, babe. Don’t be such a sourpuss. Give it a shot, huh? Give me a chance?”

“No thanks. I’m happy where I am.” You felt your lower back touch the desk behind you.

He leaned into you, very aware that you were trapped. “I could show you a good time, the best night you’ve ever had.” His hand touched your arm.

You shrugged him off, unafraid of the consequences. “I already told you no. I’m not going to change my mind. If you touch me again, I’m going to scream -- you’ve conveniently left the door open when you came in uninvited. I ask that you leave and not bother me again.”

He frowned. “No one says no to me, _____.

“I just did. Now leave me alone.”

A couple walked by your open door, chatting among themselves. They did not notice you and Noboru, but their brief presence seemed to dissuade Noboru’s advances.

He growled, almost like a tiger that had failed to corner its prey, but he backed off. “You’ll regret that.”

“Get out.”

After he left, you sighed, relieving yourself of the stress in your body. You kept a brave face during that confrontation -- you weren’t about to show fear to someone who would so obviously take advantage of it. But you knew how cruel some people could be, especially the entitled ones who usually got everything they wanted. Noboru’s last threat gave you the chills.
“_____?”

His familiar voice came from the open door, and you relaxed. “Shuichi.”

“Are you all right?” He stepped inside, still dressed in his business attire. “You look a little shaken.”

“I’m okay.”

“What happened?” Genuine concern was in his eyes.

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. I just walked past Noboru on my way down the hall; he looked irate. I assume he was here?”

“He invited himself in,” you said. “I basically told him to get lost.”

“That explains his sour expression.”

“Yeah. Sorry if I made things awkward for you.” You looked away, staring at the ground.

“Don’t apologize,” Shuichi said, searching your face for answers. “He overstepped his boundaries. Whatever you may have said to him, he deserved. I’m more concerned about you.”

“I’m fine, really,” you replied. “He’s clearly not used to rejection, but there’s a first for everything, right?”

Shuichi nodded cautiously. “Did he threaten you?”

His keen perception never ceased to amaze you. “How did you know?”

“I know his type.”

“From high school?”

“Ah, he told you.”

“Barely anything. Only that you went to high school together. He said he didn’t think you’d recognize him.”

“I do. If I recall, he’s insecure about his talents.”

“Destructively so,” you added.

“Let’s forget about him,” Shuichi said. “I’m going to change. I’ll return as soon as I’m done, and we can head downstairs for this evening’s special event.”

“Oh. I had forgotten about that.”

“Are you feeling up for it?”

“I am.” You smiled at him reassuringly. “I’m actually very excited to see what it is.”

“Good.” He returned your smile. “Relax for a few minutes, _____ . I’ll be back soon.” He shut the door gently on the way out.
Shuichi made you feel that everything was okay. That was a good sign, right?
Kurama walked across the hallway to his own room. Although he kept a calm facade, mostly for her sake, the thought of anyone threatening ____ summoned his ire. He would have to deal with Noboru -- Kurama would not tolerate any more of his contemptible advances.

The silver lining was that she was unharmed.

Underneath it all, Kurama was actually impressed with her handling of the situation. It seemed that Noboru hadn’t changed since high school. He was self-absorbed, indulgent, and chauvinistic. ____ shut him down, while many women felt pressured to oblige him.

He liked how strong, how resilient she was. She did not look for pity or overtly blame her oppressor; she simply looked for a solution to the problem. He certainly wouldn’t mind coming to her rescue, but she didn’t seem like the damsel in distress type.

Kurama hoped that she would never require his protection.

But in some ways, she already did. With the recent pestilence in the city, the distinct possibility that her dog could be a demon, she already needed him.

Didn’t she?

Was that why he felt so inclined to keep her in his sight, under his watchful eye? Was that why he lay awake last night, thinking that, despite all logic, he should have stayed with her?

Kurama was no stranger to uncertainty. He moved through the unknown with ease, planning out several paths to take and altering the routes as the situation suited him. With each obstacle he came across, he asked questions first, carefully assessing the circumstances, before making an educated decision that would grant him the highest chances of success.

With _____, the uncertainty was foreign. He loathed to admit it, but it made him uncomfortable. He felt like he lost a degree of control to her, through no fault of her own.

And despite all that, he wanted her close. He wanted to be her protector, the one whom she could run to if things went awry. He wanted to be worthy of her affections, her smile, her admiration.

As he traded his business attire for clothes appropriate for an evening beach outing, he thought about ____. Surely, a relationship with her was in her best interest? If she accepted him, that was.

If he could earn her trust, he could safely remove Yugen from her life. This seemed like the
quickest, most effective route. That was his plan all along.

He just never thought he would fall so hard.

All of the sudden, he wanted something from her that was not so simply earned. The situation was delicate, Kurama realized, and for the first time in his life, he confided in an aspect completely out of his control: hope.

You spent a few more moments in front of the mirror, touching up your makeup and hair. Although your run-in with Noboru unnerved you, the thought of spending another evening with Shuichi seemed to wash your worries away.

You had a few relationships in your lifetime, but clearly nothing that stood the test of time.

Shuichi seemed so different than the men you had dated previously.

It was silly, but you never went on more than a couple of dates with someone unless you thought you could imagine a future with him. It wasn’t that you were eager to settle down and get married, but casual relationships simply weren’t on your list of priorities.

You wanted something more -- you wanted someone whom you would converse with, someone who was willing to discuss philosophy and ethics with you into the wee hours of the morning.

You wanted something beyond physical attraction -- you wanted a charming personality, a breathtaking soul that made you pine for more.

You wanted something that ran deeper than love -- you wanted a friend, a partner who cherished you because they understood who you were and how your lives intertwined.

Your heart wanted that person to be Shuichi. When you heard a knock at your door, you took a breath. Tonight was the night.

You opened the door to a handsome Shuichi. “Hi.”

“Good evening,” he said.

“So are you going to tell me what this phenomenon is now?” you asked as you stepped out.

“You’ve waited this long. I think you deserve to see it for yourself.”

“I knew you would say that.”

“Then why ask?”

You laughed. “To prove myself right, of course.”

“Ahh, so that’s why you’re always so full of questions.” He led you down the stairs until you made it to the lobby.

You saw many people gathered there, probably ready to view the same phenomenon that you had been waiting for all day. They shuffled through the entrance to the beachfront.

“Shouldn’t we follow them?”

“If you don’t mind an extra bit of walking, I have a better plan.”
“Oh. I don’t, but now you have me even more curious.”

The sun was still on the horizon, the same beautiful display that you had seen the evening before. People were chattering contentedly among themselves as you left through a much less crowded, different exit.

“Quickly,” Shuichi said, offering you his hand. “You don’t want to miss it.”

You paused for a short moment, feeling rather gleeful. You took his hand, and it was like a spark lit up at the touch of his skin.

If he noticed, he didn’t react beyond a small smile. He led you on a bit of a hike, walking farther away from the ocean, climbing a rather steep and rocky ridge. He chose his path carefully, ensuring that you kept up with each of his steps. As you climbed, the plant life became denser and denser -- you were almost at a point where you wanted to ask Shuichi if he was going in the right direction, but he seemed certain of himself.

Once you reached flat ground again, Shuichi escorted you back in the direction of the rushing waves. He parted the brush for you with his arm, revealing just a small bit of the sun left on the horizon. You had the most amazing view of the ocean, up high enough so you could see the water from nearly any angle, and close enough that you could still feel gusts of the balmy ocean breeze.

“Just in time,” he said, gesturing toward a large rock that you could sit on.

“Oh, wow! Look! The moon is red.” You noticed the moon in the pending night sky, only partly visible. About a third of it was enshrouded in darkness, a gradient of rusty red to a mango gold presented in its glow.

“A partial lunar eclipse. It only occurs once a year, if that, usually in the summer here.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“That’s not all,” Shuichi said, seated just behind you. “Watch the ocean as the sun sinks below the horizon.”

It happened gradually, but even as the sun set, you noticed a faint glow in the ocean. The stars began to twinkle into the night sky, and their reflection seemed to touch the water. You watched, feeling rather bewildered. The stars in the ocean moved with the waves, lapping against the white shores -- and when the water retreated, it left blue specks of diamond in its wake. The whole shoreline glowed, and the ocean seemed to be set afire with azure radiance.

“What..?” you said underneath your breath.

“Bioluminescent phenomenon. It occurs on only a few beaches around the world. It’s caused by specific species of plankton -- the light is a defense mechanism, causing a chemical reaction when it’s distressed, probably to confuse and disorient predators. The light is normally tame to the human eye, but the plankton reacts heavily to the lunar eclipse, which is what you are observing.”

“I can’t believe I’ve never heard or read about this. It’s beautiful.”

“Beautiful, indeed.”

You broke your gaze from the ocean to say something to Shuichi, but when you turned around, you caught him already looking at you. There was a tender gaze in his eyes, a glint of hope, it seemed. He was close to you, the warmth of his body a contrast to the high ocean winds. You were
mesmerized by him, drawn to him, almost like a butterfly to its favorite flower.

It felt so right. You leaned forward, caught in his gaze, almost forgetting the beauty of Inoji in that moment.

Shuichi responded by closing the distance between you. His hand gently traced your jaw, tilting your chin to meet him in a kiss.

Your heart beat wildly in your chest. His lips were soft against yours, and the scent of roses was there again. As far as you were concerned, this was the perfect first kiss for any couple -- it was innocent, but also a token of the promises yet to come.

When your brief kiss ended, Shuichi reached for your hands, his fingers running over yours. “____,” he whispered, his face still close, “I want to ask you something.”

“Well, say it.”

“Whenever I am with you, I find myself breathless. Last night, I told you I’ve never been in a serious relationship before, because I never thought it justified the risk. I feel differently with you. _____, you are worth any amount of risk required. I would be honored if you’d give me a chance to prove that I’m worthy of you.”

His words left you in awe. You had wanted to hear them, but you hadn’t expected them so flawlessly presented -- and you certainly didn’t know how to respond now. “Yes,” you said, feeling that it was the only appropriate response.

Your expression must have been better spoken than you because Shuichi smiled, his eyes softening. He kissed you again, this time letting your lips linger.

You reached for him, leaning closer. Your hands touched his chest, his neck, the warmth welcome as the night began to cool, the winds picking up speed. He pulled you close, one hand around your waist, the other a gentle guide as he deepened the kiss.

The ocean tide in the background seemed to hum, complementing your evening with a peaceful symphony.

Your heart was so full.

That night, you headed back to the resort, hand in hand.

You thought it would be strange that you were officially dating your boss -- he had made an offer impossible to refuse, after all. Nevertheless, it felt right. Even stealing a shy glance from him made your heart melt.

He must have noticed. “_____,” he said, stopping for a moment. He gave your arm a gentle tug, pulling you closer in one graceful motion. “What’s on your mind?”

You fell into his arms effortlessly. “I’m just on cloud nine,” you said, resting your head on his chest.

“I haven’t heard that expression in a while.”

“I couldn’t think of another one fitting my feelings.”

“I’ll allow it.” He leaned his head against yours. “Come along. Let’s settle in for the night. I think
we’ll both be thankful for the rest.”

“You didn’t sleep well last night?”

“I was thinking of someone.”

“Your friend, Yusuke?”

Shuichi chuckled. “Yes, my friend, Yusuke. But you must not tell him -- he’ll let the attention go to his head.”

“I suppose you could pretend it was me.”

“I think that’ll have to do.” He kissed your temple.

You both made your way back to your room, where you selected another movie for the evening.

About an hour in, you fell asleep on Shuichi’s shoulder again, this time in peaceful bliss.

The smell of roses drifted into your dreams.

Chapter End Notes

And, my dear readers, now that the reader and Kurama are officially together, you know some shit's about to go down. ;) Give it a few chapters -- I'll let ya'll enjoy your relationship for a while.
An immense thank you to Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Kactuskat16, and FannibalToast for the comments! I really appreciate your feedback and hearing your thoughts! :D

I would like to draw your attention to something I'm trying out to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You still have through the end of August to participate.

There will be a few more chapters of fluff and setup -- the RC and Kurama delve deeper into their relationship. I might have written smut, which I don't usually do. Then, shit's going down, and I hope you're happy with the emotional disaster than ensues. :D

Kurama gently shifted _____ off his shoulder, tucking her into bed with a lightweight blanket. The balcony door was open, so there was a small breeze that drafted in through the open doors, chilling the otherwise comfortable resort room. She would sleep well with the smell of ocean and the light humming of the tides.

He touched her cheek with the very tip of his fingers, stroking down to her chin. She looked so peaceful in her sleep.

“I'll be back,” he thought to her. “Just stay here and dream sweet dreams.”

He had business to address. Kurama left the room, shutting the door quietly behind him. He wandered across the resort into the foyer that led to the suites. Perhaps he would book one of them in the future when he brought her back… for an anniversary of some sort, maybe.

He thought his own musings were silly; he ought to focus on nurturing his relationship in the present instead of thinking too far into the future.

He heard particularly obnoxious music coming from one of the suites, a sickly sweet smell in the air, and he knew he had arrived in the right place. Without hesitation, he rapped on the door, ensuring his knocks could be heard above the music.

After some stumbling, a girl opened the door. She seemed too young to be wearing the amount of makeup she did and too full for the amount of cloth that made up her bikini -- was she even 18?

“Oh, are you here for the party?” she asked, her high-pitched voice drawn out toward the end of the question. She giggled and nearly fell over.

Kurama had to catch her from falling. “I’m looking for Noboru,” he said.

She pointed a finger at him, opening her mouth as she processed his question. “You’re cute~! Wanna dance with me?” She pressed herself against him, looking hopeful.

“Who’s at the door?” a familiar voice called from inside.
Kurama remained composed. He helped the girl inside, guiding her to the sofa. He made eye contact with the host as he sat her down. She hiccupped, laying all the way back, babbling about how lovely Kurama’s red hair was.

“Ah, Minamino! What brings you here?” Noboru asked, two other young women on either side, clinging to him with drinks in their hands.

“Noboru.” Kurama’s facial expression didn’t change. “A word.” It wasn’t a question.

Noboru shooed the other women away, even the girl on the sofa, who could only get up with the help of one of the others. “Let’s have a conversation, man to man. Want a drink? No? You weren’t fun in high school, you aren’t fun now. You have to lighten up, live a little -- you know what I’m saying?”

“You know why I’m here.”

“____, right?” Noboru strutted casually around the room, beer in hand. “Hot lady you have working for you. This is the first time you’ve brought a girl to one of these conferences. Finally come to your senses?”

“I would insist you treat her with respect, but I think we’re beyond that point.”

“What are you talking about, Minamino? I invited her to a party, she refused, I tried to coax her out to have some fun, is all! Otherwise, she’d be stuck with boring old you!”

The personal insults had no effect on Kurama -- he was here on _____’s behalf. “Leave her be,” Kurama said, his eyes steely. “Don’t approach her, talk to her, or even look at her.”

“Hey,” Noboru said, stepping closer. He was taller than Kurama, certainly bolder, exerting a masculine energy. “I do what I want, all right? Women love me. If you’re trying to make a point, you’d better stake your claim.”

“Women are not prizes to be won.”

“This one is. Have you seen her ass in that skirt?”

Kurama’s rage flared, and his eyes narrowed in disgust. He spoke with a venomously low pitch: “Whatever it is you value most -- your reputation, your wealth, your life -- be ready to pick up the pieces, should you disturb her again.”

Noboru saw the difference in Kurama’s demeanor, and he quieted, looking away. “Whatever. Get out of here, you killjoy.”

Satisfied, Kurama left. A warm bed awaited him, and as he walked back to her room, he smiled at the prospect of waking up next to her.

You woke up spooned in Shuichi’s arms, feeling his warm breath on your neck. The memories of last night came flooding back to you, and you nearly blushed at the mere thought of how he had kissed you.

“Good morning, ____,” he said, nuzzling your hair.

You rolled around to face him, your head still on your pillow. “Can I ask you something?”

“Whatver you’d like.”
“Why is it that you smell like roses?”

He exhaled in a small laugh. “Is that what I smell like?”

“That’s what I smell.”

“You must be referring to those.” He nodded toward your nightstand.

You craned your neck, only to see a large bouquet of flowers, vivid colors arranged in a natural composition. You were no expert in flowers, but this arrangement seemed professionally done -- there were different shapes and blossoms, every petal soft and adorned with droplets of dew. The light pouring through the open balcony door made the colors even more brilliant, the glass of the vase glistening.

“Shuichi, they’re beautiful! You didn’t have to do that.” You sat up in bed to study the bouquet more closely.

“I wanted to. Happy 12-hour anniversary.”

You laughed. “That’s about the cheekiest thing I’ve ever heard, but I love the thought. Thank you.” You kissed him.

He accepted the kiss, pulling you closer. “There’s a thin line between romantic and cheeky. I’ll be sure to work on that fine distinction.”

“I really do love it, Shuichi, cheeky or otherwise. By the way, you’re aware I don’t know much about plants, but I do know that roses and tulips aren’t tropical.”

“They must be imported. I expect the best from the most highly regarded florist in town. They exclusively service the Sovereign. It is a rather romantic destination, after all.”

“I’ll say.” You looked at the time. “We really should get out of bed, hm? Isn’t your presentation today?”

Shuichi didn’t move, instead resting his chin on your shoulder, his arms around your waist. “Yes, but minimal preparation is required. I feel ready.”

Of course he did. Although usually reserved, he was incredibly charismatic when he wanted to be. You leaned your head into his. “You still have to look nice for the presentation, don’t you?”

“I suppose.” He gave you a gentle squeeze before releasing you. “You’re right.”

“I’ll meet you downstairs?”

He kissed your cheek before he left. “Yes, my love.”

His term of endearment made you glow. It was not as compelling as the three special words that you wanted to hear, but you supposed that would come later, as was appropriate. There was no sense in rushing this relationship -- honestly, you still weren’t a hundred percent sure how it started. You were quite happy even hearing the word “love” come from his mouth.

Shuichi’s presentation was the first one of the morning. When you stepped into the conference room, he was making conversation with a few other people, setting up the PowerPoint on the podium computer.
You took a seat in your usual spot after grabbing some breakfast from the buffet. You would have to pay close attention to Shuichi’s presentation. He may ask you questions afterward, and you certainly wouldn’t want to disappoint.

You noticed Noboru entering the conference room. You felt appalled, unsure of how you’d react if he chose to sit down next to you. He made eye contact with you -- but there was something different about his usual smug expression. Noboru turned away immediately, heading for another table. Perhaps your stand last night was enough to make a point? You doubted it. Men like Noboru were persistent. Whatever the reason, however, you were thankful that he left you alone for the time being.

Soon, other financial professionals joined you at your table, taking up all the seats around you.

“Good morning, everyone,” the host said into the microphone. “Happy Friday! I know this is the final conference day for some of you, so we’ll make it a fun one. We have a special presentation from Mr. Shuichi Minamino regarding the global economic outlook. He has written over a dozen nationally regarded papers on economic analysis and is an expert on holistic financial planning. Please give him a warm round of applause.”

Shuichi stepped up to the podium. Your eyes were fixed on him, the soft features of his face in contrast with this wayward hair. He was so handsome. You had no idea how you ended up with him, why he had chosen you. You were lucky.

While you took good notes, your mind drifted from time to time, daydreaming about your new boyfriend. The rest of the day was much the same, even during your brief lunch recess and your other breakout sessions. Due to Shuichi’s informative presentation, you didn’t get to speak with him until after the day was over. Although you wanted to, you thought this might have been for the best as you had not yet spoken to him about the nature of your relationship in a professional setting. It would do you both good to exercise some discretion until you talked.

That night, after the networking portion of the conference was over, Shuichi took you by the hand. “Come with me,” he said, leading you from the crowded beach patio.

“Where are we going?”

“Anywhere. I tired easily of the casual conversations that come from networking events.”

“You mean because of your well-earned popularity after your presentation this morning.”

“You enjoyed it?”

“I did.”

“What was your favorite part?”

“Well,” you began with a sheepish laugh. “I liked looking at you.”

Shuichi glanced at you, a mischievous expression you had never seen in his eyes before. “Yours is my favorite response to that question all day. In fact, it makes me want to kiss you.”

“I think that can be arranged--”

He cut you off with a kiss, and you practically melted into his arms. You returned his kiss, relishing the touch of his lips, the warmth of being so close to him. Your display of affection lasted until you heard footsteps around the corner, at which point you politely ceased.
“You really do leave me breathless,” he said as he broke away, a reference to his compliment from last night.

“Very funny, Shuichi.”

“I thought you’d appreciate it.”

You returned to your room without incident, the flowers from this morning as fresh as ever. Shuichi opened the balcony doors that you had closed when you left, letting in the ocean wind. The sun had just set, the moon casting its luminescence on the waves. You joined him on the balcony, admiring the beauty before you.

“I want to ask you something,” you said.

“You don’t have to preface your questions, _____,” he replied, wrapping an arm around your shoulder. “Just ask. I will answer.”

It did seem rather silly; it was something you did out of habit. Guess you would have to break it.

“That much is true.” Shuichi gently tipped your chin so that you looked him in the eye. “Candidly, I’m not worried, and I’m not saying that as the person with the power dynamic in the relationship. I promise I will always respect you and your wishes. If you’d prefer to keep our relationship confidential in the office, I am in favor. While I assure you that you’re here by your own merit, I certainly don’t want you made uncomfortable by anyone else thinking that I am affording you special treatment.”

Everything was going to be okay. You saw it in his eyes, heard it in his voice. You embraced him, feeling assured that whatever decision you made was the right one. Shuichi was the person you needed in your life. You knew it was foolish to be making such a claim so early on in your relationship… but it felt so right.

“I think,” you started, “I’d prefer to keep it a secret. At least for now. I’m not terribly close to anyone at the company that I normally talk about my romantic life. I doubt you are either.”

“Rita does like to tease me about finding a girlfriend, but I can easily change the subject.”

Your mind went to Ryohei, dreading the awkwardness that would ensue. You pulled away from Shuichi, thinking this through. “I told Ryohei that I wasn’t interested in a relationship with anybody -- not that it’s true. I just didn’t want to hurt his feelings when he tried to ask me out.”

“Well, there is something to be said about considering one’s personal feelings.”

“I wonder if I shot myself in the foot by lying.”

Shuichi gave you a gentle smile. “I don’t think it’s worth your worry. If you’d rather keep our relationship confidential, it doesn’t change anything. I’m sure Ryohei will respect the boundaries you set, and if push comes to shove, I can have a conversation with him.”

“You don’t seem surprised
that Ryohei likes me.”

“No. He was the one who asked me about our policy on employee relationships. I figured he was attracted to you.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t think you felt the same way about him.”

“You’re right. He’s just not my type.” You looked at Shuichi. “I’m glad of it. I think I like you better.”

“I must be lucky, then.”

“I’m not sure luck has anything to do with it.”

“Then what does?”

“You. You and everything that you are. I’ve dated my fair share of guys, Shuichi, some more seriously than others. I might be saying this prematurely, but none of them seem to stack up to you.”

“Last night, I asked that you give me a chance to prove that I’m worthy of you. I wasn’t expecting to get there so soon.”

You laughed. “Sorry.”

“There’s always something to work toward, _____,” he said. “While your opinion matters a great deal to me, I want to know in my heart of hearts that I’m doing right by you. So forgive me if I continue my pursuit of worthiness.”

“I respect that, but it’s a two-way street. I want to be there for you, too. I don’t want this relationship to be one-sided.”

Shuichi leaned forward onto the balcony, arms resting on the railing. “Then I suppose we both have something to work toward.”

You leaned your head on his shoulder. “I think that’s fair.”

The evening ended with a peaceful night of casual conversation, exchanges of affection, and a promising future outlook.
Mushy

Chapter Notes

A big thank you to Suzu, FannibalToast, Kara+S, Yeah_I’m_Crazy_So_What, and Kactuskat16 for comments!

I would like to draw your attention to something I’m trying out to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You still have through the end of August to participate.

I promise that the next chapter is going to have some action, for those of you who are looking for it. Nevertheless, I hope you enjoy this one. There’s some banter toward the end that I thought was quite funny. :’D

Saturday morning was uneventful. Some of the conference attendees had already left as staying through Saturday and Sunday were optional.

You sat through sessions on building client relationship skills and alternative financial topics. Although you tried your hardest to concentrate and take notes, your thoughts kept fluttering to Shuichi, who sat next to you.

Logically, you knew you were in the honeymoon phase. Your intense feelings of infatuation would not last forever -- underneath that, you had to feel a genuine love for him for this relationship to continue.

And what was love compared to what you felt right now?

As far as you were concerned, Shuichi was perfect.

Nobody was perfect.

You would see the flaws soon. While you didn’t want to, you knew that you had to remain open minded. Those who were unwilling to see their partners’ flaws were the ones who ended up with wounds on their hearts.

It wasn’t that you carried large amounts of emotional baggage, but you knew it was in your best interest to tread carefully.

Shuichi was careful. You knew this because he was meticulous with client accounts. The way he assessed risk in a portfolio was particular and comprised of many computations from different angles. The man had a gift for complex analysis without getting so far in the weeds that he lost the holistic essence of what financial planning ought to be.

So, knowing that Shuichi was so cautious by nature, you felt especially flattered that he had chosen you. It wasn’t just simple adoration -- he paid you the highest compliment possible. He saw a future with you. He said it himself that you were worth the risk of opening his heart and letting you into his life. He thought you were grounded and introspective enough with which to share a future, as uncertain as the challenges would be.
You actually blushed at the mere realization of this, the heat rising to your cheeks.

Of course, you couldn’t hide from your observant boyfriend, even though he appeared to be listening keenly to the presentation. The look in his eyes was tender as he tilted his head just slightly to give you the smallest grins. From under the table, he stroked your elbow in one graceful motion to reassure you.

You touched your face, hoping the heat would dissipate. Shuichi’s acute perception was both a gift and a curse to you.

After the final afternoon session, the conference ended early. Many attendees had planes to catch this evening, while others had opted to enjoy the rest of the day in Inoji and leave in the morning. You and Shuichi fell into the latter category.

“I hope you don’t mind me taking the liberty of planning out the rest of your day,” he said as soon as you were released.

You were surprised. “I hadn’t realized that you had plans, but I certainly don’t mind.”

“I made dinner reservations at the Star of Inoji.”

“What?!” Your exclamation came out too quickly. “It’s not that I’m opposed,” you explained, “but isn’t that the most expensive restaurant on the island?”

Shuichi laughed. “Yes, that would be the one. While we’re here for business, it’s deductible as a business expense, so I thought why not?”

“You’re the boss.” You looked at him from the corner of your eye. “You know all I have are business clothes, right? It may work for men, even on a date, but I didn’t bring anything that would suit a fine dining restaurant, unless you want to see me in a pencil skirt and jacket.”

“While I have little preference for what you wear, as you’ll look lovely no matter the outfit, I’m guessing you weren’t aware of the shopping centre.”

“What shopping centre?”

“There’s one in the resort, a collection of high-end boutiques, if you will. They do have fashion retailers, among other things.”

“I don’t usually go shopping for clothes while on vacation, but I suppose there’s a first time for everything.”

Kurama left _____ to her own devices as he went up to his room, thinking about how he had only slept in it for a single night during his stay. He would share a bed with her again this evening, as long as she would have him. As soon as he entered, his cellphone conveniently rang. He recognized the caller, and he wasn’t surprised.

“Hello, Botan,” he said.

“Kurama!” she started excitedly. “How is everything going? Are you enjoying Inoji?”

“We’re not alone, are we?”

A fit of giggles erupted from the other end of the phone. “Hi, Kurama! It's Keiko, and Yukina’s here, too! You're on speaker phone now.”
“Good afternoon, Kurama,” Yukina greeted.

“Hello. What are you ladies up to?”

“Oh, you know! You're off on a romantic getaway with the girl of your dreams, and we're just a tad curious to see how you're getting along,” Botan said.

Kurama smiled, knowing full well that they wouldn't be able to see his face. “Yes, well, _____ and I had a long talk about the imprudence of a supervisor and his employee dating.”

“Oh my. Kurama, I'm so sorry.”

“I'm sorry, too,” Keiko said. “Botan was so sure that you were going to end up together.”

“We were celebrating prematurely,” Yukina said. “We're so sorry.”

“It's not so bad. We decided to ignore the advised etiquette.”

High-pitched cries of excitement came from the other end of the line, and Kurama had to remove the receiver from his ear until the girls quieted down. He had no idea what they were saying.

“We're so happy for you,” Yukina said. “Will you introduce us?”

“Yes, we need to meet for dinner and a game night or something!” Botan added. “She’s an absolute doll -- you’ll both love her!”

“When can we meet her?” Keiko asked.

Kurama chuckled to himself. “I’ve barely had a few days with her, and you already want to steal her away, I see.”

“Well, you’re not going to tell us the juicy details, so someone has to,” Botan said in a particularly cheeky tone of voice. “Meow~!”

“Perhaps tomorrow evening?” he said. “I’m free for dinner, but she may wish for some time to herself.”

“You can remind her that I’m risking my life and limb by checking in on Yugen, so she owes me dinner at least. I’d even offer to buy, but I guess you’re doing that, Kurama.”

“Shuichi,” he reminded.

“So you haven’t told her yet?”

“Timing has been poor.”

Botan waved it off. “You have plenty of time. At least let us meet her first before you scare her with talk of demons and Makai insects.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Shuichi thought to himself.

“Yusuke and I will be in your part of town tomorrow for dinner either way,” Keiko said. “Why don’t we tentatively schedule something? Maybe at six?”

“I’ll be sure to invite her.”
That night, you began dressing yourself up, donning the outfit that you had purchased at one of the boutique stores.

You looked in the mirror, feeling satisfied. Your hair and makeup were finished, and the dress was pretty enough. “The most expensive restaurant in town, huh?” you thought. “It's like he's in love with me or something.”

Despite the facetiousness, you felt flattered. Of all the women in the world, Shuichi saw something in you. It was hard to believe.

You heard a knock at your door. “Come in!”

“Good evening, ____.” Shuichi stepped inside in a navy blue suit and tie. It was well-fitted, a little finer than the average business suit --he was dashing. When he saw you, he looked taken aback. “You look lovely,” he said. “That dress is stunning on you.”

You spun around shyly. “You think?”

“I do.” He offered his hand. “Shall we?”

You accepted his hand, and you took the elevator downstairs together, stepping outside where a cab was waiting.

About twenty minutes later, you arrived at the restaurant and were seated across from each other under the night sky, the beautiful ocean in full view.

“This place is gorgeous,” you said. “I can’t believe you got a reservation for us.”

“Well, as amazing as the Sovereign is, I wanted you to experience something other than the resort.”

“That’s so sweet of you.”

“____, how would you feel about having dinner with my friends tomorrow night?”

“You mean with Botan?”

“Botan, Yusuke, his wife Keiko, and a few others.”

“Really?”

“Why not?”

You shrugged with a small grin. “I’m just surprised that you’d want to introduce us so quickly after we just started dating. Not that I’m opposed, but what’s the rush?”

“I figured you’ve already met Botan and Yusuke.”

“Sure, but I don’t know them that well.”

Shuichi chuckled. “All right,” he said. “The truth is that they want to meet you. Botan called me today and asked how we were doing.”

“We?”

“She knew we’d both be here. You should be aware that she’s been not-so-subtly encouraging our relationship.”
“I kind of got that feeling when I met her at the park.”

“She is relentless.”

“I’d love to meet you friends, Shuichi. It’s the least I can do since Botan’s dropping in on Yugen tomorrow.” You studied the menu, trying your best to ignore the prices. “I’d like to give her a gift, too, for offering to do that for me. What does she like?”

“To talk.”

“I’m serious.”

“I’m truthful.” Shuichi tilted his head to the side in good humor. “She’ll like anything you give her. Botan is the type of person who would be more honored by the thought than anything. We can stop by the resort gift shop before heading out tomorrow, if you’d like.”

“All right. Since you’re so nonchalant about this, you can help me pick something out. If she likes it, it’s from me; if she doesn’t, it’s from you.”

Shuichi laughed. “Those terms seem fair.”

A waiter came by to take your orders. While you waited for your dinner, you looked at him from across the table. “Your hair is such a vibrant shade of red,” you said. “Did you get it from either of your parents?”

“No, actually. Neither have red hair. I know my mother doesn’t, and the photos I’ve seen of my father indicate that he was a brunette.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Red hair is a recessive trait. Perhaps it skipped a few generations.”

“Hm. I like it.”

Shuichi gave you a coy glance. “I am blessed to have genetics that please my girlfriend.”

You pouted. “You make me sound so shallow. You just happen to have red hair, and I like it. You could have black, curly hair or platinum blond hair -- you could even be bald! I’d still like you for who you are.”

He looked down at the table before glancing at you. “That’s a… mushy sentiment.”

You paused. “Did you just use the word ‘mushy’?”

“I realize it’s not a charming word, but it’s a rather precise one, don’t you think?”

“Are you accusing me of being overly sentimental or emotional? Because I’m pretty sure that’s what it means.”

“Not as precise as I thought, colloquially.” Shuichi looked sheepish. “I meant it with more of an endearing connotation. What you expressed was a sweet sentiment, though a trusting one.”

“Maybe you’re right. Had you been bald the day you interviewed me, I might have been so repulsed that I just walked out the door.”

“Perhaps we should test that theory. I could shave my head when we return to the resort.”
“Is this your idea of playing chicken? Letting the fate of your gorgeous locks hang in the balance?” You laughed. “You win, Shuichi. Even though I’d like you all the same, I wouldn’t wish baldness upon you just yet. That’ll come in a few decades.”

Amusement twinkled in his eyes. “You think you’ll be around for that?”

You were caught off guard by his question -- not necessarily in a bad way, but you weren’t expecting it. You supposed you had inadvertently set him up to ask it. “I mean,” you started. “I certainly hope to. We’ve only been together for about 48 hours, Shuichi.”

He chuckled. “I’m aware. I thought I’d ask the question.”

“No harm in thinking about the future, especially when it comes to relationships, I suppose.”

“What are you looking for, _____?”

“Something meaningful,” you said, feeling pensive. “I’m looking for someone to share conversations with, someone who makes me laugh, someone who laughs at my bad jokes. I want to feel wanted. I need to feel respected. I’m looking for sincerity, an honest desire to make things work. I think when two people can find that, things eventually fall into place.”

Shuichi was quiet, his eyes searching yours as if asking you to continue.

“Basically, I want something long-term, a relationship that’s going to last. I’m assuming you do, too?”

“You already know that, _____ . I admitted to it when I told you that I’d never had a serious relationship before.”

“Oh, I did know that. I just felt the need to ask your opinion -- sitting across from each other, it’s like we’re speed-dating or something. We have to take turns, Shuichi. It’s not fair if you’re the one asking all the questions.”

“Then ask me.”

“What do you want out of this?”

“Just a bit of happiness, for both you and me.”

“Just a bit? You’re really aiming for the stars here,” you teased.

“Is a bit not enough?”

You were mesmerized by his green eyes, admiring his long eyelashes as he blinked slowly. “It’s a start.”
Blood

Chapter Notes

An enormous thank you to Suzu, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, SailorCupcake, and Kactuskat16 for comments! Reading your thoughts always makes me so gleeful! ^_^

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OH SNAP. SHIT’S GOING DOWN.

And finally, this story's going to take a bit of a shift. Not only is there going to be more unraveling of the plot, but you're going to notice that I'm going to be utilizing Kurama's POV a lot more. I will only do this if I feel that his perspective adds more value to the reader than the reader character's. Since he'll be having some internal struggles, not only about the evolving situation, but also about some very human feelings, I think this is appropriate. Let me know what you all think!

Sunday morning, Botan skipped ahead, swatting at the insects that came across her face.

Yusuke and Kuwabara walked on either side of her, just a few steps behind.

“Nice part of town, this,” Yusuke said. “Noodles was the wrong industry.”

“They call it finance for a reason. Taking care of accounts for rich folks makes you rich,” Kuwabara said.

“You're about to be one of those rich folks with your architecture degree and all. One of the better decisions you've made in life.”

Kuwabara looked at his friend. “It’s not just the money. It’s pretty cool stuff, designing bridges and buildings. You can see your work come to life.”

Botan smiled to herself as she listened. Kuwabara had matured in the years since their adventures together. Yusuke and Keiko were happily married; Kuwabara had become quite the scholar and was now an architect; Yukina honed her skills as a healer with Master Genkai; Shizuru worked as a poker dealer at a casino.

They had all grown up. “Except for Koenma,” she thought. “He’s as short as ever!”

She was especially gleeful that Kurama had found someone. He was the most deserving man, and strangely choosy about women! _____ seemed to fit the bill perfectly. Botan was excited to have dinner with the both of them tonight -- hopefully, _____ could be pressured to divulging the finer details of their relationship.

They arrived at _____’s apartment building, the sliding door wide open. There was a clerk at the
front desk, an older man with deep wrinkles in his forehead. “How can I help you?” he asked through his grizzled beard.

“Good morning! We’re here to check in on _____’s dog. We’re friends of hers,” Botan said.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you here before.”

“That’s because we’ve never been,” Yusuke said. “We’re just here to help. We have a key.”

The man eyed them warily. “Very well. Floor six.” He waved them off.

They stepped into the elevator, Kuwabara staring after the clerk even after the doors closed. “There’s something off about him,” he said.

“Oh, he’s just doing his job,” Botan said. “They’re supposed to ask questions if they don’t recognize you.”

“Hm.” Kuwabara shrugged. “I guess.”

They stepped off the elevator on floor six, finding her apartment right around the corner. Botan whipped out the key that _____ had left for her. “Look, boys!” she said, pointing at the fox keychain.

Yusuke and Kuwabara stared at it for a moment before bursting into laughter.

“Is Kurama aware his new girlfriend’s got a fox fetish?” Yusuke said. “He’d probably jizz his pants!”

“Man, they’re a real match made in Living World!” Kuwabara said. “I can’t wait to meet her tonight.”

Botan giggled as she unlocked the door and swung it open. “Yugen!” she called. “We’re here to come say hi!”

“You’re talking to a demon, not a dog,” Kuwabara said. “We should just strangle him and get this over with.”

“He doesn’t know that we know, dumbass!” Yusuke said, his fist colliding with Kuwbar’a’s face. “You’re blowing our cover.”

“Where is he?” Botan asked. “I thought he’d at least greet us at the door. Now stop fighting, both of you, and help me look for him!”

They looked everywhere, under every piece of furniture, outside on the patio, behind every fluffed pillow on the bed. They checked the bathroom, the pantry, the closet. Kuwabara even looked in the oven and fridge -- just in case.

“What the hell?” Yusuke reconvened with Botan and Kuwabara in the living room. “I don’t know much about dogs, but Akitas are pretty big, right?”

“He was when I saw him at the park,” Botan said. “At least eighty pounds, as tall as my mid-thigh easily!”

“What are you doing?” The old man from the desk appeared, pushing open the unlocked door with his cane. “I thought you said that you’d be taking care of the dog. I don’t see a dog.”
Kuwabara curled his fist, coming to a realization. “No, because there never was a dog,” he said. “There was only a demon, a shapeshifting demon.”

“A shapeshifting demon, huh?” the man said, perhaps a little too casually. “Oddly specific. So what are you really doing here?”

“Why don’t you tell us?” Yusuke said, catching on to the tone of the conversation.

“I don’t have much to say.”

“Come with us quietly,” Botan said. “There must be a reason why they’re after you. We might be able to help you.”

He looked at her with cold eyes. “It’s too late for that.” He picked up his cane, pointing it at them. “You’ll never find me.”

“We won’t need to. We’ll just take that cane and shove it up your ass right now!” Yusuke charged, ready to throw a punch.

The demon dodged with ease.

Kuwabara joined the fray, trying to grab the demon by the vest. “Get over here!”

In that moment, the demon’s flesh contorted, stretching so quickly that the human eye would never be able to comprehend the sudden shift. In the man’s place was Yugen, the dog, and he took off on all fours, through the hallway and down the stairs.

“After him!” Botan cried.

Yusuke and Kuwabara sprung after the demon, skipping steps as they bounded down the stairs. Yugen was already out of sight. When they reached the foyer, they stepped into the open air, looking both left and right along the streets.

“He’s gone,” Kuwabara said. “I can’t sense him anywhere.”

Yusuke growled through gritted teeth. “Dammit.”

Kurama sat next to ____ in a cab on their way to the airport. “All in all, how was your first trip to Inoji?” he asked.

“Amazing,” she said. “I learned a lot at the conference, saw the most gorgeous ocean view in my life, and even picked up a boyfriend. Overall, the trip seems worthwhile.”

He chuckled. ‘I’m glad to hear you say that. I--” Suddenly, his phone buzzed. A text had arrived.

Botan: He’s gone. We tried to catch him, but he was too quick.

Kurama’s facial expression did not change. He texted back:

Shuichi: I will call you within the hour.

“Is everything all right, Shuichi?”

“Yes,” he said. “Everything is fine. Just my step-brother.”
Kurama loathed lying to her -- even more, he hated how easily he did it. He looked at her, the smile in her eyes, the way her hair fell around her face, and he knew just how much he wanted to, needed to protect her. “The truth will come out eventually,” he thought. “But now is not the time.”

He reached out to touch the hand on her lap, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I was going to say that I enjoyed our time together more than anything. Thank you for giving me a chance.”

“Shuichi,” she started, “thank you for having the courage to ask me out. I know it’s never easy being vulnerable, placing your heart in someone’s hands. I’ve never been brave enough to do it.”

His eyes softened. “You cannot swim for new horizons unless you have courage to lose sight of the shore. William Faulkner.”

“You didn’t even give me a chance to guess.”

“It’s one of Faulkner’s lesser-known quotes.”

“Well, that explains it, then.”

“What?”

“I had absolutely no idea who said that.” She laughed.

He chuckled, leaning in and kissing her.

Once they arrived at the airport, checked in their luggage, and went through security, they found their terminal. “Will you keep an eye on this?” he said, setting his laptop bag next to ______.

“I’ll be right back.”

He took off to a less traversed corner of the airport, dialing Botan’s cell.

“Kurama, you were right,” Botan said as her greeting.

“What happened?”

“Yugen is a shapeshifter. We were greeted by the clerk when we walked into the building. Kuwabara had a funny feeling about him. When we went upstairs, we couldn’t find the dog. The clerk appeared, shifted back into Yugen, and took off. Yusuke and Kuwabara tried to find him, but we have no idea where he went.”

“With a skilled shapeshifter, the possibilities are endless,” Kurama said. “But why did he even bother showing his face?”

“What do you mean?”

“Clearly, we raised some red flags when we met Yugen and ______ at the park that day. That couldn’t be helped. Yugen would have been fine had he just stayed as a dog when you visited. He could have kept the status quo. Something must have happened.”

Botan sighed. “Maybe bringing Yusuke and Kuwabara along was a bad idea. He must have panicked when he picked up on their energy.”

“No,” he said. “Yugen was already waiting for you, masquerading as the clerk. Something else changed.”

“What are you thinking?”
“Where are you right now?”

“Just outside of _____’s apartment. Kuwabara is in the building with me keeping watch, and Yusuke went to scout the area to see if he can find anything.”

“Yusuke won’t find anything. Find Kuwabara and go back inside the apartment.”

“What’s going on?” Botan asked, the tone of Kurama’s voice unnerving her. Nevertheless, she called Kuwabara over, and had him unlock and open the door.

Kurama pulled the receiver away from his ear, readying himself for the shriek that was sure to come.

It did, and Botan steadied herself. “There’s blood! So much blood everywhere!”

Even Kuwabara could be heard grimacing from a distance. “What the heck, Kurama? This place is a mess.”

“Our suspect is more involved than we thought,” Kurama said, his voice lowering in pitch. “He wants _____ to see this.”

“W-why?” Botan said.

“I don’t know yet. But he was very deliberate in luring you off, going as far as making it abundantly clear that he’s our suspect. He then returns to do this. It’s a message.”

“For _____?”

“Yes. And, to a lesser degree, us.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense! She doesn’t know anything about him. You said it yourself!”

“I stand by what I said about _____’s lack of awareness of the situation. I think our suspect is attached to her. Think about it: For whatever reason, he ends up in Living World, and disguises himself as a dog. He has a home, a place where he finds love and comfort. He is treated well. It’s not so farfetched to assume that he cares for her to some degree, if only to maintain his disguise. He has a human, a protector, whom he trusts and trusts him in return.

“So he splatters his blood all over the place for her to come home to?!” Kuwabara said. “Why?”

“Her beloved dog gone when she returns, the apartment covered in blood? That’s sure to unnerve her. At such a vulnerable time, she is more susceptible to him coming back into her life, perhaps even accepting of his truths. He’ll play her against us.”

“You have to tell her, Kurama,” Botan said. “She’s in danger.”

“No,” he said, his brows furrowing. “We need more information. If I tell her now, she’ll suspect that we did this to him -- no doubt, that’s how he’ll spin it, if he manages to find her alone.”

“You can’t keep her in the dark forever…” Kuwabara said, his voice trailing off.

“I won’t, but the time is not now.” He looked back toward the direction that their terminal was in. “We have the upper hand, surprisingly -- Yugen is unaware that we’ve seen his work as I doubt he expected you to return to the apartment. This gives us some potential for damage control without _____ coming to her own conclusions. Call the police and report this as an incident. As far as they know, you walked in on this by yourself, Botan. The dog is missing, and they will investigate this
as a crime scene. I will let _____ know.” He disconnected.

Shuichi was gone for a few minutes as you made yourself comfortable. As thrilling as your time was in Inoji, you were ready to go home. You missed your apartment, your own bed, your Yugen.

You thought about how he might greet you when you walked in through the doors. You’d squat down on the ground and let him kiss you, nuzzle his face into your chest. Dogs were wonderfully excited when you came home, more so than any humans you had ever lived with.

“_____.”

You looked up to see Shuichi. “Welcome back,” you said.

“We need to talk.” He sat down next to you.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just got off the phone with Botan. Something happened.” The look in his eyes was serious, and he took your hand into his. “When Botan arrived, she found your apartment in disarray. There are signs of a struggle.”

“What?! Is Yugen okay?”

“She already called the police, but Yugen is nowhere to be found.”

Your heart beat quickly in your chest. “He’s gone?”

“We don’t know what happened to him. There is blood.”

“Did someone hurt him?!”

“It’s unclear whose blood it is. I’m sure the police will run some forensics.”

You were shocked. You wanted to cry, but crying would get you nowhere. It was hard to believe that you had only been gone a few days. “Shuichi, I have to get back there.”

“We’re doing the best we can -- Botan said she would take care of everything in the meantime. Our flight leaves in about an hour. Once we return to the apartment, I’ll be with you the whole time. You don’t have to face this alone.”

You embraced him. “Thank you,” you said, taking a deep breath. He was right. As anxious as you were, there was nothing you could do right now.

Shuichi hugged you tight, one hand on your back, the other on the nape of your neck. “Everything will be all right, I promise.”
I would like to draw your attention to something I'm trying out to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You still have through the end of August to participate.

Of course, a big thank you to my commenters: Kouryu, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, LadyAmazon, SailorCupcake, Kactuskat16, and P-chan.

*sighs* Omg, you guys. I started rewatching YYH, and there's nothing else that makes me feel so nostalgic. I think it's my favorite series of anything. I'm so smitten with the whole cast, and especially Kurama, of course.

Just an update on my thought process: I've been trying a few different things for future chapters. I've decided that there are going to be three arcs, and I'm going to aim for 50 chapters total. We're done with the first arc (we're a third done, you guys! D:), where Kurama and the reader character get together officially. This past chapter was the beginning of the second arc, focused primarily on deepening the relationship and Kurama's inner struggles (I just really like writing fluff, okay!), while exploring the plot. I have to lend a bit of fluff for the reader character to get to know the YYH gang -- it just seems so natural! The last arc will be a bit more... explosive. Still working out the details. :'D I live for a good slow burn.

Please enjoy!

The moment you arrived at your apartment building, you saw police cars parked on the street outside. You likely would have panicked, if not for Shuichi’s firm touch keeping you grounded.

“It's all right,” he said, his voice kind. “I'll take care of the baggage. Why don't you find a police officer and let him know that you're the tenant?”

“All right,” you said. You took a deep breath and opened the cab door, making your way to a police officer to let him know that this was your home that had been broken into.

Kurama paid the cab driver, wheeling the baggage just inside the apartment building foyer.

He always had one eye on _____, watching her every move as he searched for someone familiar. He saw Yusuke approach.

“Hey, Kurama,” he said. “Didn't expect this, did you? Wait... what's with that glare? You only give that look when you're about the kill someone.”

“Tell me something that only you know about me.” His voice was low.

“What the hell?”
“You have three seconds.”

“Okay, okay! Um... When we first met, you were using the Forlorn Hope to save your mom. After I stepped in and told the stupid mirror to take my life, it granted your wish and unleashed a blast of light. We both blacked out for a few seconds, and when you came to, you ran off to check on her before even seeing if I was conscious!”

Kurama paused. “Not exactly one of my nobler moments, but that’ll do. Hello, Yusuke. I apologize. I had to make sure it was you.”

“Hey, I get being cautious. But don't shapeshifters gain our memories when they copy us?”

“Yes, but they don't have your consciousness. They may have access to your memories, but that doesn't mean that they can feasibly process a lifetime without knowing what to look for. If I had asked what happened after you interrupted my sojourn with the Forlorn Hope, then a shapeshifter with your persona could answer easily. My question was so vague that they would have to parse through years of memories to ensure that no one else knew of that particular incident.”

“I'm always glad you're on our side when you start talking smart. How's your girl?”

“She's holding up. Do me a favor, Yusuke. Watch her. I'm going to see Botan and Kuwabara.”

Kurama dashed up the stairs, only to find his friends on the fifth stairwell, where they lingered to stay out of the way of the investigation. He tested them, just as he had tested Yusuke. Kuwabara recited the story of how he had nearly dropped Shiori’s wedding band down the gutter when they took it in for last-minute cleaning as a favor to Kurama’s now-step-father. Botan shared her experience with Kurama when she had suggested that he bring condoms to Inoji as he had “so rudely” hung up on her. (Kuwabara got a kick out of that one.)

“How is she?” Botan asked. “Poor thing is probably scared to death. Maybe it's best is she doesn't see the apartment.”

“She'll have to,” Kurama said. “Only she knows the previous state of her own apartment. The police will want to know if anything was taken or out of place. Remember that they have not a clue what happened. It is likely that they'll suspect this as an attempted burglary gone wrong.”

“Smart call with the police,” Kuwabara said. “With all these eyes around, that demon is less likely to show his face. Just gotta be careful of him shapeshifting into someone else. I guess we're just going to have to ask about vague memories for the time being.”

“No need. I have a solution to that I'll share later. For now, please be supportive of _____. This is a lot on her shoulders.”

You gave a brief statement to the police officer, who asked you to wait while he fetched the paperwork for your second statement upstairs. You were anxious to see what had happened. Maybe they were wrong. Maybe if you called Yugen, he would come out from underneath the bed or from the patio.

“_____, how's it going?”

You turned around to see a familiar face. “Yusuke.” You had met him only once before, briefly in the office.

“Yeah,” he said. “When I heard what happened, I came down to check in on you guys. Botan was
pretty shaken by what she saw.”

“That's kind of you.” You glanced at your feet, unsure of what else to say.

“Hey, I know this is tough, but we're here to help.”

You nodded. “I appreciate it. I don’t know if there’s much you can do, though.”

“Well, for starters, you can take my jacket. You look like you’re freezing your ass off out here.” He practically dropped his jacket on your shoulders.

You hadn’t even realized how chilly it was. In your state of mind, you had forgotten about the autumn weather, and having just come from the tropics, you weren’t dressed appropriately. “A-are you sure?”

Yusuke shrugged. “You can give it back later.”

“While I appreciate the sentiment, Yusuke” -- Shuichi appeared from behind you removing Yusuke’s jacket and giving you his instead -- “I’m afraid this responsibility is mine.” He helped you, holding it while you slipped your arms in.

“Look at me, setting a good example,” Yusuke said. “And you always say I’m bad at this kind of stuff.”

Shuichi’s jacket was warm, and it smelled pleasantly of his light cologne -- it reminded you of a misty spring. You hugged it to yourself, enjoying how it enveloped your upper body. “Won't you be cold?” you asked.

“I'll be fine,” he said, a hand on your back.

“All right, Miss ____,” the policeman said as he returned. “Paperwork is all squared away. Let's get you upstairs for a walk-through.”

“Can he come?” You gestured toward Shuichi.

“Yes, yes, whatever you’d like. Just no more than one other.”

The policeman led you through your apartment. There was so much blood in your living room, soaked into your carpet, your furniture, even splattered over your walls. The sight made your stomach turn.

“Is there anything out of place?” he asked once you had seen everything.

You shook your head. “No. Aside from the overturned side table and chairs and, obviously, the blood, it all looks pretty normal.”

Shuichi stood next to you, a concerned look on his face. “Any leads, officer?” he said.

“Nothing we can conclude without running a few tests. We need to see if this blood belongs to a human or a dog.”

You cringed at those words, and Shuichi touched you, drawing you close.

“Meanwhile,” the policeman continued, “you’re going to have to find another place to stay for at least a few days. We may need to come back here for more evidence. We’ll have some recommendations for cleaners once we’re through.”
“You’re welcome to stay with me,” Shuichi said. “I have a study that serves as a guest room, so you’ll have your privacy.”

“But what about Yugen? What if he comes back and I’m not here?”

“We can check back every day and let your neighbors know,” he said. “I don’t think it’s wise for you to stay here before we have a firm understanding of what happened.”

“You’re right.”

“Why don’t you pack some clothes and toiletries? We can call a cab and head there right now.”

You were so grateful that Shuichi was here with you. As he said, everything would be okay.

You had just arrived at Shuichi’s apartment. It was far cleaner than you had expected of any bachelor, even guest-worthy. He lived in the business district, not too far from you, and the apartments here were new, modern, and polished.

“Welcome,” he said. “Make yourself at home.”

It was hard to believe that the first time you visited Shuichi in his own home would mean you spending the night. “Thank you,” you replied, admiring his living room. It was of minimalist design, void of bold patterns, and washed with shades of greys and whites. The only exception were his plants, vibrant shades of greens, and even blooming orchids. “How do you keep this place so clean?”

“I spend most of my time at the office,” he said. “You can’t mess what you don’t live in.”

He led you to his study, a sizeable room with a desk, bookshelves, and a twin bed in the corner.

“This will be yours during your stay. My room is just down the hall, and the bathroom is across the way. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

You breathed in. “You’re so good to me. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Shuichi gave you a small smile. “You’d stay strong, of course. You’d find a friend to stay with or check into a hotel room for a few nights.”

“But this is so much nicer, being with you.”

“I enjoy your company as well. I’m sorry it had to be under these circumstances.”

You stepped toward him, embracing him tightly. “I’m worried about Yugen, is all. The situation doesn’t change the fact that I would have spent the evening with you. Speaking of which, are your friends still interested in dinner in a few hours?”

“I didn’t think you’d be,” he said, his arms around you. “I was planning on staying with you tonight. Are you feeling well enough to go out?”

You nodded. “Yes, I think I’d like to get my mind off of this. Besides, your friends came to visit. It wouldn’t be right to skip out on them now.”

“I’m sure they’d understand.”

“I’d rather they not have to.”
He nodded. “Very well. I’ll call them, and see where they’d like to meet up. I’ll leave you to unpack.” He left the room.

Now that the shock had worn off, you called the local shelter to put in a word about Yugen and drew up flyers on your laptop. You called your friend, Aimi, who had checked in on Yugen prior to Sunday -- she said that he was there when she last came over on Saturday. Nothing seemed out of place.

You were about to head out to the local shop to print out your flyers when Shuichi caught you by the door. “Where are you going?” he asked.

You held up your USB drive. “I thought I might print these out and put some of them up before dinner.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m sure you have better things to do.”

“Better things than helping my girlfriend? What kind of man do you take me for?”

“You actually sound kind of offended.”

“I am.” He looked at you with reserved flirtation in his eyes. “But affection takes away the edge.”

You studied him, wondering how someone was able to lift your spirits the way he could -- and with a simple, lighthearted conversation, too. You leaned forward for a kiss, and Shuichi closed the gap easily, his lips soft against yours. “Better?” you asked.

“Much.” He grabbed his jacket, opening the door for you as he slipped it on. “Let’s go. We have only two hours of daylight left.”

You went to the nearest convenience store and printed out several dozen copies of your flyer, and you walked back to your apartment, sticking them on posts and storefronts (with permission, of course) along the way. Shuichi helped, mostly quiet, but he did whatever you asked of him without a complaint.

You even talked to some of your neighbors, letting them know that Yugen was gone. They all promised to keep an eye out for him. You even searched the nearby park you frequented together, but there was no sign of Yugen.

When you had run out of flyers and time to canvas the neighborhood, Shuichi placed a hand on your shoulder. “We can continue tomorrow,” he said, “but for right now, it’s time for dinner.”

You nodded, feeling defeated. You couldn’t believe that Yugen was gone -- you just had to keep hoping and trying.

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You arrived at the restaurant. It was a bustling establishment, the only gastropub in the area. It had opened only a few weeks ago and was quite popular among the younger crowd.

Botan waved at you from the table. “Over here!”

Shuichi had one hand on the small of your back as he guided you to the table.

“Oh, _____!” she said, pulling you into a tight hug. “I’m so sorry about what happened.”
“It’s not your fault,” you replied. Originally, you weren’t sure if you were on hugging terms yet, but this answered the question. “I really appreciate you coming over anyway. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“How are you holding up, sweetie?”

“I’m okay. Shuichi just helped me put up flyers, and I’ll go back tomorrow to see if Yugen’s there.”

Botan smiled, almost nervously. “Well, just make sure that Shuichi goes with you, okay?”

“Of course,” your boyfriend said. “_____. you already know Botan and Yusuke. This is Keiko, Yusuke’s wife. Kuwabara, Yukina, and Shizuru.” He gestured politely to each of them in turn.

You dipped your head in greeting at them. “It’s good to meet you all.”

Keiko was the first to say hello. “I heard about what happened. I don’t know what I’d do if I were in your shoes. I hope everything works out.”

“I hope so, too,” you said, “but I guess dwelling on it doesn’t really fix anything. I certainly don’t want to dampen the mood tonight either, so let’s change the subject, huh?” You seated yourself, and Shuichi sat down next to you.

Your new friends were respectful of your request, instead asking you about your relationship with Shuichi, as you suspected they might.

“It’s nice to know that our favorite redhead isn’t going to stay single forever,” Shizuru said, waving the waitress over for a refill on her drink.

“Yeah!” Kuwabara said, his arm around Yukina. “Took you long enough to find someone.”

“He’s just picky,” Yusuke said. “Women this, women that. I’ve been trying to get him to ask someone out for a while now.”

“Well, then that must mean that ______ is extra special,” Botan said, grinning at you. “For someone like Shuichi, it’s the best compliment he can give you.”

Shuichi chuckled. “I think it’s my place to say that.”

“Didn’t mean to steal your thunder! Just thought I’d point it out.”

You looked down at the menu. Clearly, these friends must have been very close to feel comfortable talking about Shuichi like this, in his presence, no less. You wondered if you would fit into the group. At the very least, you had to try.

“I guess I’m lucky,” you said. “I had no idea that I’d leave for a conference and come back with a boyfriend.”

“In Inoji, I heard,” Keiko said. “That’s pretty romantic.”

“I’ve never been,” Yukina said, “but I’ve seen pictures. It’s a beautiful place.”

“You hear that, Kuwabara?” Yusuke elbowed his friend. “Yukina wants you to take her to Inoji. You can do that with the big bucks you’ll be earning soon.”

The night continued with food, drinks, and lively conversation. You made mental notes about everyone, even noticing how Shuichi interacted with his friends. He was a little more relaxed, but he kept his usual reserved charisma. His wit came out when you least expected it.
Keiko was sweet, with a lively personality and contagious laughter. Yusuke was carefree, a street-smart type of cleverness about him. Kuwabara was boisterous but kind-hearted. Yukina was quiet and gentle, content to observe the occasion rather than join in the conversation. Botan was as bubbly as ever, and Shizuru, with her dry sense of humor, could drink anyone under the table.

They asked for your number so they could include you in their communications. You supposed that was a good sign -- you were hoping that you weren’t too distant to night. No matter how hard you tried, you still couldn’t get your mind off the events of today.

As you exited the restaurant, everyone bid each other goodbye with hugs and warm wishes.

“If only Hiei were here, it’d be like old times,” Yusuke said.

“Is Hiei another friend?” you asked.


Botan laughed. “Well, every jolly group of friends needs a grumpy one. Maybe we can get him over here next time.”

“I doubt it,” Kuwabara said. “He’s never been one to hang out for fun. I don’t think he knows what that word means.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” Yukina replied. “I’m sure he has some hobbies at home.”

“Speaking of home,” Botan started, pulling something from her purse. “Here, _____, before I forget!” She handed you your extra key, dangling it on the keychain before placing it in your outstretched hand. “I had no idea that you liked foxes so much!”

You didn’t think anything of her comment, but you did notice Shuichi stiffen beside you and the rest of the group stifling their laughter. “Um?”

“Inside joke,” Shuichi said. “Never mind that. It’s getting late, and I’m sure you’ll want to rest before work tomorrow morning. Goodnight, everyone.”

You waved at them as your boyfriend guided you away, the gentle pressure of his hand around your waist.
Crying Women

Chapter Notes

So this chapter delves a bit into Kurama's thought process and sets up some discussion for the next few chapters. Oh, and there's fluff. I like fluff. Enjoy!

Thank you, FannibelToast, Kactuskat16, SailorCupcake, and Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What for your comments!

I would like to draw your attention to something I'm trying out to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You still have through the end of August to participate.

“You have an interesting group of friends,” you said as you walked back with Shuichi, hand in hand.

“They’re really something, aren’t they?”

You nodded. “I can see why they make you happy.”

“Mm?”

“They’re not like you at all. It must be nice to be able to come out of your head every once in a while. And with friends you’ve known forever, it’s okay to be who you are with them. There aren’t any expectations.”

“Do you feel like you have expectations with me?” he asked.

The question caught you off guard. “I’m not sure we’ve been dating long enough.” You stared at the ground as you walked.

Shuichi stopped, giving your hand a gentle squeeze. “It’s all right if you don’t know yet. In fact, I don’t suppose that you would. I’m glad you came to dinner tonight, ______. Today wasn’t easy for you.”

You shook your head. It wasn’t that you didn’t want to talk about your relationship -- in fact, nothing would make you happier than discussing your future together. “I think I just need to decompress a little. It’s been stressful. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. None of this is through any fault of your own.”

The chill of the wind bit through your jacket, and you shivered. You thought about your apartment and wondered why someone would choose to break in. Yugen would have defended your home -- you were sure of that. The intruder probably fought back, resulting in the blood splatters everywhere. Of course, you had no idea whose blood it was, but you hoped it wasn’t Yugen’s.

Shuichi brought you out of your thoughts. “That jacket is too thin for brisk autumn nights, ______.” He unwrapped the scarf from his neck and placed it around yours, folding it comfortably under
your chin. “There,” he said. “That should last you until we get back.”

It was pleasantly warm, placed just where you needed to ward off the cold. You looked at him, his hands still on the scarf, and you blushed. Here he was, mothering you about the basics of keeping yourself warm, going as far as giving you his own clothing. “You don’t have to do that, Shuichi.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because it’s my fault for not wearing warmer clothes. That’s twice today.”

“I’m sure you learned your lesson.” He leaned closer. “Besides, imagine if you fell ill. That would be even more work for me, hm?”

His eyes were beautiful, glimmering in the city light. They reminded you of a forest, lush and tender, full of life. You could only agree with him, almost as if you had fallen under their spell.

He gave the scarf a very gentle tug and kissed you. The kiss was soft, lingering on your lips as he pulled away. “Come along,” he said. “No sense in staying out in the cold.” He offered you his hand again.

You took it, ever impressed by his ability to read you, and let him lead you home.

They made it back to Kurama’s apartment with no further delays. It was about 8:00, a little early to end the night. He kindly suggested that she go to bed or at least try to rest, but he sensed that she wanted company; she was not yet ready to be alone.

“How about we relax and watch a movie?” he said, hoping this would be a happy medium. He thought, perhaps, he could leverage the situation.

“Sure,” she replied. Her mind was somewhere else.

“Why don’t you pick something?” Kurama asked, knowing exactly where this conversation was going.

“It's all right. I picked the last two. You choose something you want to watch.”

As expected. She was not actually in the mood to watch a movie, but she was too polite to refuse. Kurama normally wouldn’t have pushed, but the ball was now in his court, where he needed it to be.

Kurama flipped through the selections and settled on his very deliberate movie of choice.

“The Matrix?” she said. “I didn't know you were interested in dystopian science fiction.”

“I think there are a lot of lessons to be learned from the dystopian genre.”

“I agree. It's a good choice -- it’s been a long time since I’ve seen it.”

Kurama sat down next to her on the couch. He touched her hand to comfort her.

The movie began, and an easy silence engulfed them.

He was highly conscious of her state of mind. She relaxed, her body un-tensing as the movie progressed. Eventually, she shifted, and without a word, she leaned her head against his shoulder. Kurama glanced at her, affection in his eyes. He kissed her head, gently brushing his face against
her hair. She responded with a contented sigh.

When *The Matrix* ended, she stirred and yawned.

“Would you like to go to bed?” Kurama asked.

“Not really.”

“I know it’s difficult and you have a lot on your mind, but you need to rest. A good night’s sleep will help.”

She looked at him, apparent unease in her eyes. “You’re right,” she said, giving him a sad smile.

That smile was for him, to soothe his concerns for her well being. It hurt to see her like that. Kurama leaned forward and kissed her temple, wishing that he could take her pain away.

Nevertheless, he was not conflicted. Yugen was a danger to her. He was now, at least temporarily, removed from her life. Kurama did not know what the demon was planning, but he would watch over _____ diligently. He would protect her, no matter the price.

That night, he came by the guest room. The door was open. She was sitting on the bed in her pajamas, staring out the window, watching the city lights flicker in the night.

“_____?”

“Hi, Shuichi.” She looked at him with sad eyes.

“How are you holding up?”

“I don’t want to sound like a broken record, but I’m just worried.”

“You have every right to be. He was your closest companion.”

“Three years,” she said. “He came into my life three years ago.”

Given the situation, Kurama didn’t know what else to say. He would have been more sympathetic if Yugen were actually a dog, but since he was, in fact, a demon who had lied to _____ about his identity… well, Kurama didn’t look too kindly on that. Yugen was using her.

“I’m here for you,” he said quietly, joining her on the bed. “I understand this is hard. We’ll get through it.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, scooting up to him. “Can we just cuddle for a little while?”

“Of course, my love,” he said, welcoming her into his arms. “I’m sure we’ll find Yugen soon.” His voice indicated no lie. They would find him, and Kurama would deal with him as he saw fit. Then, he would have to clean up the aftermath, for better or for worse.

The real question: How much truth could she handle?

How much truth did she want to handle?

He would find out tomorrow.

For right now, she needed comfort and rest.
She fell asleep easily. She must have been exhausted, her emotional state in turmoil throughout the
day.

Truth be told, Kurama was impressed by how resilient she was. Many humans he knew would have
crumbled under the anxiety and pressure. She took it all in stride, created a plan to find her beloved
dog, and even set aside a portion of her day for others.

Kurama slipped out of bed, ensuring that he made as little noise and movement as possible. He had
work to do. He closed the door to the guest room.

He went to the living room, looking carefully at his plants. There were two particular specimens he
had in mind, and he searched through his collection of plants and seeds.

First, the gaisen plant, a flowering shrub that resembled a small tree. He already had a few
renditions of this plant, having grown them when the Makai insects began invading the city.
Gaisens released an odorless pollen that the insects found quite aversive. He had placed a plant
near his door and next to his bedroom window to drive the pests away. He would have to locate
one to the guest room as well. Meanwhile, he carefully wiped the pollen off of the center of the
flower with a qtip and into a clean container.

Second, the juji plant. It looked like bamboo to the untrained eye, and its leaves had a distinct odor
that could only be detected by those with a highly defined sense of smell. It was also susceptible to
a specific chemical reaction that would prove useful to his friends. Kurama encouraged the juji
seeds to grow, nursing it with trace amounts of his energy, plucking the leaves when it had grown
enough.

He brought the gensai pollen and juji leaves to the kitchen, where he extracted and created two
oils. The juji leaf oil was poured into small vials for later -- Kurama had a stock of the glass
containers for his own herbal experiments. The gaisen pollen oil was taken to the bathroom and
poured into _____ ’s open shampoo bottle. He rocked the bottle back and forth to mix the
concoction. This would keep those insects away from her, and she would be the one to apply it
each day whenever she bathed or showered. Although they presented no risk in their current state,
Kurama found them agitating, the way they swarmed around her.

“Yugen’s demon energy must be strong,” he thought. “He may shield it well, but energy transfer is
not so simple. _____ is clearly impacted.”

Kurama would take no chances, not with _____ under his protection, living under the same roof. In
some ways, he was glad Yugen trashed the apartment. Had he not, Kurama would have to find
other ways to watch her, and the last impression he wished to make was that of a possessive
boyfriend. This was easier. Thank you, Yugen.

He stood by her door, listening for any disturbance. He would have to rely on his plants to assist
him -- some species were sensitive to movement, even subtle sound vibrations. As much as he
would have liked to never sleep, that was an unrealistic expectation. The human body needed time
to recover and heal from the strains of daily life.

Truthfully, if he could convince her to share a bed with him, watching over her at night would be
simpler. Aside from safety considerations, Kurama was in favor. He thought it would be pleasant to
fall asleep with her at his side, listening to the pattern of her breathing as she was lulled into a
peaceful dream. He could wake her in the morning with gentle kisses to her neck and hold her, their
bodies warm underneath the covers.

Kurama scolded himself for having these thoughts. It was selfish to think of pleasure when her life
was at stake.

He left his own bedroom door cracked. Hers was shut tight. His Makai-bred plants were positioned strategically, able to detect the slightest movement. If Yugen were smart, he would not attempt to approach her in Kurama’s own domain. If he--

Kurama heard movement in the guestroom. He tensed, listening closely.

In a few seconds, the knob of the door turned and out came _____, the familiar sound of her footsteps on the hardwood floors. She paused briefly and then headed his way. Kurama relaxed.

“Shuichi?” she whispered, a tremble in her voice.

“Oh, no…” he thought. He could handle demons and traps and games of the mind, but crying women?

He had managed them before. In fact, distressed women sought him out. It happened many times in his life.

It happened most recently with Keiko a few months ago when Yusuke said something insensitive about her work habits. At that point, he had not realized she was pregnant, and a thoughtless comment from her husband brought her to hormonal tears. Kurama comforted her and later admonished Yusuke for being so careless.

A few years before that, Shizuru had pulled him aside one late night in a drunken state. She started bawling, catching Kurama off guard. She cried about her poor choices when she was younger, how she wasn't sure how she'd ever make something of herself. Kurama took her home, gave her plenty of water, and put her to bed. They never spoke of it.

Even chipper Botan had once broken down after watching *Old Yeller* with the group one night. She came specifically to Kurama with tears in her eyes, demanding why life was so unfair. Kurama didn't have an answer for her, but he did give her a hug when she asked for one.

He really was a magnet for upset women, wasn't he?

And _____ wasn't just any woman. She was his. He was obligated to comfort her. In fact, he felt honored that she trusted him so. Kurama’s heart softened.

“I'm awake,” he said, coming to the cracked door of his bedroom. He opened it enough to see her.

Her gaze was caught on the floor, her cheeks likely heated from embarrassment. He could smell the fresh tears and hear her sniffling.

“Are you all right, _____?”

“I-I'm sorry to bother you--”

“You're no bother,” he said softly. “Tell me what's wrong.”

“I just… I-I don't want to be alone tonight.”

Kurama gave her a small smile. She probably couldn't see it in the dim night, but she would hear the tenderness in his words. “Come stay with me, then,” he said, opening the door wider.

She stepped into his arms without hesitation, and he guided her to his bed. Kurama let her climb under the covers before following her. He let her decide what position she wanted to sleep in --
from their brief stay in Inoji, she seemed to enjoy spooning, being held from behind. He pulled her to his chest, his arms tucked beneath hers. He breathed in her shampoo, the scent of her lotion, and underneath that, the very smell of her body. It was soothing to him, knowing that she was his, safely and wholly with him tonight.

“*Well, that was easy…*” Kurama thought, feeling relaxed with her in his arms. While she fell asleep almost immediately, he took a little longer to let his musings settle, eventually drifting off as the night wore on.
So this marks my two-month posting anniversary here on AO3! TWENTY CHAPTERS on Embracing the Seasons! ^_^ I want to thank everyone for reading my works! I've gotten so much support these last two months after a serious lull in fanfic writing. I've started a writing Tumblr if anyone is interested in following it for updates and/or my thoughts. I don't know how often I'll blog (mostly because I don't understand Tumblr, lol), but I figure if this is what kids are doing these days, I might as well, too! If you have any Tumblr suggestions for me, I'm happy to hear them.

Don't forget about my raffle: An Expression of Thanks. It ends this Saturday!

And, of course, thank you to the people leave me comments: Kactuskat16, SailorCupcake, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What! Your feedback means the world to me! <3

This chapter is kind of all over the place in terms of theme, but I like it. It's intimate and flirtatious and philosophical at the same time. Please enjoy!

Also: Sorry, this RC overthinks everything because I overthink everything. You're going to have to deal with her acute analysis of Kurama’s intentions. Lol.

In the morning, Shuichi nuzzled you awake, his warm breath on your neck. “It’s time to get ready for work,” he whispered.

You stirred, blinking your eyes open and realizing where you were. You weren't just in bed with Shuichi as you had spent your nights together in Inoji. You were in Shuichi's bed, specifically, and while some may argue that it was a semantic difference, you felt otherwise.

The heat rose to your cheeks as you recalled the events of last night, how you asked to spend the night with him.

“You're blushing,” he teased, his lips making their way up your neck in soft kisses.

Your body reacted to his affections, a tingle rising along your spine as you let out a small cry. You curved your back against him, but Shuichi's hold was fast.

“I thought we were getting ready for work,” you said, rolling over to face him.

“We can,” he said. “Or we may enjoy the morning a bit longer.” Without awaiting your response, he caught you in a kiss. It was gentle at first, soft and innocent. When you reciprocated, touching him, you hands on his chest, he pulled you close, deepening the kiss.

It was a dance, a whimsical frolic, a playful chase. -- every time you pulled away for a breath, he would find your lips, engaging with more passion than before. His hands were around your waist, and they trailed up your back, your shoulders, supporting your head at the base of your neck. Everywhere he touched you, you felt a warmth that kindled beneath your skin, embers that craved
The very tip of his tongue swept across your bottom lip, testing the waters, before retreating. You shivered, the stimulation enough to make you want more, and you leaned back in. You caressed the side of his face, running your fingers through his hair -- even after a night’s sleep, his beautiful locks felt like silk, and you combed through them easily. Gingerly, your tongue brushed against his lips, inviting him to join you.

Shuichi welcomed your request for a more amorous kiss by touching you, his fingertips along your neck and shoulders, as he maintained his affectionate advances. After one more slow, passionate kiss, he pulled away. In his eyes was flirtatious desire. “As much as I’m enjoying this, our time is short. I suggest we continue this later in the evening.”

“All right,” you agreed, looking at him as you rested your head on the pillow. Your heart rate slowed, the departure from your morning intimacy letting your excitement melt away. “I’ll hold you to it.”

“Please do.” He slipped out of bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” you said. “Thank you for letting me stay with you. I hope I didn’t ruin your quality of sleep.”

“Not at all. It’s certainly warmer under the covers when there are two people to share it.”

You glanced at the floor, almost shyly. “I can go back to the guest room tonight.”

He opened his closet, selecting his suit, dress shirt, and tie for the day. “Only if you want to.” He glanced over his shoulder, giving you a smile. “I rather enjoy having you here.”

“You don’t think it’s moving too fast?”

“_____, we’ve slept in the same bed every night since we’ve started dating.”

He was right. It was only a few days, but it was still 100% bed-sharing. “Touché.”

Shuichi chuckled. “More than anything, I want you to be comfortable. But my offer stands -- you’re always welcome in my bed.”

Part of you appreciated the offer; the other part of you wondered about his phrasing. The choice of words wasn’t overtly sexual -- on the contrary, it was quite literal -- though it could be interpreted that way. On the other hand, you were just discussing the actual practice of sharing a bed, and you supposed he was simply repeating the verbiage. Then again, Shuichi was never one to be careless with words.

You returned to the guest room, preparing for the day ahead.

By the time you were set, your boyfriend was waiting for you in the living room. “Ready?” he said.

You had a serious case of the Mondays, having just come back from Inoji and given the events of yesterday. Nevertheless, you gave Shuichi a smile and soldiered on. “I have a warmer jacket,” you said as you buttoned it up. “And a scarf of my own. You can keep your clothes today.”

He opened the door for you. “I believe it’s supposed to be sunny today, warmer than yesterday.”

“Well, I tried.” You shrugged as you stepped outside. “It’s not my fault the weather decided to
change.” You thought about making a joke about him no longer needing to strip for you, but until you had the talk, you thought it was better to keep your mouth shut. It might save you the embarrassment.

Shuichi gave you an amused glance.

“It’s like he can read my mind,” you mused, feeling sheepish. “Did you just think of what I was thinking of saying before I said it?” you asked, the awkward question spilling from your mouth.

“Well, I suppose not. My impression was that you were too abashed to say it at all, but I’ve been wrong before.”

You looked at him defiantly. “Why would I be embarrassed? What did you think I was thinking?”

“Do you really want me to say it? Or are you testing me?”

“Your answer is only going to define the future of our relationship,” you quipped, figuring you’d leave the conversation at that. “Choose your words wisely.” You had half the mind to skip off and leave him wondering.

Shuichi caught you by the wrist, spinning you back toward him, akin to how a male lead in a dance would guide his partner. “If only your feet were as quick as your mouth. Clearly, you’re in a flirtatious mood. I regret to say we’re going to be late for work if we keep at this pace.”

“Sorry,” you said with a grin. “I can save it for later.”

“Your choice. I do believe you said you’d prefer to keep our relationship confidential in the office.”

“I stand by that.”

“Very well,” Shuichi said, “then perhaps we should actually walk to the office, like fellow coworkers who don’t flirt.”

“I suppose.”

It was early enough that no one else would be in the office. You thought that perhaps Shuichi was the first one there in the mornings -- you never came in early enough to know, but it was 6:45 a.m., and it would only take you ten minutes to walk.

Your day was exhausting, filled with administrative work and meetings with clients. You had to follow-up with the clients you had abandoned last week due to your sudden conference in Inoji. Even though the other advisors in the office helped contact them, you wanted to maintain the relationship. You only took a brief lunch before continuing your work.

Shuichi respected your wishes and kept his distance. You only saw him once during the day when he gifted you a small potted plant behind your closed office door. “I have a lonely plant without a home,” he said. “Will you take it? Put it in your window. It thrives on sunlight.”

“You really do like your plants, don’t you?” you said, accepting it. “If you help me take care of it, I’m happy to lease my window to you.”

“For what price?” he asked.

“Oh, clever you. There’s always a price -- everything for a price!”
“It seems that you’re the clever one. ‘So much the better. The higher the price you have to pay, the more you will cherish it.’”

“Lloyd Douglas. I’ve never read his works, but I am familiar with them. I hear *The Robe* is a fascinating story.”

“Your literary knowledge is quite vast. But that aside, I am at your beck and call,” he said, dipping his head toward you.

“I’d like to take a rain check, if that’s all right.”

“It’s of little consequence to me.” Shuichi had a suspensefully curious look on his face. “Though I do wonder what you’re thinking.”

You stood up, walking around your desk until you were facing him. “I’m sure you’ll find out soon,” you said. “Maybe. Sometimes I wonder what I’m thinking, too.”

He leaned forward, close enough to kiss you. He didn’t. “I will wait impatiently,” he said before leaving your office.

You canvased the neighborhood again that night, Shuichi in tow. You suggested that he stay at the office because he seemed to have a lot of work to catch up on, but he insisted on coming with you. “I know this is important,” he said. “Besides, I can just as easily work from home.”

“I don’t want you to have to work from home,” you replied. “I’m sure it’s safe. It’s not exactly a dangerous neighborhood, and it’s not even dark yet.”

“_____, please give me this. I would be ashamed if something happened to you. As it stands, even the police don’t know what transpired in your apartment. It’s better to be cautious.”

Although you thought he was overreacting, you weren’t going to argue with him. In fact, he spoke sense. “Fine, then. At least let me help you with your work tonight.”

He chuckled. “We’ll see.”

You talked to some neighbors -- there was nothing new. You still weren’t allowed in your apartment, yellow caution tape across your door. You spoke with the clerk at the front desk, who also had nothing to give you. Finally, you decided to take a quick walk through the park, trying to cover as much ground as you could before the sun set.

“How did you like *The Matrix* last night?” Shuichi asked as he walked beside you.

“It’s not my first time watching it, but I liked it. It’s eerie and kind of disturbing, but that’s how it was meant to be.”

“Some hypothesize that it’s an allusion to Descartes’s ‘First Meditation.’ Others suggest that it has more to do with Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Both imply that what we perceive may not be the whole truth, that we are only limited to a false perception of what is real.”

“Are you referring to that philosophical idea of a tree falling in the middle of the forest? If no one is around to perceive it, did it actually make a sound?”

“Unperceived existence is certainly a branch of the conversation.”

“But you mean something else?”
“Well, I was curious.” Shuichi had his hands in his jacket pockets. “The red pill or the blue pill?”

You tilted your head to the side. “If I recall, the red pill represents the truth of reality, no matter how brutal, while the blue pill is blissful ignorance. I guess that’s what you mean by perception versus the harsh truth.”

“Which one would you prefer?”

“The red pill.”

“That was fast.”

“Truth is important, as long as you can cope with it.”

“How do you know you’d be able to cope with it? Neo certainly didn’t have a clue before making his decision.”

“I guess I’d choose the red pill on principle. If we don’t have our principles, then what are we?”

“If you choose the blue pill, you’d be blissfully unaware of your violation of principle.”

“But if I chose the blue pill and then discovered the truth, I’d be upset that I’d been living a lie, wasting my time in a hopeless dream. If I chose the red pill, I’d have my principles to stand behind, at least, even if the world crumbled around me.”

Shuichi nodded slowly. “I see.”

“Does my answer surprise you?”

“Not any more than if you chose the blue pill. I was legitimately curious. There’s no right or wrong answer.”

“What about you?” you asked. “Which one would you choose?”

“The brave choose the red pill.”

“Are you brave?”

He chuckled, giving you a warm smile. “I’m not so sure.”

You touched your boyfriend’s hand, weaving your fingers through his. “That’s okay,” you said. “A man with outward courage dares to die; a man with inner courage dares to live. As long as you choose to live, Shuichi, that’s bravery enough.”

“And here I thought you had great literary prowess. I had no idea you were familiar with the great philosophers, too.” He lifted your hand to his lips and kissed your fingers.

“Lao Tzu’s always been one of my favorites. I wonder what it’s like to have that kind of age-old wisdom.”

“He lived into his seventies,” Shuichi said, looking pensive. “Quite an achievement in his time. Seventy years to be wise. Hm.”

You sighed. “I guess we’re not finding Yugen tonight. Let’s go home. We can pick up some dinner along the way.”
“I’m sorry, _____.” He squeezed your hand. “We can try again tomorrow.”

Although you were disheartened, you leaned your face into Shuichi’s shoulder. You were so blessed to have him, and your spirits soared when you thought of your evening together. You’d cuddle and kiss and have these philosophical conversations. Maybe, with luck, this would be the beginning of the rest of your lives.

Chapter End Notes

For those who have never seen *The Matrix* and are curious, [here](#) is some information on the red and blue pills.
Chapter Notes

SO. I wrote the last part of this chapter a few weeks back when I had a dream about Kurama. Yes, I dream about him -- that's how deep my love runs for him. lol. I highly value keeping characters in character -- otherwise, they're not the characters we know and love -- but I'm taking liberties with his sexual preferences as, clearly, Togashi has never said anything about them. Intimacy is so important in relationships, and I wanted to reflect just how a healthy relationship progresses.

I will confirm that there will be smut later on in this story, and that will come in time. For right now, I want to work up to that moment as our RC and Kurama explore each other a bit more and figure out exactly what it is that they want from one another. Kurama is very much biologically human, and a male at that, which means that he has sexual desires and needs. I wanted to devote a little bit of time to his internal thought process and how he feels about the reader character, even though they haven't committed to having sex yet. This is how I think he'd approach this, being the highly perceptive man that he is and how much he cares about the RC. I hope I'm doing him justice.

Your thoughts and opinions about how I did this would be wonderful, of course! I welcome the feedback! Please enjoy!

TWO MORE DAYS TO SUBMIT AN ENTRY TO MY RAFFLE: An Expression of Thanks.

As always, thank you to the people leave me comments: Kactuskat16, SailorCupcake, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, and jumponthechandelier! Your comments make me smile. ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She preferred the red pill, the truth.

Part of him wished that she would choose the blue pill. It may have made things easier.

It was a good thing, he supposed, that she was open to the truth, no matter how harsh, that it was what she valued and desired. But just because she favored the truth on principle didn’t mean that she would like it.

She didn’t even have to like it, but he wanted her acceptance. Her approval, despite the short length of their relationship, was important to him.

She was… different than any woman he had met.

It wasn’t like him to pursue someone as he did her. In fact, he never thought he would settle down with someone from Living World. He intended on spending his life here with his family, his friends, and perhaps someday return to the Demon World.
Was it love?

She amused him, certainly, took him by surprise, made him wonder about her musings, how she became the person that she was.

Kurama cared deeply for her. Her tears brought him grief; her pain, his heartache. He watched her in her sleep, holding her close at night. Sometimes, her rest was fitful. He would shush her through her nightmares, whispering in soft tones to lull her back to sleep. She wasn’t truly conscious for any of it, but he thought his efforts may have helped.

She completed her work at the office diligently. Her clients loved her. Her advice was solid, and her clients' portfolios performed well. Despite the turmoil in her life, she soldiered on. She was the perfect employee, really.

But that wasn’t the reason he cared.

It was her smile, the way she looked at him, the coquettish gaze that teased him, daring him to come closer. Yet, there was something else hidden within her eyes, an inquisitive thirst for knowledge and truth, a lust for learning more about the world around her. She was sharp, a spirited girl that sought an adventure and purpose that she didn’t quite recognize in herself. She could be intense -- he knew this through their conversations, the way she carried herself, her outlook on everyday life.

Kurama could read people well. He understood her, having a great advantage with his many years of experience in perception. He could recognize her emotions, interpret her methods of thinking, and predict her next move.

But he wasn’t always right. Her resilience impressed him, her thoughtfulness touched him, and her wit surprised him. He wasn’t sure what to expect anymore -- only that she would continue to inspire him.

She kept him coming back, desiring more each time he interacted with her.

She was not like other humans. She was perceptive and open-minded, her heart free to the world, accepting of its mysteries.

If anything, Kurama was captivated, left astounded every moment he spent with her, whether they shared a simple conversation, kissed in bed, or even when he just watched her. He realized just how unusual this feeling was, almost foreign to him -- and for that reason, made him uncomfortable.

It could be love, he thought.

Would he dare to believe it?

It was Saturday. The week had gone by quickly.

Each and every night, you went back to your apartment. The police had finished their investigation and found it inconclusive. The only news of note was the result of the blood test -- it belonged to that of a dog.

You were heartbroken when they told you, but that didn’t mean anything. If Yugen were dead, where was his body? Why would a common thief take Yugen with him?
No one would want your dog. He was a relatively unfriendly mutt that only had affections for you. You wanted him, and you were probably the only person in the world who did.

Shuichi went with you every single time you canvassed the neighborhood. He never did complain, but you were sure that he was tired of wasting his time. Your search was always unfruitful, after all.

You had called a cleaning company to get the stains out of your carpet and the blood off your walls. They wouldn’t be available until next week, and you didn’t want to go back until those horrific stains were gone.

You were tired. Even though you felt tremendous comfort in Shuichi’s arms at night, your sleep was not restful.

You weren’t sure when you’d give up the search. It seemed hopeless. But you owed it to Yugen, your companion of three years, to continue looking.

It was morning, and you pulled on your running clothes. You would often take Yugen jogging when you had time -- although you weren’t particularly enthusiastic about running, you knew your dog (and you, for that matter) could use the exercise. You were going to take your usual path and see if perhaps you’d be able to see any evidence of him. The outlook was bleak, but you were faithful to him.

Shuichi agreed to come with you. He actually seemed to enjoy the prospect of stretching his legs. You had not a clue about his exercise regiment, if he had one, and if he did, he had not practiced it this week.

The both of you took off once you arrived at the park. Immediately, you could tell he was in superb physical condition, far better than you. His breathing was calm, almost as if he hadn’t been running at all, even as you broke the first mile.

“I didn’t realize how in shape you were,” you said as you stopped for a quick break before turning back.

“I practice martial arts on the weekends sometimes,” he said. “Physical fitness is vital if you wish to do well.”

“I didn’t know that about you. How cool. And here I thought you were just a finance nerd.”

“It’s a passion of mine, I suppose.” He chuckled but didn’t elaborate.

You smiled at him, placing your hands on his chest. “You never cease to amaze me, Shuichi. I feel like I learn something new about you every day.”

“Careful,” he said. “I’m covered in sweat.”

“And I’m not? Besides, you smell like roses.” You kissed him. “Sweaty roses.”

His hands found your waist, pulling you close. “I’ll take sweaty roses over odoriferous.”

“Odoriferous?” You raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think most of the population knows what that means. Try stinky.”

“Sudoriferous?”
“Even odorous is better than that.”

“Diaphoretic?”

“You know, there’s a really good word for all of this that most people understand: sweaty.”

“Ah,” he said with a chuckle, “so we come full circle.”

“I did choose that word for a reason.”

“Mm.” He kissed you. “I should have known. Are you ready to return, ____? Don’t forget we’re meeting with our friends in two hours.”

You nodded. No sign of Yugen at all -- just the usual activity at the park. You jogged back to the apartment with Shuichi, feeling quite exhausted by the time you returned. Shuichi didn’t look tired at all, coated in only a light layer of sweat. You, however, were breathing heavily.

“Go ahead and shower,” you said, your hands on your knees. “I still need to catch my breath and figure out what I’m wearing today.”

“As you wish.” He gave you an affectionate glance before disappearing into his room to gather his clothes.

When he finished, you were able to shower, washing away the sweat from this morning’s jog. You felt better, fresher, running your fingers through your hair as you lathered and rinsed your shampoo through it. When you stepped out of the shower, you dried yourself with the towel.

First, you put on your undergarments -- a bra and some lacy panties that you thought were cute. Next came your tank top, which you would layer with something else once you were back in your room. And then… uh oh. You must have forgotten your pants.

Rather than wrap yourself in a wet towel, you figured you’d try to slip out unnoticed. Shuichi was probably in his room anyway. It would be a quick step right across the hall.

You took a deep breath and turned the doorknob, the lock clicking out of place.

Kurama sat in the living room, waiting for her. The running water had stopped some time ago, so he figured she’d be out any moment now. He held a white paper in his hand, the latest study on hedge funds that was written by an associate of his. Kurama had been asked to look over it before it was published.

He heard the click of a lock, and he looked up.

There she was. She had just stepped out of the shower, the steam exiting the bathroom door as she shut it behind her.

Kurama’s breath caught in his throat when he saw her, her cheeks stained with pink -- he guessed correctly that it wasn’t the heat of the water that brought such color to her face.

“I-I must have left my pants in the room,” she said, her workout clothes tucked in a ball underneath one arm. Her hair was wet, dripping just slightly around her shoulders. She wore a tank top, the tight cloth following every curve of her torso all the way down to her hips. Her lace panties traced the supple contour of her bottom, an intricate design woven in a way that seemed to make her skin glow.
He observed her nipples, hardening as soon as the cool disparity of the living room air enclosed her. There were soft dewy drops of water on her skin -- she had not bothered to dry herself completely.

Despite her embarrassment, Kurama smelled distinct arousal when she looked at him. It came on suddenly, a warm tidal wave that left him drenched on the beach. This made his heart race in excitement, the anticipation difficult to quell.

Kurama set down the paper he had been reading and walked over to her without a word, studying her.

He was not colloquially a “leg man,” per se, but he had never seen so much of her skin at once, and the exhilaration almost overcame him. As with any human man, he had his vices. No straight man would refuse to admire the breasts of the lady who enthralled him when so obviously on display; nor would he deny her firm buttocks, the lithe curve of her body a treat to his eyes.

But Kurama was a little peculiar.

While he was certainly enamored by the female body, as human men were, he favored the more subtle feminine features, enjoying the slight arcing shape of her collarbone as it started at her shoulders and bowed below her sensitive throat. He adored the whole of her back, finding fascination in the smooth contour of her skin, past the shoulder blades and down to the small of her back.

Quadrupedal skeletons, such as those of foxes, for example, contained an arched spine -- it flexed upward, acting as a springboard of sorts for bursts of incredible speed. Humans, however, evolved for the efficiency of bipedal motion and required a spine that could support the weight of their upper bodies, one that could fight gravity. And so, instead of a spine that could only arch upwards, humans had two arcs in their spines to offset to the weight. This was one of the many features that set them apart from their four-legged counterparts in Living World.

Demon bodies varied drastically, but human women seemed to have the most nuanced curves, and Kurama could not help but wonder what thrills he would find beneath her shirt.

He stopped right in front of her, their height difference apparent. With sure hands, he embraced her beneath her arms, pulling her close to him. He started up at her shoulder blades, trailing his hands down her back, feeling every curve along his fingertips. He stopped short just past her waist, for a moment grasping the hem of her shirt.

The arousal was still there -- he could smell it even more now that she was pressed against his chest. The scent of her skin, her hair, her pheromones, combined with the mere sight of her -- she was, he dared to think, sexy.

But he knew that carnal arousal was very separate than that of one’s emotional state. As such, he would not advocate his inclinations over her wishes. He cared too much for her.

Kurama kissed her, first softly on the lips and then on her forehead. “You are beautiful,” he whispered. “Get dressed. We have the day ahead of us.”

As she returned his kiss and headed back to her room, the rosy color still in her cheeks, he let out a small sigh, making a deliberate effort to slow down his heart rate. He reexamined his thoughts, letting the throb of desire calmly melt away.
Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Fitting In

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your input this last chapter: Kactuskat16, SailorCupcake, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Pepucz, and LadyAmazon! It is especially helpful knowing that you're liking the direction this is going in! I appreciate your feedback so much!

This particular chapter is a little fluffy. It gives the RC a chance to get to know the girls, and of course, there's some Kurama time at the end. And some funny stuff. XD

NOW, brownie points to anyone who can tell me what episode this Kurama quote appeared in: "Any prize worth having requires a risk." I CANNOT FOR THE LIFE OF ME PINPOINT THIS, and I'm usually very good at remembering. :D This serves no practical purpose, but my lack of knowledge is bothering me. lol. I figured that if anyone would know, it'd be one of you.

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Relax, Kurama. I’ve never seen you so uptight -- your head's going to explode at this rate or something.”

Yusuke meant well. He usually did.

Kurama watched _____ from afar, keeping tabs on where she was at all times. He stood one floor above where she and the other girls were, following them in the shopping mall. The retailers were positioned on either sides of the vast chambers, their entrances and windows fully available, while the center of the mall was open from floor to floor. This made it easy to track someone down and see exactly where they were going.

“You two don't have to come,” he said to Yusuke and Kuwabara. “You can find a bar or even an arcade, if you're feeling nostalgic.”

“You must be feeling really nervous about something,” Kuwabara said. “You still think that demon's going to come after her?”

“I don't know, but I'm not taking chances.”

“It's been a week,” Yusuke said. “I think you're overreacting. If he was coming back for her, don't you think he'd have done it already?”

“I don't know what to think,” Kurama replied, feeling irritated. “Do remember how you felt when Keiko was kidnapped by Hiei? Or after the Saint Beast Suzaku sent his infected human army after
her? Or, perhaps, when she sat among the crowd at the Dark Tournament--”

“Okay, okay! I get your point!” Yusuke huffed.

“You'd do the same for Keiko, and I'd do the same for Yukina,” Kuwabara said, “so I think we owe it to Kurama to be vigilant for _____. What are men if they can't protect their women?!” He struck a pose, drawing the perplexed attention of passersby.

“Well, what they should feel is embarrassed,” Yusuke quipped, taking a huge step away.

Even Kurama chuckled uneasily.

Kuwabara resumed a normal expression on his face. “So how is the relationship going? You've lived together for a week now. Anything new?”

“It's going well.”

“Well? Just well?” Yusuke walked forward with his hands behind his head. “I mean, she's probably moving back to her place soon, right?”

Kurama had thought about this. “I'd rather her stay with me for her own safety.”

“Just for her own safety?” Kuwabara teased. “I mean, I get it. You want to protect her. But there’s nothing wrong with wanting to be with her because you love her.”

Kurama heard his friend, and he glanced to the side, unsure of how to respond.

Kuwabara gasped. “You haven’t told her yet!”

“Honestly, Kuwabara, we’ve been dating for just over a week.”

“I don’t see what the hurry is,” Yusuke said. “I mean, Keiko and I didn’t say it for our whole childhood. I don’t even think I said it when I officially proposed.”

“You mean, the fourteenth time?” Kuwabara said with a purposefully stupid, taunting expression.

Yusuke socked him right in the face. “Shut up. We have a unique relationship, all right? So what if my proposals weren’t serious until the fourteenth time?”

While his friends wrestled with one another, drawing attention from the shoppers, Kurama rested his arms over the side of the railing at the center of the complex. ____ had entered a boutique with Keiko, Yukina, and Botan, and they hadn’t left yet. That was fine. He had the time to wait.

His patience for her was endless, even when she giddily shopped each outlet for new work clothes.

“As long as she’s safe,” he thought.

“So how’s everything going with Shuichi?” Botan asked. “You seem to be lively!”

You laughed as you looked through blouses on the clearance rack. “He’s… wonderful,” you said, not sure of that adjective did him any justice. “I know we’ve been together for only a short time, but he’s everything I could ask for in a boyfriend.”

“Oh, wow!” Keiko said. “I’m not surprised. Shuichi’s been such a good friend of ours, and he deserves someone like you to make him happy.”
“I certainly hope he’s happy.”

“I’ve never seen the man smile as much as he has lately!” Botan assured as she pulled a blouse off the rack and handed it to you. “You should try this on. It will enhance the color of your eyes.”

You took her offering and added it to the collection draped over your arm. “He’s been understanding of my situation, allowing me to stay and making sure that I feel safe. I want to do something for him.”

“Oh, like buy him a gift?” Yukina asked.

“A gift would work, if you ladies can help me think of something.”

“Shuichi’s kind of difficult to shop for,” Keiko said. “We had a gift exchange last year for the holidays, and I drew his name from the hat. I was thinking about what to get him for weeks!”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” you said, “and you know him better than I do.”

“What about something for his office?” Botan said. “I’m sure that financial advisors might need something to spice up their work lives!”

You raised a teasing eyebrow. “Are you implying that financial advisors are boring? I hope you remember what I do for a living, Botan.”

She laughed. “I’m just kidding, ______! But I’ve seen the inside of his bachelor pad, and his decor is simple -- far too simple! He could use a woman’s touch.”

“I mean, he already has plants to liven up his office.”

“What about a photo of you two?” Yukina suggested.

“I suppose I do have one from Inoji,” you said. “That’s a great idea, actually! Just not in the office…”

“No?” Botan tilted her head to the side. “Is this about that boy from work?”

You were surprised. “Did Shuichi tell you about Ryohei?”

“O-oh, no!” Botan looked sheepish. “I just noticed how he acted when I went to pick up your key.”

“Really? What did he say?”

“Nothing, he just seemed standoffish. Unrequited love is never easy, is it?”

You sighed, a little unsure of how Botan was so perceptive. It didn’t matter, you supposed. “No, but that’s why we’re keeping our relationship confidential at work. I figure the less Ryohei knows the better. We have to collaborate with him, after all, so it’s better that he’s not aware.”

“That’s sweet of you to consider his feelings, but don’t you think it’s better for the truth to be in the open?”

“Easier, sure, but I’m not sure if it accomplishes anything. Besides, we’re there to work in the office. We can save the affection for later.”

“How’s the living situation?” Keiko asked. “Your apartment should be just about ready for you to move back, huh?”
“Later this week, yes. I’ve scheduled a cleaning crew to come in on Tuesday. There’s… a lot of blood, but you already knew that.” You gave her a small smile.

“There was a lot, huh?” Botan said. “I’m sorry, sweetie. It must be tough. Maybe you can stay with your boyfriend a bit longer.”

“Oh, I don’t want to burden him anymore. I’m sure he’ll be happy to have his privacy and his home back.”

“I’m sure you’re no burden, ____.” Yukina said kindly. “Maybe you should talk to Shuichi. I mean, if you want to stay with him, that is. Do you?”

You shrugged, heading over to the fitting rooms. “I guess I’m a little nervous about moving back. The police still don’t know what happened. My main motivation for returning is so that Yugen can find me if he comes back.”

“It must be hard losing a pet,” Keiko said. “Still no sign of him? I hope you find him soon.”

“Thanks. I’m still looking. Shuichi insists on coming with me every time I go searching, and I know I’ll be at it a while longer. I don’t want him to feel like he has to come with me every time. He’s so busy with work as it is.”

Botan touched your shoulder. “I’m sure he wants to go with you, _____. Nothing to feel guilty about!”

“That’s nice of you say. I guess we’ll see.” You and each of your friends stepped into the fitting rooms, ready to try on some new clothes.

You stepped out of the boutique, a paper bag in hand with your new outfit inside.

“Now where did those boys go?” Botan mused. “I bet they’re at the arcade.”

You felt someone touch you from behind, brushing your hair aside to kiss you on the cheek. At the same time, the weight of your bag was relieved from your hand. “Hello, my love,” Shuichi said. “Did you have fun?”


“Oh, nothing of particular note. We chatted as we walked around.”

“And all this walking makes me hungry! Let’s grab some lunch!” Kuwabara only had eyes for Yukina, and he grabbed her hand as he led her off to the food court.

“I could use lunch,” Keiko said, following, her hand in Yusuke’s.

“Me too!” Botan said as she scrambled off. “A sandwich sounds delicious!!”

“And what about you?” you asked, looking at Shuichi. “Are you hungry?”

“I could eat.”

“You should eat.” You leaned up and kissed him. “You had a workout this morning. Well,” you corrected, “I had a workout this morning. You just came along for a stroll.”

“The more you train yourself, the greater your endurance.” He guided you forward with a hand on
your lower back. “We can run again tomorrow, if you wish.”

As you walked toward the food court together, you noticed a gourmet grocery store. It sold all sorts of goods and speciality foods from all around the world. You had been there several times before -- their selection was impressive. “Can I cook for you tonight?” you said.

Shuichi looked surprised. “You want to cook for me? Why?”

“I’ve noticed that you don’t cook. Your kitchen is pretty much empty. Don’t you ever miss homemade meals?”

“Well, my mother was an excellent cook. I never acquired that talent from her, I’m afraid. Takeout is convenient and can be nutritious if you make good choices.”

“So I take that as a yes?”

He chuckled. “If you’d like.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Well, given your eating habits this week, how was I to assume that you can cook?”

“Well, given your kitchen’s lack of basic supplies and groceries, how was I supposed to cook?” His observation was fair, you supposed. You bought every single meal you ate this past week from local vendors and restaurants, in part due to the convenience, and in part due to your emotional state -- needless to say, you were feeling a little stressed. “You don’t even have salt or oil,” you continued. “Instead, you have chemistry equipment in your pantry.”

“Oh, you are a nosy one.”

“Don’t deflect, Shuichi. I can even teach you, if you want.”

“Where did you learn to cook?”

“My father is a produce broker, remember? It’s his job to make sure he can get high-quality fruits and vegetables to the market. And the only way to know the quality of the produce is to use it. I used to cook with my father all the time. Ever since I’ve been on my own, I haven’t cooked as much as I’ve liked, but it’s not all that fun cooking for one.”

“You think cooking for two would be better?”

You smiled as you stepped in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. “Always. It’s a way for me to show that I care. Please?”

His eyes softened. “I find it hard to deny you anything, _. If you desire to cook dinner, then I suppose we’ll have to go grocery shopping on our way home.”

“You know,” you said, “I appreciate you opening your apartment to me. You’ve called it ‘home’ on my behalf since I’ve been there.”

“It’s how I want you to see it.”

“My own apartment will be ready for me mid-next week. I can’t stay with you forever.” You looked away from him for a moment. “I’ve been thinking about it. I don’t know if we should be living together yet as a permanent situation.”
“Why do you feel that way? It has worked well thus far.” There was sincerity in his eyes. “Please don’t think you’re imposing. While I certainly want you to have the freedom to make your own decisions, I want you to know that I’ve enjoyed the time we’ve spent together. I think it’s done our relationship good -- it’s helped me with my work-life balance, knowing that I have someone to come home to and relax with in the evenings. I hope you’ve felt at home and comfortable with me.”

“Oh, Shuichi,” you started with a small sigh. The mall wasn’t the ideal place for this discussion, but the timing was appropriate. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’ve done for me. You’ve seen me at my most vulnerable, and you took care of me. You never judged me or made me feel weak -- instead, you assured me and gave me support through it all. I don’t know many people who would make me feel as safe as I feel with you. Part of me wants to stay with you, but I also want to know that I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can take care of yourself,” he said. “You’re brave, intelligent, and independent -- all traits I admire. You have nothing to prove.”

“It’s not just that.” You looked at him with sad eyes. “Yugen might still be out there. He only knows my apartment. If he ever returns, I want to be there for him. Besides, if he does come back, I’m not going to force you to keep a one-hundred pound dog in your apartment.”

“Well, there is that.” Shuichi touched your shoulder, guiding you back to the food court. “You still have a few days to make your decision, ______. Let’s see how you’re feeling come Tuesday.”

“I’m not sure I’ll change my mind, Shuichi,” you said.

“You don’t have to. Just think on it.” He leaned over and kissed your head.

Lunch with a jovial affair with jokes, laughter, and plenty of teasing. Kurama was glad that his friends were so welcoming of ______. They liked her -- he could tell by the way they included her in their conversations. She fit right in.

“I need to run a last-minute errand,” she said to everyone after they were done eating.

“I’ll go with you,” Kurama said. “We can pick up groceries before heading home.”

“Actually, that reminds me!” Keiko said, a hand on Kurama’s arm -- she was up to something. “Shuichi, I need some help picking out flowers for my parents when we have them over for dinner tonight. You always have the best taste in arrangements. I was hoping for your expertise?”

______ smiled at Kurama and gave him a small shrug. She was up to something, too.

“Very well,” he said, hesitantly. “Perhaps Yusuke would prefer to join _____, then. He doesn’t strike me as the sort to enjoy flowers.”

Yusuke was about to say something, but he felt a jolt of electricity in his mind.

A telepathic message. “Watch her,” Kurama said. “If anything happens to her, I will hold you accountable.”

Although he was not normally afraid of, well, much anything, Yusuke was quite intimidated by Kurama’s threat request.

“Y-yeah,” Yusuke said. “That works. We can meet up at the bus stop after.”
Kurama prided himself in being persuasive. He trusted Yusuke -- he simply wished to provide very specific instructions and expectations.

Chapter End Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
THE MYSTERY OF THE QUOTE IS SOLVED. Thank you, FannibalToast! "Any prize worth having requires a risk." -- episode 14, where the YYH gang storms Maze Castle. I CAN SLEEP AT NIGHT NOW.

So this chapter gets the RC some one-on-one time with Yusuke. I actually really love Yusuke as a character -- he's one of the few reluctant hero type characters that I really enjoy. However, I could never bring myself to write a romantic reader-insert for him because that would mean tearing him from Keiko, and we all know that they are the perfect couple. Same with Kuwabara and Yukina. YYH is so good at couples. BUT ANYWAY, this chapter gives our RC some time with YYH's main character. I think I'm hilarious, btw. I hope this chapter makes you laugh because I had a blast writing it. XDDDD

Of course, many thanks for your comments: Kactuskat16, SailorCupcake, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, and Pepucz!

I am also so incredibly flattered that this story now has over 100 kudos. <3 Thank you!

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

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Yusuke walked besides you, hands shoved casually in his pockets. “So what errands are you running?” he asked.

“I want to get a photo printed for Shuichi,” you said. “I want it to be a surprise, and I'm so glad Keiko picked up on that to distract him. Your wife is sharp.”

“Yeah, she is. The last time I snuck into a bar when she was going through one of her moody pregnancy episodes, she was there when I arrived.”

“Eh? I hope she knows she can't drink while pregnant?”

“Oh, she wasn't there to drink. She was there to sock me in the head for trying to leave her home alone that night.”

You laughed sheepishly. “Well, she's pregnant and probably really uncomfortable. Not that I support domestic violence, but you could have avoided that abuse entirely.”

Yusuke shrugged. “Well, they say I'm a glutton for punishment.”

“It's one thing to tolerate physical punishment, but how do you like the silent treatment?”

“Oh, that's the worst! It must be a girl thing. Keiko does it, my mom does it, and even Botan
wouldn't talk to me for a week after I stood her up at the movies once. I'd rather you all just smack me and be done with it.”

“I'll remember that, Yusuke, if you ever make me angry.”

“Hey, that depends on how soft your fists are. If you're secretly an MMA fighter, I might prefer the silent treatment.”

“Do I look like an MMA fighter? I ran a couple of miles with Shuichi this morning, and his physical fitness put me to shame.”

“You can't compare yourself to him.”

“Why not?”

Yusuke looked pensive for a moment. “Let's just say that he's not a good standard for the average person. He's pulled some stunts and thrown some kicks in his lifetime.”

You would have asked him what he meant by that, but as you walked to the local convenience store to get your photo printed, you passed by a man. He looked downtrodden, thin, covered in streaks of dirt and grime. He sat quietly on the sidewalk, his belongings in plastic bags. His clothes were in tatters, and he must have felt the chill of the wind. More than anything, he looked defeated.

“Hold on just a second,” you said to Yusuke. You stepped closer to the homeless man, kneeling down beside him. “Excuse me. Can I help you?”

He stared at the ground. “I've lost everything,” he muttered. “I've lost my bed, my home, my daughter. There's nothing left for me.”

Your heart bled for him. “I'm sorry. It'll be okay,” you said gently, deciding not to pry. “I used to volunteer for a shelter. It's not too far from here, just across from Golden Acorn Park. Do you know where that is?”

He nodded.

“Good. Go there and tell them my name. _________. They'll take care of you. They'll clothe and feed you, and even give you a bed to sleep in tonight. They even have career services to get you back on your feet.” You reached into your purse. “Here,” you said, handing him a couple of twenty dollar bills. “This should be enough for the bus fare and a hot meal. You can even buy a blanket to keep you warm.”

He looked at your hand before accepting the cash, and he gripped your hand with his. “Thank you, miss,” he said. He made eye contact with you.

His gaze was familiar, and your heart beat rapidly in your chest. Where had you seen those eyes before?

“You remind me of my daughter,” he added. “Such a kind heart. Bless you.” He released your hand.

“Please take care of yourself,” you said. “Promise me you'll find help?” You then pulled away and continued along with Yusuke at your side.

He gave you a glance from the side. “What was that all about?”
“Hm?” You continued walking, shifting your purse over your shoulder. “I saw someone who needed help, and I helped him.”

“You aren’t afraid of being taken advantage of? What if the guy isn’t actually homeless and that was the easiest money he’d ever earned? You could have just bought him a burger or something.”

“Your sentiment is a common one.”

“And?”

“I’ve always believed there are different types of hunger in the world. Ever study Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs?”

“Nope.”

“Well, it takes the shape of a pyramid. The physiological needs are down at the bottom -- you know, things like food, water, sleep, etcetera. Then, safety and security. Then, a need for love and friendship, a sense of belonging. Then, self-esteem needs, a feeling of accomplishment. Finally, at the top, you have self-actualization, the achievement of reaching one’s potential and pursuit of personal growth. You can’t reach the top without having the bottom tiers met.”

“Okay. You’re starting to sound like the lovechild of a philosopher and a nun.”

“My point, Yusuke, is that most of society thinks that we can create a better world just by addressing the very bottom tier of Maslow’s hierarchy. We have this foolish tendency to think that all people need is food and a place to rest their heads. In reality, these are the bare minimum basic needs for human survival. And what is living, if we amount it to just survival?

“We’re people, and there are many types of hunger. Sure, you need to address the need for food and sleep first, but beyond that, there’s a hunger for safety, for love, for esteem, and for personal growth. If you want to help people, you need to figure out exactly what it is that they need. You can’t just assume that the only hunger is in their bellies.”

“So you gave the guy money so he could choose what he needed to do with it. Fine. I get that. But what if he’s a fraud?”

“Are you so afraid of having your kindness forsaken that you’d rather not be kind at all? Is their dignity not worth the price of your courage?” You tilted your head to the side and smiled. “Someone taking advantage of my good deeds is not a reflection on me. I’m not afraid to be kind.”

There was thoughtfulness in his eyes. “Kindness has never really been my strong suit, but I guess it’s yours. And you’re not wrong. I respect you for going against the grain. That’s probably why Kurama respects you, too.”

You blinked. “Kurama...?”

“Oh, shit! I meant Shuichi!”

“Who’s Kurama?”

“It’s a stupid childhood nickname. Shuichi used to be really emotional about things, so we called him… uh… Melodrama Kurama!”

You raised an eyebrow. “I get the melodrama part, but where does Kurama come from?”
“It’s really just a stupid nickname! You know, teenage boys! We were so dumb we don’t even make sense!” Yusuke gave you a large grin, indicating he was clearly feeling sheepish about something. “But don’t tell your boyfriend that -- I’m really not supposed to mention it again. It’s kind of embarrassing for him!”

“If you say so,” you said with a small laugh. “Your secret’s safe with me, Yusuke.”

Keiko: Hey, Yusuke. Are you and _____ nearly done?
Keiko: Kurama and I are all set at the florist.
Yusuke: yeah, were just about done
Keiko: Okay! We’ll be waiting for you at the bus stop!
Yusuke: k
Yusuke: oh um
Yusuke: btw
Keiko: Yes?
Yusuke: can u tell kurama something for me
Yusuke: ?
Keiko: Um, sure.
Yusuke: can u tell him
Yusuke: that i may have let his name slip
Yusuke: i made up something stupid to cover it
Yusuke: but
Yusuke: i don’t think she bought it
Keiko: Ugh, Yusuke.
Keiko: Why don’t you tell him yourself? I don’t think it’s fair that your wife has to be the bearer of bad news.
Yusuke: pls
Yusuke: hell have words for me later
Yusuke: but at least this will buy him some time to
Yusuke: you know
Yusuke: blow off some steam
Yusuke: or at least
Yusuke: not direct it all at me
Yusuke: plants are not how i want to die :(
Keiko: ...
Keiko: Fine. But you’re cooking dinner tonight.
Yusuke: u are my goddess <3

You met Shuichi and Keiko at the bus stop as planned, where you bid your friends goodbye. Keiko had a beautiful flower arrangement in her arms, which you tried not to crush as you gave her a hug. “Thanks for your help,” you whispered in her ear.

“Anytime, _____,” she said. “I hope you got what you needed. Shuichi’s lucky to have you.”

From the corner of your eye, you noticed Yusuke and Shuichi exchanging words. They said goodbye to one another, the consensus being that you should all find time to spend together again next weekend.

After waving Yusuke and Keiko off, you and Shuichi went to the grocery store closest to the apartment.
“So what would you like for dinner?” you asked as soon as you stepped into the first aisle. “I’m pretty versatile as long as I have a recipe.”

“Anything,” Shuichi replied. “I’m honored that you’d want to cook for me.”

You leaned your temple into his arm. “I know it’s the thought that counts, but it’d really make it easier if you have a preference.”

“I’m not a picky eater.”

“But surely you like some foods more than others.”

Shuichi chuckled. “Perhaps. I’m just curious to see what you’d do with a full creative license.”

You playfully shoved him aside. “Fine, make my life difficult. I have a few recipes in my head. Let’s just see what meat and produce is fresh and work our way up from there.”

You made your selections, browsing over the possibilities with a carefully devoted thought process. After you checked out, you and Shuichi headed home.

“So what are you making?” Shuichi asked, lifting a bag filled with groceries. “It certainly feels like a lot.”

“Come make dinner with me, and you’ll find out. You’ll finally have some food in your fridge.”

“I’ve noticed you have a voracious appetite.”

“I like food,” you said, “and I like to graze. I’ve noticed that you’re a ‘food is fuel’ kind of guy.”

“Food is supposed to provide energy and nutrition.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” you teased. “I think food should bring you happiness. It’s not nostalgic for you at all? You said your mother is a good cook -- doesn’t her cooking ever remind you of anything?”

Shuichi gave you a pensive look. “Well, when you put it that way, I suppose food can be sentimental.”

“I have a lot of memories surrounding meals with friends and family. Sometimes, I’m the one hosting or cooking; other times, I’m not, and instead I’m in someone else’s home or at a restaurant. Why do you think every major holiday is celebrated with food? Besides, food can taste so damn good.”

“You’re clearly very passionate about this.”

“Don’t worry, Shuichi. I’ll fix your tastebuds.”

“I look forward to it.” He tilted his head to the side, the expression on his face artfully modest. “Heaven knows you’ve already started.”

“If this is your way of getting a kiss, you’re going to have to try harder.”

“It’s going to have to wait. I’m afraid my hands are full.”

“That’s a shame.”
As soon as the words came out of your mouth, faster than you could even follow his movements, Shuichi dropped the groceries and swept you into his arms, one hand on your mid-back, the other supporting your legs. You were caught off guard, grasping his neck and shoulders for balance as your own bag tumbled from your hands. He kissed you, gracing you with the affectionate gesture in public, ignoring any onlookers. “You were saying?” he asked, your faces so close that your noses touched.

“You were saying?” he asked, your faces so close that your noses touched.

“Put me down, Shuichi. If my groceries are so much as bruised, you will rue this day.”

“I had no idea you’d be so vengeful over vegetables,” he said, amusement twinkling in his eyes. He did not set you down.

“Oh, you have no idea what vengeance is.”

“Your vegetable vengeance?”

“Put me down and you’ll find out.”

“Not exactly a convincing argument.” You rolled your eyes. “Am I supposed to ask nicely?”

“It wouldn’t hurt.”

“Fine. Please put me down.”

Shuichi acquiesced, letting your feet touch the ground again. “That wasn’t so difficult, was it?” You didn’t release your hold around his neck just yet. Instead, you kissed him. “Hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Young impudence is charming.”

“Young mischief is tedious.” The expression on his face did not change. “In an endearing sort of way, I suppose,” you added.

“I’m glad to hear it. There’s much more where that came from.”

“I feel resigned to my fate already.”

“Good,” Shuichi said, his hand around your waist. “The first step is acceptance.”

“The first step of what is acceptance?”

“The fact that you’re stuck with me, of course.” You laughed. “That’s a little presumptuous, don’t you think?”

He grinned, the smile reflected even in his beautiful eyes -- you thought you might lose yourself in them. “I don’t think so,” he replied.

His response made you feel warm, the gentle wing-beats of butterflies in your stomach. “You’re right,” you said, correcting yourself. “I’m sorry, I spoke too soon.”

Maybe you really did have a bright future ahead of you. Given how your relationship was thus far, you certainly wouldn’t mind being stuck with him forever.
You took his hand into yours after you both gathered the dropped groceries. “Come on,” you said. “Let’s go make dinner.”

He kissed your hand. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Chapter End Notes

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Shenanigans

Chapter Notes

I originally wanted to get some other writing done this weekend for the raffle, but I was really, really, really engrossed by this chapter. :D It turned out longer than I thought it would, but once I started writing the final scene, it just wouldn't stop. lol. I finally ended it where I thought appropriate without having it drag out another 1,000 words. I hope you enjoy!

I'm easily embarrassed, so I think some of that leaked into the RC. I hope you all can relate, too! :3 I certainly hope I'm not the only one.

Also, I decided that Kurama can't be the perfect boyfriend. He needs a weakness. He may be wonderful in all other ways, but he just doesn't share the RC's love for food. And he certainly doesn't care about dessert.

Thank you to my commenters: Kactuskat16, SailorCupcake, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, and Pepucz! As always, your feedback makes me happy and inspires me to keep writing! <3 I appreciate it so much!

You discovered something important about Shuichi that night -- he couldn’t cook his way out of a paper bag.

He did not know how to cut, peel, and dice an onion. In fact, he wasn’t even aware you had to remove the outer layer. He did not know the correct ratio of water to rice -- it was something that you knew by heart. Rice was such a staple of the cuisine here that you thought it was common knowledge. He did not know that fish needed to be seared skin-side down first. He did not know that woody end of asparagus needed to be snapped off and discarded.

He did know how to boil water at least, which he owed to his experience with chemistry.

“You remind me of my mother,” you said affectionately. “She’d burn water if it were possible.”

“Actually, it’s not impossible to burn water, per se. Depends on your definition of ‘burn.’ Normally, when we talk about burning something, we’re referring to combining it with an oxidizer, usually oxygen, in an exothermic reaction. In an oxygen environment, water is technically already burnt as the hydrogen cannot be oxidized further due it only have one electron to lose. However, the oxygen in water could be oxidized further in a fluorine-rich environment as fluorine is the only other element on the periodic table more electron-hungry than oxygen is. This is the closest you can get to burning water, if you’d like to call it that.”

You watched Shuichi as he explained this. He seemed so passionate about chemistry. “I'm surprised you're in finance. It sounds like you'd make a good chemist, too.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I miss it sometimes.”

“How?” You opened up a drawer, revealing his collection of pipettes and test tubes. “It seems like
a hobby. It’s taken over your kitchen.”

He laughed sheepishly. “For efficiency’s sake.”

You shut the drawer and opened a cabinet. “Erlenmeyer flasks, beakers, graduated cylinders. Wow, Shuichi, you practically have a whole laboratory here. Do you use your range hood for dangerous fumes, too?”

He shrugged off your teasing well-naturedly, instead smiling at you. “For someone who doesn’t seem interested in chemistry, you know your laboratory equipment.”

“I took Chemistry 101 in college as a science credit, so I’m not completely in the dark. Admittedly, I don’t remember much of it, but I do remember the hours spent in a white-washed lab, watching chemical reactions take place.”

“I should have known that there’s a bit of nerd in you.”

“Look who’s talking,” you said with a chuckle. “I bet you have a lab coat in your closet.”

Shuichi hugged you from behind, resting his chin on your shoulder as you measured out sugar for the dessert you were making. “Have you been digging through my closet?”

“Of course not. I was kidding -- I mean, not really. I don’t know for certain, but I’d bet money that you have a lab coat in there somewhere.”

“I’m not interested in money,” he said, his voice lowering to a flirtatious pitch.

“Says the financial advisor. Really, Shuichi, you’re going to have to do better than that.”

His hold on you tightened as he kissed your neck. “Like this?” His lips were firm but gentle, gracing your skin in a trail of small nips.

“You’re maddening,” you said as you touched his face with the hand of the same shoulder he had perched his chin on. “Try this for me, will you?” You lifted a wooden spoon to his lips, covered in whipped cream.

He leaned forward as though he was going to sample it, but then, in one swift motion, he took the spoon from you and tapped a small smear across your nose and lips.

“Shuichi!” you gasped, turning around to snag the spoon back before he could do further damage.

He was laughing, far more freely than you had ever heard. He released the spoon without a fight, backing away so you wouldn’t be able to exact your revenge.

You tried, nevertheless, somehow ending up being caught by him, his hands just below your shoulders, holding you away at arm’s length. “Damn it, Shuichi! This isn’t fair!” Your fit of giggles subsided as you saw the genuine mirth in his eyes, a reflection of carefree bliss, and you calmed for the moment. “You have a beautiful laugh, you know,” you said.

He seemed taken aback by your comment, an expression of puzzlement on his face.

You saw your chance, booping him gently on the nose with what remained of the whipped cream. “You have a beautiful face, too. It looks even better now.”

Shuichi gave you an amused glance, a slight tilt of his head. “I’m sure my face is nothing compared to yours.” He pulled you close, kissing you, his tongue briefly running over your lips.
“You taste good, too,” he said, and he leaned forward to kiss you again.

You were caught off guard by his second kiss, dropping the spoon to the floor.

Kurama stepped outside, locking the door behind him.

_____ declared that as his punishment for the “shenanigans” he pulled, he would have to pick up a bottle of wine, which she had forgotten to add to their list of groceries earlier. He couldn’t suppress a small smile as he thought of their mischievous evening together so far.

He was lucky to have her. The more he spent time with her, the more he felt comfortable poking a bit of fun at her, testing each reception. She was clever, not particularly sensitive, though still reactive, to his teasing -- in fact, he thought she might have enjoyed it, their banter and games.

She said he had a beautiful laugh.

He had never received such a sincere compliment before, not from someone whose opinion mattered so much to him. He would try to laugh more for her.

Under ordinary circumstances, he would not have left her alone. However, the danger was not in his apartment, and truthfully, the convenience store was just down the street. And he knew he had business to address.

Kurama walked past a man slumped over, sitting on the curb. He recognized him as the one who had been trailing them all day, blending into the background. A few more steps, and Kurama could still feel eyes on him, hidden beneath the tattered hood. His smell was not identical to the one Kurama remembered, but it was vaguely familiar.

“Who are you?” he demanded, stopping in his tracks.

“It’s me, Shuichi.”

When he heard her voice, his eyes widened, and he turned around. There she was, a lovely young woman, the lady of his affections. She stood with her hands in her jacket pockets, a scarf tucked neatly beneath her chin. Her posture was her own, the slight curve of her waist and hips uniquely hers; the spirited light in her eyes was the same, even her distinct smell.

“You have a lot of nerve impersonating her,” Kurama said, a fire in his eyes. “I suggest you find a new form to take.”

His senses would have been deceived, if not for one scent that was missing -- the juji plant. Every morning, before they began their day, Kurama would dab a small concentration of the juji plant oil on the nape of her neck, unbeknownst to her. He would embrace her, kiss her, and then deftly run some of the oil over her skin. It absorbed quickly, a scent undetectable by humans and even most demons -- fortunately, he had inherited his highly distinguished sense of smell from his last life. With a talented shapeshifter on the loose, he knew he could not afford to be misguided.

With a quick contortion of the flesh, faster than the human eye could perceive, his adversary was back to playing the role of a homeless man. “Impressive,” the man said. “I was sure my disguise would be enough to at least shake you... Kurama.”

“You know my name.” He did not show it, but he was immensely relieved that the shapeshifter no longer took on _____’s persona.
“I know you. We met on several occasions, well over a thousand years ago.”

Kurama stiffened. “Who are you? Not the innocent companion _____ thinks you are, at any rate.”

“I see she has endeared herself to you as she does to many people who cross her path.” The man’s eyes narrowed. “I thought that Ryohei boy was bad enough, a walking flesh-bag of anxiety, a ball of nerves. You’re far worse. If you care about her, you’ll leave her be.”

“So you may enter her life again? I think not.”

“And you think I would entrust her life to a demon? The cold-blooded Yoko Kurama?”

“Are you not a demon yourself? Or do you normally speak so lowly of your kin?”

“Demons are all the same. Impulsive, selfish, cruel. I have seen more potential for redemption in the human species.”

Kurama didn’t care much for the lecture, but he listened.

“You know her, Kurama. She is kind, naive, and pure of heart. She doesn’t need you as a corrupting influence in her life.”

“And who are you to her? What business do you have deceiving her?”

“You’re in no position to talk about deceit. Leave her. It is the least you can do.”

“I will not,” Kurama said, defiance in his voice. “She is safest with me.”

The man’s eyebrows furrowed as he studied his enemy. “Then watch yourself. If any harm comes to her, I will ruin you, stamp you from the very face of this world.”

“I could say the same about you.”

In a burst of speed, the shapeshifter took off, running with far more speed than a downtrodden homeless man should have been able to muster.

Kurama watched him leave, tracing what little energy he emitted until it was out of range of detection. Although not usually one to be unnerved, when it came to _____, he was far more vulnerable than he cared to admit.

You set the table, somehow able to find dishes in one of the upper cabinets among the chemistry equipment. They were of good quality, beautiful china that you thought his mother must have gifted to him when he moved out. You even managed to find a set of wine glasses in the very back.

You removed Shuichi’s gift, a framed photo of you two, from the paper packaging, setting it right behind his dish on the table.

Dinner was ready, dessert in the oven. Shuichi was taking longer than you thought he might, which gave you plenty of time to perfect the atmosphere.

When you heard the door unlock, you smiled, and your boyfriend walked through the door. “Welcome home,” you said, helping him with the wine while he removed his jacket.

“I wasn’t sure whether to buy white or red, so I bought both... and a gift.” He presented you with a bouquet of red roses, each petal perfectly shaped and dusted with droplets of water. “An apology
for my ‘shenanigans’ from earlier.”

You accepted the gift, breathing the fresh scent of roses. “If I just casually throw around the word ‘shenanigans’ to describe your behavior, will I get more flowers in the future?”

“You can if you’d like, but all you have to do is ask.” Shuichi kissed your head.

“I really don’t know where you got these so late in the day. They’re gorgeous. There’s that nice lady who sells flowers from her cart on the corner near the ramen shop, but she’s usually gone by mid-afternoon.”

“Well, she stayed late today.” He chuckled and changed the subject. “It smells amazing in here, _____.”

“Probably the best your apartment has ever smelled,” You took his hand. “Come on. Dinner’s ready.”

As Shuichi sat down, he noticed the photo at his place setting, picking it up. “This is from Inoji,” he said, the tone of his voice seemingly nostalgic.

“It’s for you. The first selfie you’ve ever taken, remember? I practically had to beg you take that picture, what with your long arms and all.” You hugged his shoulders from behind, resting your head against his. “I wanted you to have something that you could put on display, even if only for yourself.”

“Thank you, _____ . I know just the place for it.” He didn’t look away from the photo. “You’re stunning in this picture.”

You raised an eyebrow.

“And all the time,” he said, catching himself. Shuichi set the frame photo down as leaned his head over to kiss your arm. “I’m flattered that you thought of me. You certainly didn’t have to buy me a gift.”

“I wanted to thank you, Shuichi. For everything you’ve done, for being in my life, for taking a chance on me.”

“Dinner wasn’t enough?”

“Well, you eat it, and it’s gone. I figured the photo might last a little longer. Unless we go through a nasty breakup, of course.”

Shuichi chuckled. “Well, unless you have any surprises for me, I don’t think we have anything to worry about.”

“No surprises here. Except for dinner. I hope you’re hungry.”

You served dinner, plating everything up so that it was to your standards. When you placed the dish in front of Shuichi, he blinked. “This looks restaurant quality. I’m impressed.”

“You eat with your eyes first. Go on,” you said, taking a seat across the table. “It’s really the flavors that matter.”

Shuichi took an elegant first bite, chewing thoughtfully before swallowing. “It’s delicious,” he said. “The fish is cooked perfectly to my, albeit limited, knowledge.”
“I’m glad.” You gave him a smile as you both began to eat. “I didn’t know what I’d do if you didn’t like my cooking.”

“Why wouldn’t I like your cooking?”

“Well, aside from the fact that you smeared it across my face earlier, it’s important that I can show that I care in one of the ways I know how.”

“I understand the sentiment,” he said, ignoring your jab, “which begs the question: What can I do for you?”

“You don’t need to do anything for me, Shuichi. You’ve been doing things for me this whole time. You practically took me on vacation to Inoji and now you’re housing me. Tonight was purposefully for you.”

He sighed, exhaling in a small chuckle. “_____, relationships are a two-way street. I believe you’re the one who told me that. You can forget about Inoji -- that was a business function that happened to work in our favor. And you’re living here because of circumstances out of your control. There’s no reason for us to keep tallies. I enjoy doing things for you, and I’m charmed when you think of me. I adore you, and I want my efforts to be reflective of that, which is why I ask how you wish to be cherished.”

“All right, then,” you said, feeling demure, even bashful, from his affirmations. “I suppose that’s fair, and I’ll get back to you on what I want. I don’t have anything top of mind right now.”

Shuichi seemed satisfied with your response. “I’ll forever be entertained,” he added, “by how easily I can make you blush.”

You looked away from him immediately, realizing just how warm your face was. “Well, I’m glad my embarrassment suffices for your entertainment.”

“Why are you embarrassed?” he asked. “I do adore you and cherish you. Is the truth really so disconcerting?”

“No,” you said. “I’m happy to hear it. I really am. I think… it’s just hard to believe.”

“Why? Are you not deserving of my affection?” Shuichi’s question was not demanding or accusatory -- his tone was of earnest curiosity.

“It’s not that.” You stared at your plate. “I just wonder how I got so lucky -- sometimes, I have a hard time accepting compliments. It has nothing to do with my feeling of self-worth or confidence. When I say I’m embarrassed, it’s not a sense of shame -- the feeling is far more intricate than that.”

“I see. So you’re modest.” He smiled at you. “I already knew that.”

“I guess you just described my complicated feelings in just a single word. It’s a revelation.”

Shuichi laughed, the sound clear and pure for the second time this evening. “Do you see the irony? You couldn’t put your thoughts to a single word -- someone truly modest wouldn’t even think of it.”

“That’s perceptive of you,” you said, enjoying his sincere delight. “I guess that solves the mystery of my feeling of embarrassment. I never realized why I always felt a little uncomfortable with compliments before.”
“_____,” he started, “my intention isn’t to make you uncomfortable--”

“I know,” you interrupted gently. “This isn’t a you problem -- it’s definitely a me problem. In fact, I’m not even sure it’s a problem.” You laughed at the absurdity of it all. “I guess I’ll just blush some, and since you seem to like it, it’s your gain.”

Shuichi pushed his chair from the table, standing up and offering you his hand. “Perhaps,” he said, helping you up. “I do like it when you blush. It means your heart is racing, your blood flowing faster. It’s exciting.” He tipped your chin up so you would look him in the eyes. “But I like everything else about you, as well. Your modesty is a part of who you are, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Despite my teasing, I hope you know I only speak the truth about my feelings for you.”

You felt your cheeks warming again, but before you could say anything, Shuichi kissed you. He guided you to his living room, keeping your touch constant as he pulled you onto the couch.

His hands were around your waist, his lips on your neck. His touch sent a shiver up your spine as he eased you into his lap, your legs settled long-ways along the couch, your hands on his shoulders.

You gave a quiet gasp when you felt gentle teeth nipping at your skin, followed by his tongue and the soft pressure of his lips. His fingers trailed along the curve of your waist, to your back and down to your hips. You arched your back in response, just enough to pull your neck away from his lips, and you leaned forward to kiss him.

Your hands moved to his face, threading through his gorgeous locks of silk hair. Your fingernails ran along his scalp, which elicited what seemed like an involuntary reaction as he let a small moan escape. You deepened the kiss, your tongue slipping past his lips--

The oven beeped, interrupting your moment together.

“I need to get that,” you whispered, pulling away.

Shuichi’s grasp tightened on your hip and waist. “No, you don’t,” he said, bringing you back for another kiss.

“It's going to burn, Shuichi.”

“Then let it burn,” he all but purred, breathlessly, seductively.

“Dammit, Shuichi. I'm not letting my cake burn.” You pushed against him, slipped off his lap, and walked toward the kitchen.

He watched you as you left, silently chuckling to himself, admiring both your defiance and the swing of your hips as you trotted off to save your dessert.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. :) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.
Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Chapter Notes

Chapter 25! We're at the halfway point, I think. Or about there. :) I sat down and sketched out the next 25 chapters. Embracing the Seasons will be at least 50 chapters, potentially more.

This chapter is meaningful to me. This is the main reason why I started writing this story -- I never could find anything else like this to read, so I thought I'd create my own analysis. Kurama is so beautifully, almost sorrowfully, complex -- I wanted to be able to interpret this Yoko/Shuichi duality, how it has impacted him up till this moment, how it affects his feelings toward the RC, and share it with you all.

I never intended this to be a songfic. I don't usually write songfics because I don't think the addition of lyrics often improves the reading experience. However, I was listening to a cover of "Canonball" by Damien Rice, and something just clicked into place. I think this song describes Kurama's plight as perfectly as any song would, and I hope I am able to communicate this to you through the writing. Click here to listen. You may have to listen a few times. :) Please let me know what you all think; of course, I hope you enjoy this because I'm really pleased with how it turned out. If you like this, I have a couple of other songfics planned for Kurama and the RC.

As always, your comments mean the world to me. <3 Thank you to: Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, SailorCupcake, LadyAmazon, FannibleToast, Kactuskat16, jumponthechandelier, Pepucz, and oscar_milde for your kind words!

PS: Because so many of you implied in the last chapter that you'd rather the cake burn (I was amused!), I'm here to tell you that you can have your cake and eat it, too! Just walk over to the kitchen, remove the cake, and then run back over to snog Kurama all you want. ;)

It was not easy giving her his heart when he could only share half of himself.

There were two faces to this enigmatic coin: Yoko Kurama and Shuichi. Kurama acted as the metal in between, the shades of grey among the black and white.

He was once cruel, merciless, selfish. Yoko Kurama gave little thought to others and would not hesitate to take life if it suited him, for a specific ambition or otherwise. He lived a tumultuous life, striking fear in the hearts of even his demon kin.

These years in the body of Shuichi Minamino, under the tender care of his mother, had softened him. He found unconditional love, a reason to be compassionate. This was Shuichi. He was reserved, polite, and reflective, the perfect son for the mother whom he adored.

But even as a human boy, Shuichi was not without the influence of Yoko. He remembered everything -- the ruthless vindication, the violent sadism, the lack of concern for life. But he also remembered the cautious wisdom, the calculating calm, the bold initiative, traits that even Shuichi
valued.

There was a struggle within him. Consolidating these two existences was near impossible.

Thus, Kurama surfaced, the mediator of the two personalities. They were not separate in spirit or soul. They were all fused, joined as one, but they were conflicted in intention, ambition, and method. And as life became more interesting, the thrill of adventure, purpose, challenge on his doorstep, Kurama became the prevailing psyche -- he retained Yoko’s unparalleled precision and foresight, while compensating with Shuichi’s kindhearted, gentle nature.

As he learned, he grew. His experiences with his friends allowed him the chance to explore his heart, his desires. He explored his powers to the point where, in moments of duress, he would revert back to Yoko and rely on his strength. There was even a time when he was desperate to summon the demon inside to defeat an even darker enemy. Nevertheless, Yoko was cruel and unyielding, harboring a disregard for any life besides his own. Kurama suppressed him, quite literally facing his inner demon, determining that for the moment, he wanted to just be Kurama. He wanted to live out his life among his human friends and family, the ones he cared for most.

He wanted to be with her.

He never thought he would find a love such as this. He never thought he would look at a woman and want her.

When he kissed her, he felt a wave of contentment that lit a fire in his soul. It was not a vengeful, raging fire, but a constant flame, kindling steadily, radiating warmth. She made him happy, revealed to him this previously fleeting feeling that was now within his grasp. With her, he could be happy.

But how could he commit himself to her wholly when he could only give her a part of himself?

She needed to know the truth.

*Still a little bit of your taste in my mouth*
*Still a little bit of you laced with my doubt*
*Still a little hard to say what's going on*

Kurama watched her as she watered his plants, humming a distant tune. She didn't have to, but she insisted on helping him with his household chores while she stayed. That was so like her.

They didn't have to be actively engaged with each other -- he was content to simply watch her. He liked the way she walked, the purse of her lips when she thought, even the way her body relaxed when she fell asleep on the couch. He enjoyed her playful defiance, her witty comebacks, her mock indignance when he teased her.

He was so enamored with her that even his attitude toward everyday, mundane tasks was now vastly improved. He no longer felt the drudgery of waking up in the morning, the routine of going to work, the exhaustion of returning home late at night. Kurama now had something to look forward to.

It seemed too good to be true.

*Still a little bit of your ghost, your witness*
*Still a little bit of your face I haven't kissed*
You step a little closer each day
That I can't say what's going on

He rarely let her out of his sight for fear of her safety, but when he did, no matter how brief, she was in his thoughts. He couldn't stop. She was on his mind while he worked throughout the day, hidden away in her office. He imagined her in her pencil skirt and suit jacket, wishing that he could tuck his hands around her waist and pull her close.

He would kiss her neck, her face, her lips, and let her fall into his arms. He would whisper in her ear, taunting her with words of affection and passion.

And when she would react, stepping closer, his heart would flutter, like the wing beats of a southern bird flying home for the shifting seasons. He knew where to go, but he knew not the destination.

All he knew was that she was his, and she was his happiness.

Stones taught me to fly
Love taught me to lie
Life taught me to die
So it's not hard to fall
When you float like a cannonball

Life was not always kind to him. Yoko Kurama did not know compassion, not because he couldn't find it, but because he did not see its value. Demons had no need for virtues. The strongest would prevail, power and cunning the deciding factor in all battles.

Strength was law. Yoko hated law, but he enjoyed the game, relying on his chaotic adventures to burn the days. He uprooted ancient riches, stones and treasures that were said to be guarded by the most greedy demons. He slaughtered those who stood in his way without a shred of remorse. This was the nature of the game, and with each death, his cold heart hardened.

The more he looted and killed, the less trusting of others he became. Even his band of brothers could not be trusted, and especially not women. Interactions at brothels were kept strictly for pleasure. He would tell no one of his ventures as he relied on the secrecy of these missions for success. He could not afford to confide in anyone, nor did he need to.

Served by his brilliant mind, he soared. He became one of the most feared demons in all the land: the legendary bandit, Yoko Kurama.

He carefully assessed his risk for each opportunity. He walked a precarious path, like that of a tightrope -- one mistake, and he would tumble. He never feared the threat of the chasm beneath him, and that was his mistake. One day, his tactics failed him. Like a cannonball, he came plunging down, escaping only narrowly with his life.

Still a little bit of your song in my ear
Still a little bit of your words I long to hear
You step a little closer to me
So close that I can't see what's going on

She still hummed, moving from the plants and onto dusting the shelves. Kurama watched her, glancing over his laptop as he wrote his next research paper. He normally would have done this in the office, but he wanted to be here with her.
He loved her voice, her laughter. Whenever she spoke, Kurama heard her words and the message in them separately. He hung onto them, collecting most everything she said for potential future use. He remembered her opinions, her musings, her frustrations. He forgot nothing.

As she turned around, Kurama could not look away, entranced by her beauty. She saw him, caught his gaze, and smiled. “I thought you were supposed to be writing your research paper,” she said, subtle flirtation in her eyes.

“I thought I was, too.”

Stones taught me to fly
Love taught me to lie
Life taught me to die
So it's not hard to fall
When you float like a cannon

Yoko Kurama fused his spirit with that of the boy who would be named Shuichi Minamino.

Shiori Minamino’s selfless love curbed the part of him that was once demon. She made incredible sacrifices to ensure the success of her son, and for the first time in his life, Kurama realized that there was strength in more than just raw power.

Even so, he could not bear to hurt her. This lie, the tale of his origin obscured by his mother's love, would forever be his truth. He acknowledged this, and it did not dishearten him.

He wondered why he did not feel the same with _____.

She had to know the truth. She was not in a position where she could simply accept and love Shuichi Minamino. She had to accept and love Kurama, and even the vestiges of Yoko, for they were one and the same.

But if he could hide half of himself from his mother, why couldn't he do the same for ____?

Stones taught me to fly
Love taught me to cry
So come on, courage
Teach me to be shy

Shiori was his blood. Somehow, Kurama knew that she would accept and love him, no matter the pending storm. He would always be her son -- she had endured his childhood tantrums, his pride, and his disdain with devotion and understanding. Presently, his truth would do nothing but create trickles of doubt, inviting Shiori to examine her past, seeking answers to questions that did not exist. Her love would always be there; it was her own happiness he wished to preserve, amends for the hardship he had caused in his earlier years.

On the other hand, he found ____. He chose her. She had no obligation to accept and love him. She was an extraordinary woman, but even the most remarkable human beings had their limits. It was easy to understand why she might love Shuichi Minamino, but could she love Kurama, too?

Truthfully, he feared little in life. He feared even less when he was Yoko Kurama. It was the price he paid for being human, for opening his heart. Knowing what it meant now to have friends and family, a place in this world beyond mercenary ambitions, he could never go back to his demon ways. He lived life bravely, chasing after his aspirations with a gentle sorrow in his soul.

Kurama was confident with ____, in some ways, forward, even. He had never pursued a woman
like he pursued her before. He had never been so fascinated. He had never wanted something for himself as deeply as he wanted her.

Perhaps he needed to be more reserved. He couldn’t get his hopes up. This, he feared. He did not want to lose her, the joy she brought him, the warmth he felt when she touched him, the breathtaking awe at the mere sight of her.

’Cause it’s not hard to fall
And I don't wanna scare her

Kurama loved her.

He loved her. It was a thought that was always there, faintly pulsing in the back of his mind. He knew he cared, and he knew that she had a special place in his heart. But to think that this was true love, the passion shared among the dearest of companions, he never felt an emotion so pure. As he came to this conclusion, his breath caught in his throat.

He had fallen hard, and he wasn’t sure how he’d pick himself up. Only she could do that for him.

Did she feel the same way about him?

He thought she might.

But that was because she only knew Shuichi. She didn’t love Kurama. He had never given her the chance.

Part of him didn’t want to risk it.

It's not hard to fall
And I don't wanna lose
It's not hard to grow
When you know that you just don't know.

“Always ask yourself what prizes are the ones worth having, the ones worth the prospect of uncertainty.”

He said that to her during their stay in Inoji.

She was worth any amount of risk. He promised her that.

But was the truth worth losing what happiness he had already found with her? When he already had her? Was he willing to risk her for the truth she so desperately needed to hear? The truth that could hurt her?

It could shatter, not only their relationship, but her overall perspective on life and love. He couldn’t do that to her.

Kurama didn’t have an answer.

For all his wit and intellect, thousands of years of wisdom, he had no answers.

All he knew was that, with every fiber of his being, in this world and any world beyond, he loved her.
Thank you for reading! Would love to hear your thoughts!

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
You guys are all wonderful! <3 Thank you for your continued support!

I'd especially like to thank perfect-to-stay, Kactusc16, oscar_milde, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Pepuz, FannibalToast, LadyAmazon, and SailorCupcake for your comments! I really do get tons of writing inspiration from them, so THANK YOU. <3

Kurama's torn, as you probably all suspected. BUT THERE IS ALWAYS ROOM FOR SOME FLUFF. Also, I really, really love Kuwabara. He's such a good friend. Please enjoy!

“Kurama, it’s been nearly two weeks, and we still haven’t apprehended that demon. Please tell me you have a plan.” Koenma had a lavish spread in front of him, pan-seared dumplings and steamed buns of all varieties. A bowl of rice fit comfortably in one hand, chopsticks in the other.

“As I’ve said before, we’re at an impasse, I’m afraid,” Kurama said.

Koenma groaned. “I knew we should have seized him while we had the chance.”

“But, Koenma, sir,” Botan started, “we didn't even have solid evidence that Yugen was the right suspect before that incident in _____’s apartment. Truthfully, there was no way of knowing until that happened.”

“Hindsight bias can cloud judgment,” Kurama said. “I stand by us taking the more conservative approach.”

“Well, speaking of biases, that's easy for you to say, Kurama. You got a pretty girlfriend out of this, but what do I have to show my father?”

Kurama’s expression was calm. “We may not have apprehended the demon we call Yugen, but I confronted him.”

“What did you learn?” Botan asked.

“He knows who I am.”

“That’s not a surprise,” Koenma said irritably. “Everyone in Demon World knows who you are. Yoko Kurama is the real life equivalent of the boogie man.”

Kurama ignored him. “He knows me personally, claiming we’ve met on more than one occasion over a thousand years ago.”

“Who is he, then?”

“He wouldn’t give me a name,” Kurama said. “He hasn’t taken on a form with which I’m familiar,
“So we really don’t know anything.”

“This information is more useful than you think. If his claims are true, then this means he must be a demon of the highest class. At least an A class by your measure. How else would he have lived that long, been able to evade detection by his pursuers, and even outwit our team in Living World? He is dangerous and clever.”

“But he doesn’t seem like a threat to _____,” Botan said. “You think he would have done something by now.”

“I don’t think he means her harm,” Kurama said, “but I’m less sure of the role he wishes to play in her life and why he has been at her side all of this time. Even now, I doubt he’s far from her, hidden in plain sight. He seems protective of her, if anything.”

Koenma clicked the chopsticks in his hand together. “Keep the investigation up. While harmless, those Makai insects are really unnerving to see -- they’ve begun to widen their search, from not just within the city to the outskirts of it. That’s why we may feel that the threat is dissipating as we see fewer of the insects, but it’s really not. Apprehend Yugen any safe chance you get, but don’t make a spectacle of it.”

“I wonder what Shuichi and Botan are doing,” you said as you sat next to Kuwabara at the bar of a local restaurant.

“Botan needed help with something,” Kuwbara said with a shrug. “Shuichi’s a good friend, so I guess that’s that.”

You took a sip of your drink. “You all seem so close. Admittedly, I’m a little envious of how tight-knight your group is.”

“I’m sure you have friends, too.”

“Sure,” you said. “But for the most part, they’re far away. I came here as a career choice, so I left most everyone behind.”

“You didn’t leave them. You make it sound like you abandoned them or something. You’re just out exploring your options, making yourself a better person, securing your future. At least, that’s what it feels like.” Kuwbara took a swig of his beer. “Besides, we’re your friends now. You can count on us for anything.”

His words touched you. “You know, I’ve always thought you could tell a lot about someone by the company they keep. You’re doing a great job representing Shuichi.”

“He cares about you a lot. He’s never been interested in women before -- I’ve never actually seen him date anyone, except for those silly dates his mom sets up for him. They never work out. I guess your boyfriend’s just particular.”

“Well, he’s… perfect,” you replied, finding the word hard to say. “I know no one’s perfect, but… I think he might be. I guess someone perfect would be particular.”

Kuwabara chuckled. “He’s wise, that’s for sure. He does everything deliberately and thinks through his choices before making a decision. That’s why we all know that you must be the perfect girl for him. He wouldn’t commit to someone so easily.”
Your heart fluttered -- you honestly thought you might cry. “I feel so lucky to have people like you and Shuichi in my life. When I got back from Inoji, my life was kind of in shambles. I mean, I still don’t know what happened with Yugen and my apartment. But knowing that you’re all here to support me makes it all the easier. Thank you.”

“Hey.” He touched your shoulder. “You’re a part of the gang now.”

You gave him a small smile. “Did Shuichi put you up to this?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Well, I know he worries about me, especially with all that’s happened. I hope realizes that I don’t need someone with me all the time. I actually thought I was going to canvas the neighborhood again for my dog, but then you showed up and asked if I wanted to go out for a drink.”

“Oh, I just happened to be in the area!” Kuwabara smiled at you cheekily. “Shuichi had nothing to do with it.”

“You’re a horrible liar.”

“Am not.”

“Okay.” You laughed. “I’m not mad. It’s sweet how much he cares.”

“Are you planning on staying with him? Or moving back as soon as you get your apartment cleaned this Tuesday?”

“The current plan is for me to go back. I don’t think that’s what he wants, but I do like my independence.”

“Are you just saying that because you feel it’s too soon?”

You shrugged. “That’s part of it.”

“Do you like living with him? Is it working out? I mean, it’s a big step for any couple, but I wouldn’t say no just because it’s too soon by social standards. We have a lot of stupid rules with no basis, like how it’s rude to put your elbows on the dinner table, or how watching TV is okay but video games are rotting my brain. Social norms are dumb.”

He made a good point. “Well,” you said, “it just so happens that I put my elbows on the table” -- you tapped your elbows where they rested on the bar -- “and I like video games. I agree with you that some social norms are ridiculous, but I’m a cautious person by nature, I guess.”

“But the reason why they say to not move in together too soon is to get to know a person better. You’ve known Shuichi for over two months now.”

“Through work.”

“You get to know people well enough when you hang around them for eight hours a day. And you’ve stayed with him for a week. You said it’s going great, and I’m sure you’ve seen his dirty laundry by now.”

“He has a hamper,” you said. “He’s actually really clean, much more so than the other guys I’ve dated. I told you already -- he’s perfect. Other than the fact that he’s a dud in the kitchen, I don’t think he has any dirty laundry to share.”
“See? Don’t fix what ain’t broke.”

“Mm.”

“What’s the hesitation?”

“Yugen,” you sighed. “He won’t know how to find me if he does come back.”

“Aren’t dogs supposed to be smart?”

You laughed. “Yes, they’re very intelligent, but how’s Yugen supposed to know where to find me? I mean, if I left you right here, without telling you anything about where I was going, how easily could you find me?”

“Point taken.” Kuwabara finished his beer. “I’ve just never seen Shuichi so happy before. Ever since he came back with you from Inoji, he seems more lively.”

“Really? You’ve only seen him a couple of times since then.”

“Really. I would know.”

“I believe you.”

Kurama and Botan returned to the Living World.

“That went better than I expected,” Botan said. “I thought Koenma might order Yugen’s arrest immediately.”

“How? Even his enemies can’t find him.”

Botan shrugged. “I don’t know. Koenma’s been under a lot of stress lately. I think King Yama has been putting pressure on him to find the source of these Makai insects. They may not be doing anything right now, but if they found their target, who knows what would happen?”

They stepped into the bustling restaurant, noticing Kuwabara’s large form at the bar right away. _____ was nowhere near. Kurama paced up to Kuwabara -- he trusted his friend, but she was supposed to be with him. “Hello, Kuwabara. Where is she?”

“Oh, hey, Kurama,” Kuwabara said. “She’s in the bathroom. I hope you didn’t expect me to follow her in there, too.”

Kurama sighed. “No, this is fine. I just thought I’d ask. Thank you for spending the afternoon with her.”

“It’s no problem.” Kuwabara turned around in his seat. “Oh, hey, Botan. Why don’t we grab a table for dinner?”

“Great idea! I’m starving! I’ll go talk to the host,” Botan said as she walked off.

“How was your afternoon?” Kurama asked.

“It was great,” Kuwabara said. “_____’s easy to talk to, so hanging out with her is fun. I think she’s catching on, though, Kurama. She’s sharp. She’s noticing that you never let her out of your sight or that she’s always with one of us. I don’t think she gets why, but you don’t want to come off as the
possessive boyfriend type, do you?"


“You have to tell her, man. It’s not fair that she’s the only one left in the dark.” There was sincere concern in Kuwabara’s eyes. “If she figures it out herself or if Yugen tells her, you’re going to be in a hell of a lot of trouble.”

“I know.” The reality of it all was not lost on him.

“Are you talking about me?”

Kurama felt someone hug him from behind, arms wrapping around his chest. Her touch was both familiar and comforting. “____,” he greeted, eyes softening. He turned around. “I hope you had a fun time this afternoon.”

“I did,” she said, her cheeks lightly flushed. “Kuwabara’s good company.”

“I agree,” Kurama said. He smelled the floral notes of tequila and noticed the bounce in her step. “How do you feel about dinner here?”

“Sure. I was starting to get hungry. Besides” -- she stood on her tiptoes to peck him on the lips -- “that margarita pitcher really should come with an appetizer. I’m feeling a liiiiiittle tipsy.”

You felt back to normal after dinner, waving goodbye to Kuwabara and Botan for the evening.

“So,” Shuichi said, “you drank a whole pitcher by yourself?”

“In my defense, it was a small pitcher. Besides, Kuwabara claimed that men don’t drink margaritas, and I wasn’t about to let it go to waste.” You threw Shuichi a teasing glance. “You would have helped me, wouldn’t you?”

He chuckled. “I’m not much of a drinker, _____. The occasional glass of wine is sufficient.”

“As much as I enjoy a good glass of wine, too, you didn’t answer my question.”

Shuichi rolled his gaze upward toward the night sky, seemingly pensive. “I suppose I wouldn’t let my girlfriend tackle a whole margarita pitcher on her own. But, you do seem fine, and tipsy _____. was quite amusing--”

You bumped into him playfully. “Hey, amusing is good -- I know I didn’t do anything stupid. I’m a responsible drinker, and I regulate my intake well. Alcohol just might take away the filter a little bit and help me relax, especially in social settings.”

“I’ll remember that if I have to weasel something out of you.”

“That won’t work. I have a resolve of steel.”

“Oh?” Shuichi spun you toward him, wrapping an arm around your waist, your hand in his. “I’d like to test this resolve of steel,” he said, his face close to yours.

You felt of wave of exhilaration course through your body when you looked into his eyes. There was something… arousing about your boyfriend being assuming and forward. He was so soft-spoken and modest in his interactions with others that his boldness caught you off guard, in turn
Shuichi seemed satisfied with the expression on your face, kissing you before gently pushing you along. “Perhaps some other time,” he said. “It’s getting late, and we have work tomorrow morning.”

You sighed. While you liked your job enough, the prospect of having to devote all that time to work was tiring. “All right,” you said, hugging his arm. “But I do want to cuddle tonight, if that’s okay.”

“We can test your resolve with that.”

“How so?”

“We’ll see how long you can lie in bed next to me without cuddling.”

You saw where this was going. “Oh, so you want to play hardball, Shuichi,” you said, giving him a raised eyebrow. “Two can play at that game.”

“If I recall, you were the one who claimed to have a resolve of steel.”

“I most definitely do, but I didn’t think you required evidence.”

Shuichi laughed. “I don’t. I’m merely teasing you.”

“Good. Because I could really use that cuddle.”

“I would never deny you a cuddle.”

“I imagine that’s what a good boyfriend would say.”

“Am I a good boyfriend?” The question came suddenly.

You squeezed his hand. “You’re more than I could ever ask for, Shuichi,” you said, deciding to give him a serious answer. “You’re perfect for me.”

Shuichi looked at you, and you almost saw your reflection in his eyes. There was emotion there that you couldn’t quite place, intense and vivid, almost sorrowful. He blinked, just once, and it was all gone. “_____,” he said, his voice beautifully smooth, “you are my wonder, the light of my life.”

Your heart was so full.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

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Voyeurism

Chapter Notes

*Sigh* You guys, I love fluff so, so much. This chapter, per my outline, wasn't supposed to be fluffy, even a little limey, but it is. Just as a warning, I can see how my 50 chapter goal can quickly morph into much more than that. :'D

I also didn't intend for it to take the turn it did at the end, but it kind of felt right as I was writing it, so... there you have it!

Enjoy!

As always, thank you to my commenters: FannibalToast, KactusKat16, jumponthechandelier, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, oscar_milde, and Pepucz!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When you returned to Shuichi’s apartment, he settled on the couch with his laptop, finishing up some last-minute work before tomorrow.

The roses from last night were beautiful, vividly red and plump with color. You buried your nose in the petals, enjoying their cool velvet feel against your skin. You pulled them from the vase, trimming the stems to lengthen their livelihood.

“Careful,” Shuichi said from the living room. “Every rose has its thorns.”

“I’ll be fine,” you said. “But thank you. I promise I’ll be care-- ow!”

Shuichi rushed over to the kitchen immediately. “Your promise is clearly a misrepresentation. Are you all right, _____?”

Your finger was in your mouth. “Mmhmm,” you replied, nodding your head.

“Let me see.”

You shook your head, the tip of your finger on your tongue. “It’s fine,” you said, your voice a lisp.

Shuichi gave you a stern look. “____, you need to treat your injury before it becomes infected.”

You removed your finger from your mouth, taking a look at it. “It’s hardly an injury -- it’s a small puncture wound.”

“Even a puncture wound can be deceivingly detrimental. A specific species of fungus grows on the tips of rose thorns that can cause swelling and a horrible infection. Let me see your hand.”

You grudgingly obeyed. “It’s just a small hole in my finger. It’s not a big deal. I can take care of it.”

Shuichi ignored you, his thumb straightening your index finger so he could study the wound. He brought you over to the sink, where he washed your hand, applied ointment, and secured your finger with a bandage. He did this so delicately and so quickly that you were actually impressed.
“And how many times have you been stabbed by rose thorns?” you asked, admiring how seamlessly your finger was wrapped.

He lifted your hand to his lips and kissed your finger, glancing at you with telling eyes. “Too many. I’ve treated enough injuries in my day.”

“Thank you, Shuichi,” you said. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do without you.”

“What are you talking about?” He kissed your hand again.

You squeezed his hand before pulling yours away. “I’m moving back to my apartment on Tuesday night, remember? That’s the plan.”

“Mm. I forgot.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“Since when did you become so argumentative?”

“Don’t deflect.”

He chuckled. “I can’t help it. It’s a strategy I’ve employed for a long time.”

“Deflection? Well, stop it. It’s what politicians do, and you don’t want to be like a politician, do you? You’re far too honest.”

“Mm.” He leaned in close, his face right in front of yours, tipping your chin up. “How about a distraction instead?”

“A distraction--” You were cut off with a kiss, Shuichi’s one hand on your waist, the other sliding gracefully along your jawline. You nearly melted at his touch, pulling away for just one moment. “You’re shameless,” you whispered against his lips.

“I’ve been called worse,” he said as he pulled you closer, a flirtatious gaze in his eyes.

You touched him, letting your hands trace his strong shoulders until your arms were around his neck. “Oh? Like what?”

Shuichi’s thumb touched your cheek, stroking it as he kissed you again. “Let’s not ruin the mood with my flaws. I’d much rather focus on you.” His lips found your neck, right below your jaw, and he began a trail of kisses, his touch firm but affectionate.

You gasped, the sudden sensation enough to cause a shudder to wrack through your body. “Shuichi…” His name came out in roused whisper.

He smiled against your skin -- you could even feel his lips curving in amusement. He continued to kiss your neck, his tongue caressing your skin with each carefully placed nip.

You pulled away, catching his mouth in a passionate kiss, which he gladly returned.

He shifted, easing you along with him, his hands now on your hips. You felt the kitchen counter behind you, and in one fluid motion, he lifted you up, your lips maintaining constant contact. In this position, you sat taller than him, changing the dynamic in a way that was rather exciting. He eased closer, his body settling in between your knees.

You briefly broke the kiss for a breath of air, only to find Shuichi courting your lips again. When
he kissed you, you felt a comfortable warmth inside, spreading faster as he touched you, his fingers running along your spine, dipping into every curve of your back. He began to explore, tentatively at first, testing your consent with each touch. He wandered lower and found the small of your back, which was strangely stimulating for you, letting his hands rest there for a moment.

You responded with a small moan against his lips, giving him permission to continue.

His hands slid along the curve of your body, from the small of your back to your hips, your upper thighs atop the countertop, his thumbs caressing you through your clothes. It felt incredible to be touched by him, the sensation kindling a steady, gentle fire in your core.

Then, Shuichi’s lips left yours for a moment, and he tilted his head upward, looking into your eyes. “_____?”

“Yes?” you asked, your voice a low murmur.

“Regrettably, I need to finish that research paper tonight.”

You kissed Shuichi, taunting him with your lips before pulling away. “All right,” you said. “But you’re missing out.”

“I believe it,” he said with a small laugh. He helped you slide down from the counter, looking at you tenderly before he removed his hands from your waist. “It’ll be a late night for me, so feel free to go to bed if you’re tired.”

“I won’t distract you.” You leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. “You know where to find me. Good luck with your paper, Shuichi. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, my love.”

Kurama watched after her as she walked down the hallway. He sighed, missing the feel of her warmth beneath his fingertips, the way she tasted on his tongue, every lithe curve of her body.

He enjoyed the way she reacted to his touch, her soft moans, the way she ran her fingers through his hair and along his neck and chest, her pattern of breathing as she reflexively moved with the ebb and flow of his ministrations.

He found it all arousing, looking forward to the day when she felt comfortable enough to give him that piece of her heart. From her, an intelligent and independent woman, it would be the ultimate gift, a token of her trust and affection.

He would only move as quickly as she wanted to, and with each passing day, she let them move a little further. Still, he felt a tinge of resistance from her, a hint of uncertainty. She was careful, too, he knew, testing the boundaries of their relationship. The somatic arousal was there -- he could smell it, feel it, see it. It was in the air, the sounds she made, the way she grasped his shoulders when he sucked gently on her skin.

But she was not quite there emotionally. And that was okay.

He would just have to be patient, offering his constant devotion until that time. He loved and respected her, and would allow her to make her own decisions, come to her own conclusions.

Sex was an afterthought. Admittedly, a very nice afterthought.
She was worth any wait, after all, her trust being his first priority.

He smiled to himself as he settled on the couch. He reached for his laptop, ready to finish his paper on economic theory, thoughts of _____ lingering in the back of his mind.

It was 12:42 a.m. Shuichi was still not in bed, and you could not sleep. You rolled over to his side, burying your face in his pillow. It smelled like him, fresh and clean like the rain in the mountains, with the distinct perfume of roses. You breathed him in, thinking about how much you'd miss going to bed with him and waking up next to him in the mornings.

You thought about what Kuwabara said this afternoon. Were you being cautious just for the sake of it? Or did you really have a good reason for moving back to your apartment? You knew you wanted to do it for Yugen, but in your heart of hearts you knew that if your couldn't find your beloved dog by now, the chances were slim.

Shuichi never made you feel like you had to give up hope. He never gave you statistics or used logic to dissuade you from your objective. He only supported you, providing help when you asked for it. You were thankful to him for that.

This past week had been an emotional one. The situation with your apartment was terrifying, of course, but you found comfort in Shuichi and his friends. You were lucky to have them in your life, especially during such a volatile time.

You heard footsteps and rolled back to your side of the bed, pulling the covers over your shoulders.

Shuichi stepped inside the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind him. You watched his silhouette in the dark, the only small bit of light leaking from the drawn blinds of the windows. He opened his closet door slowly, letting it slide open as not to wake you. You thought it was sweet, his tiptoeing to preserve your sleep.

He began to strip, first unbuttoning his shirt. Your eyes could barely follow his movement in the dark, relying mostly on your ears. Next, he removed his belt, releasing the zipper on his pants as they slid to the floor. He took off his undergarment. You were sure at this point that he was completely naked.

Shuichi threw on a shirt and pajama pants, stepping silently closer to you. He crawled into his side of the bed, lifting the covers so he could slip underneath, making as little disturbance as possible. You felt him lean toward you, your back facing him, and you thought he might nuzzle your hair or kiss you on the cheek. Instead, he whispered in your ear: “I never thought you’d be one for voyeurism.”

You froze for a moment, and he took advantage of your surprise, sliding an arm underneath you, pulling you close to his chest. “It’s dark, Shuichi!” you said, defensively. “I couldn’t see a thing.”

“No?”

“Of course not. Besides, there’s no way you knew I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Your breathing changes when you’re asleep. I knew the moment I walked in.”

“So you put on a show for me in the dark. Is that it?”

He chuckled, nuzzling his face into your hair. “All you have to do is ask,” he murmured seductively.
You were astonished that modest Shuichi would say anything of the sort, the tone of his voice carrying both serious and mischievous notes. You weren’t usually speechless, but you weren’t sure how to respond, the thought of your boyfriend behaving in such a way causing the warmth to rise to your cheeks.

“I know you’re blushing,” he teased, kissing your neck. “What’s interesting is why you’re not asleep already.”

You swallowed. “I was thinking about Tuesday,” you said, the change in topic allowing your embarrassment to subside.

Shuichi was quiet, encouraging you to continue.

“I guess I hadn’t really thought about it, but I’ll be alone in that apartment. I won’t have anyone there with me.”

“Isn’t that what you want? Your independence?”

“I mean, yes. It’s the sudden realization that Yugen’s gone. I feel like I’ve taken his constant presence for granted. I miss him, obviously, but you forget the impact of your loved ones on your everyday life when things go back to ‘normal’ after they’re gone.”

“_____…”

“I know what you’re going to say, Shuichi,” you started. “You’re going to ask me to stay.”

“It’s dangerous. We still don’t know what happened in that apartment. You’re brave for wanting to return, but I can’t help but worry about you.”

“If I don’t face this, how am I supposed to live or go anywhere by myself?” You sat up, looking at your boyfriend, who lay on his side. “I’ve had time to think about this. I’ve never felt so violated in my life, having someone come into my home for some reason I don’t understand. I don't know what they want or why they targeted my apartment. And my dog is gone defending it, his blood splattered over my carpet and furniture.” You felt the tears welling up in your eyes -- this was the first time you’d spoken about the emotional impact of the intrusion beyond the obvious hurt of losing Yugen. “I feel like I've lost my sense of security. I know I've said that I value my independence, but I'm scared, Shuichi. I'm scared of what might happen, and I'm scared of being scared and losing my independence because of it. I need to take it back.”

Shuichi sat up with you. “_____,” he said gently. “Come here.”

You leaned into him, letting him hold you in his arms as the tears came. You hadn’t cried since the first night, and you felt like you needed to now. Your emotions had been bubbling beneath the surface, and they overflowed. “I-I’m sorry,” you said between sniffs, knowing that this must have been awkward for him.

“Shh,” he comforted, holding you tight. “I promise you everything will be all right, my love. Cry, if you need to. Let it all out.”

You eventually slipped off, cradled in his arms, welcoming a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes
I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

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Chapter Notes

So this chapter feels a little fractured to me, but it includes four conversations that I really wanted to share, some of them fluffier than others, some of them more serious than others. I apologize if things feel kind of slow right now, but I'm building up the intimacy and tying up some loose relationship-related knots before getting into the heavier conversations (and I just really like writing fluff...). I promise things will definitely get more exciting for their relationship, and then more exciting plot-wise afterward!

Please enjoy! As always, I enjoy comments and kudos! :) They make me really happy!

Thank you to those who commented on the last chapter: Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Oscar_Milde, FannibalToast, SailorCupcake, Kactuskat16!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You barely had any sleep, and what little you managed to get was restless. I think it’s best if you stayed home today.”

You made a face, looking Shuichi in the eye as you both lay in bed, the sun’s light peeking through the blinds. “I can handle it.”

“I’m not saying you can’t, but as your boss, I’m giving you the option.”

“I don’t need special treatment, Shuichi,” you said. “Besides, if you know how fitful my night was, that means you didn’t get much sleep either. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I only hope I was able to comfort you.”

You nodded. “You did. It’s nice knowing that I’m not alone, even though I make it sound like I want to leave you for my own space.”

“I respect your decision, _____.

“Even if you don't like it?”

He gave you a small smile, a pause in the conversation. “Even if I don't like it.”

“Well, at least you're honest, which is more than can be said about most men I've dated.” You gave him a coy glance. “You've never asked me about my past relationships.”

“Far be it from me to infringe upon your privacy. Is there anything of note you'd like to share?”

“No,” you said. “Usually, people are nosier, is all. My romantic life hasn't been that exciting.” You snuggled up to Shuichi, resting your head on his chest, you knee folding over his leg. “Present company excluded, of course.”

He kissed your head, his fingertips running soothingly along your back. “I am curious.”
“About what?”
“About your thought process.”
“Regarding..?”
“Other men.”
“What do you mean?”
“You must realize that you are an attractive woman. You have half the office interested in you.”
“What?”
“Interested to varying degrees. Ryohei was the only one remotely open with his feelings, but the others are like tactful wolves at the door, biding their time.”
“That's ridiculous, Shuichi.”
“Is it? I know you're not oblivious. You simply don't want to admit it, being the modest lady you are.” He lifted your hand from his chest to his lips, gracing it with a kiss.
“I know what's going on here.”
“Hm?”
“You're jealous.”
Shuichi looked taken aback. “Me? Jealous?”
You looked up at him coyly, taunting him with the expression on your face.

“Maybe I am,” he finally said, a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “Who wouldn't be if he had someone like you?” He shifted you from his chest so you were facing each other, and he leaned in to kiss you, his hand guiding your jawline right above your neck.

You returned the kiss, your heart fluttering when he touched your skin. His lips were soft against yours, playfully begging for more whenever you thought to pull away for air. It was a chase, a flirtatious courting event, where Shuichi teased you with affectionate advances, kindling your desire.

After a few moments of intimacy, he broke the kiss. He had a look of contentment on his face, adoration in his eyes, his long eyelashes fluttering as he blinked. He kissed your forehead. “Well, , if you're coming to work with me, you'd best get out of bed. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

“All right,” you said, leaning in for one last kiss. “Shuichi?”
“My love?”
“Rest assured, the men at the office don’t have anything on you.”
Shuichi smiled a beautiful smile, the lightest tinge of pink dusted on his cheeks.

“You’re blushing!” you said, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. “I can’t believe I just made you blush!” You laughed when he didn’t respond, the pink deepening just slightly. “I also ruined the
moment, but I’m hoping you’ll forgive me.”

He glanced away and then back at you, the blush now fading. “Always, _____,” he said.

You stole glances at Shuichi during your meeting with several other employees. You hoped no one else noticed, but you knew your boyfriend did. His expression would soften, if only in the slightest way, whenever he looked at you.

You found him in his office during your lunch break, and you slipped inside, closing the door.

“Hello, _____,” he said as he looked up from his desk.

“Shuichi, I had some questions about annuities.” You walked past his desk, standing next to him, a portfolio pad held to your chest. “I also just really wanted to see you.”

“I figured. You don’t usually shut the door when you come into my office.”

“Well, everyone else probably just thinks we’re talking about something super secret and sensitive for a client.”

“Mm,” he hummed in agreement. “Super secret, indeed.” He stood, pushing his office chair back as he stepped toward you, touching your upper arms.

Your eyes were on him. He was so handsome in his business suit, his jacket ironed, his pants pressed. His tie was done expertly, sitting just beneath the collar of his starched shirt. His whole suit was fitted perfectly, tracing the contour of his body. He stood tall, his hair falling in silken locks over his shoulders, and, of course, the feature of most intrigue, his eyes, reflected an affectionate gaze mingled with flirtatious desire.

You had always admired his lean build, his elegance, the way he moved so flawlessly. He was strong, too, his muscles firm to the touch -- you felt them in the way he held you, when he literally swept you off your feet, when you touched his shoulders and chest. Even the most mundane of actions Shuichi made graceful and effortless. Your mind went to the memory of last night, the way he had stripped down as he turned in for the night. You couldn't see anything in the dark, of course, and he knew this, but your imagination was not idle.

He kissed you, gently and tenderly. “You’re beautiful, _____,” he said, smoothing your hair. This time, he didn't mention anything about the pink in your cheeks. Instead, he smiled. “You have questions for me?”

You laughed. “A few.”

“Ask away.”

“Well, I was originally going to ask about this annuity contract” -- you set the documents on his desk -- “but I figured I’d ask if you were hungry?”

“We’ll have to be sneaky, if you want to keep our relationship clandestine in the office.”

“I think I might be kind of bad at that.”

“I’ll meet you outside,” Shuichi said as he kissed your cheek. “Wait a few minutes before following me.”

You agreed, heading back to your office to grab your purse and put on your coat. You managed to
walk by the front desk unnoticed and slip out the door. It seemed that Rita was out on lunch like everyone else.

You looked to your left and then to your right. Where was Shuichi? You headed toward the marketplace as the majority of restaurants and vendors were in that direction.

Shuichi stood a short distance away from the office, hidden between two buildings. He joined you as soon as you walked past, hands casually in his pockets.

“Hey, you,” you said. “What are you feeling?”

“Whatever you’d like, my love.”

“You’re too accommodating.”

“Do you prefer I be less so?”

You looked at him with a curious glance. “I’m just teasing, I’d prefer you be yourself.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I? I’m with you because… well, you’re you. I wouldn’t change a thing about you, Shuichi.” You smiled at him. “Unless you really wanted to change. Then, I guess I’d have to help you.”

He looked at you, pensively quiet for a moment. “You have a loving heart, _____,” he said. “I wouldn’t trade you for the world.”

That night, you climbed into bed after brushing your teeth and snuggled into Shuichi’s chest with a small sigh.

“What’s wrong, _____?” he asked, running his fingers through your hair.

“It’s my last night here,” you said. “Tomorrow, I’ll be back in my own apartment. I’m just enjoying our time together.”

Shuichi continued playing with your hair. “Then enjoy it,” he said softly. “It’ll be lonely without you.”

His admission caught you off guard, not because you thought he wouldn’t miss you, but because you realized just how much you’d miss him. The warmth of his body, his touch, his mere presence was of great comfort to you. Your hand on his chest instinctively grasped his shirt.

“_____?” He placed his hand over yours.

“It's nothing,” you said, immediately releasing the cloth.

“That certainly didn't feel like nothing.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.”

“Do you feel safe returning tomorrow?” he asked.

You swallowed. If you said yes, you would be lying to yourself; if you said no, you'd be letting your fears consume you. Besides, the last thing you wanted was to cause Shuichi any more reason
to worry. “I'll be fine.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“I don’t think I’m in any immediate danger. I don’t have any enemies that I know of. There’s nothing in that apartment of value to me now that Yugen’s gone.”

“That doesn’t explain why your apartment was infiltrated in the first place.”

“No, it doesn’t. I don’t know if knowing would make anything better. Maybe I’m thinking too much about this. Maybe there isn’t a reason and this is all just coincidence, a freak accident that I happened to be a victim in.”

Shuichi was quiet. “It bodes well to be cautious, _____,” he said. “Assumptions without basis are dangerous.”

“I don’t know what else to do. I can’t hide in your apartment forever.”

“Mm.”

“I realize you disagree. I don’t want to fight about it, but I’m not going to change my mind.”

He sighed a short laugh. “I’d rather not argue either. And we don’t have to. I’ll support you, no matter your decision.”

While his reassurance was touching, it did little to ease your anxiety.

The next evening, after work, you headed back to your apartment with Shuichi. When you opened the door, you smelled the distinct sterile scent of cleaning products, bleach being prominent among them.

You studied the carpet, the furniture, only to discover what a wonderful job the cleaning crew did. “Wow,” you said. “I’m impressed. It’s almost like nothing happened.”

“They did an excellent job,” Shuichi agreed.

“It feels strange being here again after being gone for nearly two weeks.” You looked around, feeling a little lonely without the companionship of your dog.

“I’m sure.”

You set your baggage next to the sofa, stepping into the kitchen and opening the fridge. “Oh, my,” you said. “I’m going to have a lot of garbage come trash day. I never thought I’d be staying away for this long.”

Shuichi chuckled. “We can opt for delivery tonight.”

You were glad that you had this odd habit of cleaning before leaving home or going on a vacation. Coming home to a mess after an exhausting few days of travel was one of the worst feelings. Your apartment was not as minimalistic as Shuichi’s was, as you were far more sentimental in the way you kept your things, but it was presentable to guests and your boyfriend.

You looked at everything, the placement of your decor, the pillows on your bed, the jewelry on your dresser. Nothing seemed to be moved.
Shuichi touched your shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Everything is all right?”

You nodded. “Seems so.”

“I’ll place an order from the Thai place down the street, if that’s all right. Your usual order?” He left the room to make the call as you continued your inspection.

An hour later, your dinner arrived. As you ate, Shuichi brought up an interesting topic: “My mother wants to meet you.”

“W-what? Really?” The thought was flattering. Not that you had any doubts, but meeting the parents was usually an indication that the relationship was going well. Shuichi had already shared you with his friends; now, he wanted to introduce you to his family.

“Yes. I should warn you she has attempted to set me up on dates since high school. I believe she thought I was lonely without a girlfriend and that my life required a feminine presence.”

“Were you? Lonely, I mean?”

“I didn't know I was until I met you,” he said. “You've filled a void in my life I never realized I had.”

“That's sweet of you to say. I feel the same way about you. I wasn't really interested in pursuing a relationship as much as expanding my career opportunities, but you made me an offer I couldn't refuse.” You smiled at him.

“Well, I've been told before that I can be persuasive.”

“I'd love to meet your mom, by the way, Shuichi. Maybe we can schedule some time in the next few weeks?”

“Yes. My stepfather is out on a business trip this weekend and next. He wants to meet you as well. So two weekends from this one? We could visit for the day.”

“That sounds lovely. Does your mom need help with anything?”

“I'll ask, but I doubt it. I've told you this before, but she's quite the chef.”

“All right. I'll think of something. Maybe I'll bake a dessert.”

Shuichi tilted his head to the side, a small grin on his lips. “I’m looking forward to you meeting my family, ______. I know my mother is excited. She’s been waiting for a long time for me to bring home a girl.”

You laughed. “I hope I don’t disappoint. No pressure, right?”

“Truly not. I want you to be yourself. I’m not putting you on display, ______, I hope you know. I only want to introduce you to my mother because you’re an integral part of my life now. I want you to understand that I’m serious about us.”

“I never had any doubts,” you said. “I guess I’ll have to arrange something with my parents, too.”

Shuichi looked at you, a thoughtful expression in his eyes. “I would be honored.”

Chapter End Notes
I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
I've been playing with ideas on how to handle the move-out moment. I really do want the RC to keep her fierce sense of independence, while allowing Kurama to still watch over her and protect her (because we all know that he would.) His devotion knows no limits, and now that we all know that he loves her, well, he's not giving up easily. But how does he do that without seeming possessive?

He's a tricky fox. That's how. He weaponizes emotions in the most effective way possible. ;)

I think I struck a pretty good balance in the end. I hope you think so, too! :'D And, of course, there's a bit of fluff and intimacy that comes with it. <3 Please enjoy!

As always, I want to say a big thank you to those who leave comments! They really inspire me and keep the writing process going! :D They're tokens in my muse jar! lol.

Thanks to: oscar_milde, Kactuskat16, Queensunasama, FannibalToast, Pepucz, and SailorCupcake! Ya'll are wonderful!

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Kurama left half her apartment just over thirty minutes ago. It was dark, and he was reluctant, but she insisted on staying there tonight.

He watched her apartment from the streets, quietly minding his own business so passersby wouldn’t be suspicious. The light in her room was still on. He knew he should go home and rest for the night. Yugen did not mean her harm. During their brief exchange, Kurama concluded that the demon did not wish to reveal himself to her. In his own way, he was protecting her.

Nevertheless, Kurama was less trusting of the nature of his supposed guardianship. He wouldn’t rest until he had answers.

His cellphone rang. “Hello, Kuwabara,” he said.

“Hey, Kurama. Just wanted to check in on you and _____ She’s supposed to move back to her apartment today, huh?”

“She already did. I’ve left her to her own devices.”

“What? You really feel comfortable doing that?”

“No, not entirely.” Kurama’s eyes flitted between the busy city street and her bedroom window. “I do have a plan, though.”

“You’re going to tell her the truth,” Kuwabara said. “If you haven’t already, that’s the answer to all this. You know that.”

He sighed. “Tell her that Yugen’s a demon and that she should seek refuge with me? Another demon? It’s feeble method and timing.”
“You love her, don’t you?”

Kurama paused. He had never been so sure of anything in his life, but it was hard for him to confess, to put his affirmation into words, even to one of his closest friends. It was as though the admission made him vulnerable -- at least, that would be so until she confessed the same.

“She loves you, too,” Kuwabara continued. “I got that feeling from her when we were talking about you the other day.”

He was quiet again, his eyes closing as he calmly reveled in the news. Although he would certainly like to hear it from her, it was comforting to know that Kuwabara, someone with such acute senses, thought the same.

“EARTH TO KURAMA!” -- Kurama had to pull the phone away from his ear -- “SHE’S GOT THE HOTS FOR YOU. AT LEAST YOU CAN ACKNOWLEDGE IT AND RECIPROCATE IT.”

“I will,” he said, “but not tonight. The time isn’t right.”

“Then you’re just going to let her sleep by herself tonight? What if that demon comes back?”

“The demon doesn’t mean her any harm and doesn’t wish to reveal his identity to her. He’s no threat to her, given the current state of affairs. All the same, I’d rather not leave her safety up to fate. As I said, I have a plan.”

“Busting in like her knight in shining armor, huh? I knew you had a bit of a hopeless romantic in you.”

“Well, not quite. Best leave me to it, Kuwabara.”

“Okay. Call if you need anything.”

“Will do.”

You had showered, brushed your teeth, settled into bed, but there was an eerie feeling about you. You reached to turn off the lamp on your nightstand, but you felt a twinge of fear. It wasn’t that darkness itself was scary but thoughts of what might be lurking within it.

Like most children, you feared the dark when you were young. It seemed that those nightmares were returning, but this time, instead of the monsters under the bed, they were grounded in reality.

Having Yugen here made the dark less intimidating. And since Yugen had disappeared, Shuichi was your courage. It felt empty not having someone there for you, with you.

You pulled your legs up to your chest, the lamp still shining. As much as you hated to admit it, you couldn't bring yourself to shut off the lights. You weren’t sure how you’d get through tonight -- probably with the lights on.

It was then that your phone buzzed. You picked it up, plucking it from the charger, only to see a message:

Shuichi: I miss you.

Your heart swelled. Hearing from your boyfriend was exactly what you needed in that moment. Even though it hurt your heart that he was not here with you, you were touched that he was
thinking of you as you were thinking of him. You typed back:

_____: I miss you.

In a few moments, your phone buzzed again. The immediate response pleased you because, clearly, he was making this conversation a priority.

Shuichi: How are you doing?
_____: I’m okay.
Shuichi: I hope I didn’t disturb you.
_____: Nah, I’m just getting ready for bed.
_____: What are you doing?
Shuichi: Finishing up some work.
_____: That’s so you.
_____: Do you have a lot of work?
Shuichi: Not much. I should be getting to bed here shortly.
_____: You probably shouldn’t let me distract you.
Shuichi: It’s all right.
Shuichi: I don’t mind it at all.
Shuichi: I miss you. <3

It was the same message as before, but it was the less than three emoticon that nearly brought tears to your eyes. Because you were always together since you started dating, you rarely texted, and he had never had much of a reason to send you a heart.

The gesture was such a simple one, but it brought you great joy.

You typed back:

_____: I miss you, too.
_____: I wish you were here.

Your breath hitched in your throat with that last message, thinking just how true it was. How was this a good idea, putting yourself through this? Seconds later, your phone buzzed. It wasn’t a text, however.

“‘I certainly can be,’” Shuichi said, right as you accepted it.

You had never been so happy to hear his voice. “‘Shuichi…’” His name fell from your lips, spoken with a tone of longing and subtle relief.

He must have heard it. “Is that what you want?”

A silence engulfed you. Of course, you wanted to be able to take back your independence, be brave enough to face your fears, be certain of yourself. But you weren’t sure if you were ready, and forcing the issue didn’t seem prudent. You closed your eyes in thought. “‘Yes,’” you finally said.

“‘Very well. Let me pack a few things, and I’ll be over in twenty minutes.’”

“‘Shuichi?’”

“‘Yes, _____?’”

It was so nice to hear him say your name. “Thank you. I’ll leave the door unlocked for you.”
You hung up, settling on the couch with the TV on as you waited for him. The noise in the background helped soothe your nerves.

True to his word, Shuichi showed up at your door not twenty minutes later with only his laptop bag in tow. He locked the door behind him, and you embraced him right as he turned around, hugging his torso tightly, your face pressed against his chest. His coat felt cool to the touch at first, though the cloth quickly warmed.

He dropped his bag to the ground, returning your embrace, his arms wrapping around your shoulders. “I’m happy to see you, too,” he said.

“I know it’s only been an hour or so,” you started, “but I missed you so much.”

“Oh, my love,” he sighed, stroking your head. “I missed you, as well.”

“It must seem so silly to you.”

“No. I admire your courage for wanting to confront your fears, but you don’t have to do it alone. I’m here. There’s no shame in asking for help.”

“I just don’t want to have to rely on you forever.”

“Isn’t that what significant others are for? To rely on one another for support?”

You pulled away at his comment, entwining your fingers together as you led him to the couch. You sat down next to him, your other hand on his leg. “I came to a realization when you left earlier.”

“Mm?” he hummed as he shut off the TV with your remote.

“I believe you when you say that we’re supposed to rely on each other for support. I guess I’ve never let myself really rely on a man before. Not entirely. Even in my serious relationships, I kept my boyfriends at a bit of a distance. It’s not that I didn’t trust them, in most circumstances anyway. I just… well, I’ve always wanted a sense of independence.” You looked away for a moment. “I wonder if all my past relationships failed because of me, my unwillingness to compromise my freedoms.”

Shuichi listened intently, the look in his eyes gentle. “You can have your independence, _____. I can’t speak for your past boyfriends, but your fierce sense of independence is something that I respect about you. I won’t begrudge you your freedoms.”

“I think that’s the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“With you, I don’t know if I need my independence as much. I think part of why I valued it in the past was because I would have something to fall back on if things didn’t work out. I wouldn’t be fully invested in a relationship that could irrevocably change my life if things deteriorated.” You smiled shyly at him. “I don’t feel like I need a backup plan with you, Shuichi. It’s so unlike me to feel this way and act like this, but--”

He cut you off with a kiss, his hands on both sides of your face and neck.

You were surprised by his sudden forwardness. Although he most certainly enjoyed being affectionate with you when you least expected it, he never interrupted your more serious
conversations. Still, you didn’t mind. His touch was nearly intoxicating -- it was what you missed, the warmth of his body, the faint smell of roses mingled with his cologne.

You returned the kiss, enjoying the feeling of his lips on yours. Your hands found his chest, realizing that he hadn’t yet taken off his coat. You began unbuttoning the garment, carefully slipping each button through its respective hole in the slits of cloth. When you finished, you ran your hands along his shoulders, starting at the base of his neck, sliding the coat off with ease.

Shuichi let the coat fall to the couch, pulling his arms from the sleeves in one smooth motion, and returning his hands to your body, deepening the kiss. He touched you, his deft fingers working their way down from your neck, your collarbone, your shoulders, even grazing your breasts as they traveled down to your waist. His lips were soft upon yours, but his kisses were firm and amorous. When you let out a small moan, he nibbled gently on your bottom lip.

Your heart raced, and you trailed a few kisses from his mouth to jawline, your lips finding the sensitive spot right beneath his ear. You pressed the tip of your tongue against his skin, running it along a short stretch along his neck, and you heard him give a small grunt beneath his breath. Then, you kissed him, letting your teeth graze his skin as you tended to him.

His hands brought you closer, easily pulling you into his lap until you straddled him, one knee on either side of his thighs. His graceful strength impressed you, and as you looked into his eyes, he grinned mischievously. “You are a tease,” he said, his voice low.

You touched his chest, leaning into another kiss. “Don’t be a hypocrite,” you whispered against his lips. “I’m not any more a tease than you are.”

“I may just have to live up to that.” He kissed you again, hands touching your back, bringing you closer.

Your fingertips ran along his neck, nails lightly dragging against his skin. You kissed his mouth, your lips moving in tangent with his, a passionate frolic in each affectionate advance. You felt excited, desirous, craving his attention and caress.

From outside your door, you heard shuffling in the hallway, and you pulled away from Shuichi in a nervous jolt.

“It’s all right,” he said, his hands grasping yours. “I’m here.”

The jingling of keys eased your anxiety. An invader would have no use for keys, after all -- this was surely your neighbor.

You sighed, letting out the tension. “I’m sorry. The footsteps just startled me.”

Shuichi shifted, placing your arm over his shoulder as he picked you up, his arms under your legs and supporting your back. “You’re safe,” he said. “I promise you.” It was effortless, the way he swept you up, and, despite the situation, you thought it was rather romantic.

“I can walk, you know.”

“You don’t have to. We’re already halfway there.” He pushed open your bedroom door with his back and set you on the bed.

You didn’t release his shoulders, even as he tried to pull away. Instead, you leaned up and kissed him. It was a loving kiss, purposefully prolonged and indulgent. You touched his face with both hands, and he acquiesced without protest, climbing into bed with you and rolling over your body to
rest beside you.

When Shuichi broke the kiss, he eased a finger along your jawline, a tantalizing sensation. “It’s time for bed,” he whispered.

“Do we have to?” you asked.

He looked at you with an amused glance. “It would be ill-advised to subject ourselves to poor sleep for two consecutive nights.” He pulled the covers over both of you, and with his arms around you, your back to his chest, you relaxed.

You gave a contented sigh. “Shuichi?”

“Mm?”

“Thank you for staying with me tonight. I know it must be inconvenient for you, but I feel so much better now that you’re here.” You shook your head. “I can’t believe I was so foolish to think that I was ready for this. I should have just stayed with you.”

He squeezed you gently, kissing your head. “I’m not one for gloating. I assure you, _____, it’s my pleasure. I know you want to take a stand, but you don’t have to do this alone. If it makes you feel better, I can stay as long as you’d like.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

You let the stress melt from your body, feeling safe and secure, and you drifted off for the night, sweet dreams blessing your sleep.

Chapter End Notes

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In the morning, you pulled out your ironing board from the closet. “I didn’t realize you had brought your business clothes,” you said. “I thought you might drop by your place to change really quick before work. I have no idea how you fit so much in that laptop bag.”

“There’s a surprising amount of room in there,” Shuichi said as he plugged in your iron.

You smiled at him. “I’ll leave you to it. Whenever you’re ready, there’s tea in the kitchen for you.”

When Shuichi finished, he came out with his collared shirt and slacks, a tie hanging loosely around his shoulders. He was always so buttoned-up with his work clothes that you had never seen a wrinkle or knot out of place. It was kind of refreshing to see him not entirely ready.

“Here,” you said, “let me help you with that.” You set down your mug and walked over, evening the two ends of the tie and ensuring that they fit nicely under his collar.

“You know how to tie ties?”

“Of course. I’ve dated other men before, remember? Not all of them were as practical or as skilled as you.”

He chuckled, holding still as he let you knot the tie. “Quite impressive,” he said when you finished.

“It’ll do.” You gently tugged on his tie, pulling him into a kiss. “I have your tea in a tumbler. You ready to go?”

“Thank you,” he said, following your tug without protest. He kissed you, hands around your waist as he held your close. “Let’s go.”

The rest of the week you stayed in your apartment. Yugen never returned as you had hoped, but you never gave up searching for him.

The addition of Shuichi’s presence was enough to provide you the comfort you needed, and your anxiety improved, even when in the brief moments when he wasn’t there with you. It seemed that you had reclaimed your courage and confidence. His gesture and flexibility meant the world to you,
especially because it wasn’t convenient for him. While he had an extra room in his apartment for your privacy whenever you needed to change or store your clothes, your apartment only had a master bedroom.

On Friday night, you went to the movies with the gang. Everyone was there: Yusuke, Keiko, Kuwabara, Yukina, Botan, and even Shizuru.

You, Botan, and Keiko were assigned snack duty.

“How are you doing, _____?” Botan asked. “I heard that Shuichi has been staying with you.”

“We're doing great. Everything seems to be working out with us. He wants me to meet his mom and stepdad.”

“Really?” Keiko grinned at you. “How wonderful! How are you feeling about meeting the parents?”

“It seems like the logical next step. Shuichi holds his mother in such high regard. I'm excited and a little nervous.”

“I've met Mrs. Minamino before,” Keiko said. “She's a lovely lady. You'll like her.”

“I have a feeling I'll like her. I wonder if she'll like me.”

“That's a silly thought!” Botan skipped ahead. “Of course she'll like you. What's not to like?”

You shrugged. “It's just nerves. We've been invited over for lunch in a couple of weeks.”

Keiko stepped into the concession stand line. “Just be yourself, _____. Everything will be fine. Besides, Mrs. Minamino is probably super excited that Shuichi is finally dating. She wants to like you, and she knows how particular her son is. She must already know how much you mean to him.”

“That's right!” Botan agreed.

Their words touched you. “Thanks, you guys.” This concession stand line sure was long. “I wonder, though.”

“About what?” Botan asked, peeking over the line to see what overpriced goodies were available.

“When is it appropriate to tell someone you love them?”

“Aiii!” Botan gave a cry and nearly fell over, a look of puzzlement and shock on her face. “He hasn't told you yet???”

“No? Is that abnormal?” You suddenly felt awkward.

She pulled herself together. “I just thought Shuichi would be… you know, more romantic? Him and his obsession with flowers and all! Not that we have any dating history to work off of, but he seems like the type to be honest about his feelings!”

Keiko placed an assuring hand on your shoulder, while giving her friend a small glare. “He also seems like the type to not want to be overbearing about his feelings. Don't listen to Botan, _____, I think he'll say it whenever he's ready, and I encourage you to do the same.”

“You don’t have to listen to me,” Botan said, “but I’m going to give that man a talking to!”
“I appreciate the sentiment, but you really don’t have to,” you said, a sheepish expression on your face. “I don’t think rushing into that conversation is going to help anything.”

She held up her index finger to silence you. “It’s not fair to you, _____. We all know that Shuichi is smitten with you!”

“Then he’ll tell me at his own pace.” You gave her a small shrug, satisfied at her proclamation -- she knew Shuichi longer than you did, after all. “It’s really not a big deal. I just wanted to know if you two thought it would be too soon if I said it first.”

They blinked at you.

“It’s the twenty-first century! Women are allowed to confess their feelings first!”

“I don’t disagree,” Botan said. “At this juncture, I was just hoping that Shuichi would, you know, take the reins a little bit. Take care of his lady, you know? You shouldn’t have to sit back, wondering where this relationship is going.”

“I’m sure it’s more complicated than that,” Keiko said. “Overthinking it isn’t going to help, and it sounds like _____ has it under control. I trust you to do what’s best, ______.” She smiled. “I’m sure Shuichi will tell you what he’s feeling when the time is right.”

The boy at the counter called you over for your order. “Next!”

“I can’t believe you haven’t told her yet,” Kuwabara said as he counted the number of available seats in his chosen row. They were here early, among the only people in the theater. “She deserves to know, man. It hurts being left out, and I wouldn’t blame her for being upset if she found out from someone other than you.”

Kurama sighed. “I want to tell her. I only fear her reaction.”

“Really?” Yusuke said. “I mean, she seems like a reasonable person. I figured she’d just accept it and move on.”

“Do you remember the first time you were introduced to the Spirit World? The first time you fought demons?” Kurama said as he sat down. “I’ve no doubt you had some reservations.”

“Hey, I died, and I’m doing just great.”

“Yes, and you had to embrace the truth or remain dead. It was Koenma’s ordeal. You didn’t have much of a choice if you wanted to rejoin the living. Becoming a Spirit Detective required you to adapt.”

“Okay,” Yusuke said. “But come on! Even Keiko’s fine, and I’m part demon, too!”

“Like that’s an ideal example,” Shizuru said. “I’m pretty sure Keiko fainted when Botan told us that you boys were going to the Dark Tournament. She just flat-out hit the floor, and that was even before anyone knew you were part demon.”

“She’s fine now!”

“Keiko and _____ are two different people,” Kurama said, his eyes closed, feeling agitated. “And I need not remind you that circumstances are different.”

“Yeah,” Kuwabara agreed, “think about how long you and Keiko knew each other. Practically your
whole lives. There's a lot of trust there. _____ has only known Kurama for a few months.” He looked at Kurama. “Sorry, man. I get it, but I stand behind what I said. She still deserves to know what she's getting herself into. She needs to know that her boyfriend is a demon and works part-time for Spirit World. She has to decide if she wants involvement in all of this.”

Yukina spoke for the first time since this conversation started: “Kurama, I know it's frightening. You fear she may not feel comfortable around you if you tell her, that she might leave you. And there's no way to be sure how she'll react.” Despite the message, there was conviction in her eyes. “But I agree with Kazuma. You can't keep secrets from her, not if you truly love her. Honesty is the basis for any healthy relationship. You must know that. Eventually the truth will come out, and you'll want it to be you who tells her, not anyone else. And really, I have a feeling that _____ would understand. She has a kind and accepting heart. I can sense it; I could tell from the moment I met her.”

“See?” Yusuke said. “Yukina has it right. Just tell your girlfriend, and you'll be fine.”

“Tell me what?” _____ asked as she stepped up to their row of seats. The girls had arrived, their arms loaded with fountain drinks, popcorn, and candy.

_____ scooted past Yusuke and sat down next to Kurama, handing him a bucket of popcorn. “Pass this along, will you?”

Kurama did as she asked, thinking quickly as he knew the question would come again in mere moments.

“So what were you planning on not telling me?” you asked again, poking fun at him.

“A surprise,” he said.

“What kind of surprise?”

“You really don't want to keep it a surprise?”

You laughed. “Only if me knowing isn't going to ruin some grand master plan.”

“Well,” Kurama said, “I was telling Yusuke how I saw a set of dice in your bedroom. We had no idea you'd be into tabletop games and thought we might host a game night sometime.”

“I had a feeling you were all closet nerds.”

“Well, I'm more of an arcade guy myself,” Yusuke said. “You know, Goblin City and stuff.”

“Well, if you've never played Dungeons and Dragons, I'm happy to teach you. It's a commitment and a process, but it's a lot of fun.”

“How is it that you play D&D?” Yusuke pointed an unsure finger at you. “I thought only weird, nerdy guys were into that kind of stuff.”

“Hey, those weird, nerdy guys are some of the nicest people I've ever met. Besides, Goblin City isn't exactly the opposite of nerdy.”

“It’s what all the cool kids are doing!”

“Yeah,” you said, “maybe ten years ago. You’re holding onto nostalgia now, and I think that makes you automatically uncool per societal definition.”
“Depends on who you ask,” Yusuke huffed.

“I think by default, kids are the ones who get to define cool.” You looked at Keiko. “How many of the kids you teach play Goblin City?”

“None that I know of,” she said. “They all think it’s an old person’s game. They've traded old arcade games for newer video games with nicer graphics and visual effects.”

“See?” you said, shrugging at Yusuke. “Not cool.”

“Then I guess I'll just be uncool,” he said, without a care in the world. “Happy and uncool or cool and unhappy? Take your pick.”

“So, you want to be uncool and learn D&D?” you asked.

“Only if I get to kick ass.”

“Well, that depends on how good you are at rolling the dice.”

“I like taking chances.”

“Good enough! Anyone else?” you asked.

“I'm always up for a good game!” Botan said.

“Me too!” Kuwabara added, looking gleeful. “I've played a few times before. Wait until you guys see my crazy paladin build!”

Shizuru grinned. “And any time I have the opportunity to beat my baby brother at anything, I’m in.”

You looked at Shuichi with a hopeful glance.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose I may just have to partake. I was the one who brought it up, so I'd be remiss if I didn't join, hm?”

“Yeah, you would.”

He chuckled, lifting the arm of the chair that separated you. The lights dimmed, music volume increasing when he brought you close, and you snuggled against his shoulder as the movie previews began.

Kurama waited for _____ as she slipped into the bathroom with Keiko and Shizuru after the movie ended.

Kuwabara had already headed off, walking with Yukina to the bus stop. She had planned on staying the weekend with him.

Botan and Yusuke stood on either side of Kurama.

“Sooooooo,” Botan started, chipper as usual.

“So?” Kurama repeated, a minimal reaction to her clear attempt at starting an awkward conversation. He would not feed the beast.
“I had the chance to talk with _____ earlier.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re getting along.”

She frowned at his deflection. “Come on, Kurama. You can’t be serious. You haven’t told her anything!”

“That’s what I said,” Yusuke muttered under his breath.

“She’s just waiting for it to come out, don’t you know?”

Kurama looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t want to inconvenience you or make you feel awkward. I told her I’d talk to you about this!”

“Did she say she wanted you to talk to me? Or did you bring up this topic of your own inquisitive volition?”

Botan paused, a nervous laugh escaping her. “Well, she might have mentioned that she was content with how things were going.”

“I thought that might be it.” Kurama tilted his head to the side. “But you say she’s waiting. What do you mean by that?”

“I think she’s hoping you have a plan of some sort, a romantic declaration of love! Maybe a night under the stars! Or a stroll on the beach! Or even a lovely getaway to Paris!”

Yusuke creeped over, pointing an accusatory finger at Botan. “Are you sure this is _____ talking? Or are you trying to put words in her mouth? Because this is starting to sound a whole like your fantasy for when you finally find a guy who puts up with you.”

Botan growled at him, raising her voice: “Just because you don’t have a romantic bone in your body, Yusuke, doesn’t mean we all have to be boring!”

“Oh, shut it!” Yusuke said. “You’re focused on a silly love confession when Kurama still has to tell her his deepest, darkest secrets! That’s more important!”

“Is not! She needs to know his feelings!”

Kurama chuckled at the irony of arguing over two virtues, stepping in between them to cease the debate. Not only was it futile, but they were in a public space. “I’m not concerned about you looking out for _____’s interests,” he said. “In fact, I find it touching that you both care about her.”

He now understood the contrast between what Botan and Yusuke meant. One wanted a love confession for _____; the other valued the truth to be spoken. Kurama needed both; _____ needed both. “But there are clearly two facets to the required conversation. I need to sort this out on my own.”

He saw his beloved exit the restroom, giggling with Keiko, and he stepped toward them, offering her his hand. “Are you ready to head home, _____?”

He liked how easily, how casually he said it. Home wasn’t his apartment; it wasn’t her apartment. It was wherever they were together.
I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Confession

Chapter Notes

AHHHHH. YOU GUYS. THIS IS A LANDMARK CHAPTER. Kind of. Well, you'll see. ;)

A warm thank you to: Kactuskat16, PiSeule, Mei Mei, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, and SailorCupcake! Seriously, I know I say it every chapter, but I enjoy reading your comments immensely. ^_^ And knowing that you guys like what I've written makes me want to write more! So thank you! <3 I've only made it this far because of you guys!

I know at the end of the first arc, I kept on talking about how shit's going down. Well, the shit got interrupted by the mountains of fluff that somehow came from the tips of my fingers as I'm typing up these chapters. lol. I am being serious when I say this time that the second arc will be coming to an end soonish -- it should be just a handful of chapters, which will bring intimate topics into the fold (pun not intended.), so I think you'll enjoy them. :) The third arc will be underway soon.

Oh, and on another note, fuck the 50 chapters I said this would be. It's definitely going to be more. I should just stop guessing.

Please enjoy! <3 I really liked writing this chapter! Hope ya'll get some feels 'cause I sure did!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two weeks passed.

Kurama valued every moment he spent with her, cherishing each shared glance, every kiss, and their conversations, whether serious or playful. Every time he caught her in his arms or she rested her head on his shoulder, he felt a sense of happiness that he'd never experienced before, a feeling of pure joy. He never wanted it to end.

His friends urged him to be honest with her. They said the truth was the best course of action because she deserved to know -- she needed to know.

Reluctantly, even with the back-and-forth deliberation in his head, he agreed.

He tormented himself over and over again, running through the scenarios in his head. How was he to tell her? What would be the best way to reveal his identity to her? How would she react? And what would he do if she rejected him?

Kurama swallowed, the anxiety gnawing away at his heart.

He didn't have all the answers, and that unnerved him.

He was always one to plan, to strategize. He had an alternate route for every situation, and then yet another potential strategy after that. Sometimes they required great risk, but all those risks were carefully calculated, the pros and cons weighed with a mentally calibrated scale.
He did not dare equate _____ to mere numbers. She was much more than that. She was clever and perceptive, able to interpret his thoughts and feelings in a way that made him feel vulnerable -- and he loved her for it, appreciated her ability to understand him like no one else could.

That was why he was so torn. He loathed lying to her, and even more, he hated how easily he did it.

She deserved better.

Kurama even entertained the idea of letting her go. As much as it pained him, the thought of her being in the arms of another man, he could protect her from the truth, the very notion that demons existed, an idea that could change her view on life forever.

Certainly, beyond the revelation of spirits and demons, there would be dangers in being involved with him.

But he didn't want to give her up, not so easily. Could he not both have the woman he loved and preserve her safety and happiness?

She really did deserve better.

He sighed. It was now or never. Tonight. He did not know how he would strum up the courage to tell her, but he had to. He wasn't going to let her go without at least attempting to explain the nature of his existence, his history. Then, he would have to trust her with his truth -- if he ever wanted anything in life, he wanted her love and acceptance. It seemed so simple, but the thought of her rejecting the demon half of his soul made his heart ache.

He loved her. His heart belonged to her whether she would accept it or not. It was out of his hands.

“_____, there's something I need to tell you.”

You were staring at the moonlit lake, memories of Yugen in your mind. You came here often with him to enjoy the sun and the fresh air. He would have loved it in the fall with the beautiful autumn leaves. “Yes?” you said.

Shuichi looked somber, almost nervous. His eyes weren't quite as bright, his face angled away from you.

You had never seen him like this before, and you stepped toward him, resting one assuring forearm on his shoulder, your closed hand at the base of his neck. You touched his face with your other hand, bringing him to look at you. “You can tell me anything, Shuichi. You know that.”

“I do.”

In that moment, you heard rustling in the nearby bushes. You instincts overcame you, and you pulled away from Shuichi and walked toward the bushes. “Yugen?”

A hare dashed out.

You sighed, feeling defeated. “You know, I really shouldn't keep my hopes up like this.”

“What are we without our hopes, _____? You're not the only one who hopes and dreams. We all have them. It's what makes us human.” Shuichi approached you.

You gave him a small smile. “You said you wanted to tell me something.”
“Only that you're beautiful.”

“Stop. I know you better than that.” You paused, deciding to take a chance in alleviating his doubts. “We've been dating for about a month now. I realize that it's a short period of time. I might be overstepping my boundaries when I say this--”

“You seem to always think we're moving too quickly,” Shuichi interrupted gently. “But each relationship evolves at a different pace. I have no regrets or misgivings about ours.”

“Wise words from someone who's never been in a serious relationship.”

“I prefer the untainted perspective. Having dated others before, you may have certain expectations about the development of relationships. There's nothing wrong with that -- it's your perspective. The most important question is: Are you happy with us, _____?”

“I've never been happier.” The words came so easily that confidence swelled in your chest. “How are you feeling?”

He looked at you, his green eyes vivid again, even under the dim lighting of the park lamps. They carried him to you, the gateway to his very soul. You felt lost in them, a serene sense of belonging and wonderment in your own heart. “I feel like it's just us. When I'm with you, there is nothing else. You are what's important in my life, your belief and trust in me, your laughter and sorrow. _____, I'm not sure words do my feelings for you justice.”

His response was exactly what you needed to hear. “I love you, Shuichi,” you breathed, the confession revealed in the most concise and sincere words possible.

His gaze intensified for just a flicker in time, and then he embraced you, holding you tight as he buried his face in the crook of your neck. “I love you, _____,” he whispered against your ear. He pulled back and then kissed you, his passion apparent in the way his lips met yours. When he broke the kiss, he looked you in the eyes, the expression on his face both fierce and gentle. “I love you in ways I can't describe, more than I thought was possible. I cannot be more honored that I have your love, too.”

Kurama abandoned ship. He had intended to tell her the truth, not about his feelings for her, but about the nature of his being. He wanted to confess everything, to see her reaction, hoping that she would accept him for who he truly was. That was the only way he wanted to move forward. He did not think he could bear it if she only professed to love Shuichi Minamino, unaware of the demon, the whole persona, poised beneath the surface.

Well, he was wrong.

Her confession made him hopeful. The way she looked at him, the expression of adoration on her face, the light in her eyes -- it made him love her even more, if that were possible. Her bravery, her willingness to be vulnerable with him made his heart swell. She really did love him.

When he heard those words, he felt an intense happiness, a relief that surpassed his anxiety of having to tell her his truth. Her confession gave him the courage, the impetus, to respond in kind, and their love for one another was no longer an uncertainty. It was obvious now, out in the open, and their future was, at least in this respect, secure.

For a moment, Kurama thought he might desert his original plan of telling her the truth about his demon nature. If this was enough right now, why would it not suffice in the future? They could live like this for the rest of their lives, joyful in their mutual love and companionship. They could
get married, grow old together. He was happy now -- why wouldn't this euphoria last?

She said she loved him.

But she didn't know Kurama, not the whole truth about him.

She only knew Shuichi.

Kurama thought he could be Shuichi for her. After all, Shuichi made her happy -- she said so herself.

Was making her, and, as a result, himself, happy not enough?

“No, she would want the truth. She preferred the red pill, after all,” he thought, remembering their conversation on the matter. He mentally sighed.

It was the least he could give her. He could not claim to love her and withhold the truth, no matter how painful the confession was. He could not lie by omission.

He had to tell her because she deserved to know. She deserved the world, after all.

But he would not ruin the moment, not tonight. Not now. It was far too precious, and he wanted to preserve this memory for as long as he could. Tonight was the night when she was most beautiful.

“Oh, you,” you said, returning his embrace. You held tight to him, never wanting to let him go. You breathed a sigh of relief, wondering just what you did to deserve him, this happiness that you thought you may never find.

Shuichi was smiling, the expression on his face one of pure elation. He smoothed the hair from your face. “I must be the luckiest man in the world,” he said, leaning in to kiss your temple.

“You? You're stuck with me,” you replied with a laugh.

“Hardly stuck.” He held you close, leaning his face into your hair. “If so, stuck of my own volition, and if I had a choice, I'd remain stuck with you for all eternity.”

“You're getting mushy now.”

“Ah, your favorite word.”

“Who has a favorite word? There are so many good ones out there. How could you possibly choose?” You breathed in his scent, the cologne mingled with a touch of roses. It brought you a sense of calm.

“Mm, you're right,” he said. “I suppose I might have many favorite words, all of them involving you.”

You smiled at him. “Oh, stop it, Shuichi.” You leaned up to kiss him, and as soon as your lips touched, his breath warm in the chilly autumn night, you felt like you were walking on clouds, your body lighter than air.

His hands were on your waist, yours around his neck. He deepened your kiss, pressing closer to you with each caress of his lips. Even when the evening wind blew past you, he only tightened his hold.
You were his. The thought was overwhelming, the very idea that your heart might belong so wholly to someone. You might have been frightened at the prospect in any of your previous relationships, but with Shuichi, it felt right. It felt natural, as if you were meant for one another, soulmates in this world and beyond. You gave him your heart freely, trusting that he would take care of it.

And he was yours. You looked into his beautiful eyes as you pulled away from the kiss for a breath of air. They reflected his love, his devotion, his desire to do right by you, the very promise he made when he first asked you out in Inoji. You were touched.

You weren't sure if you would ever feel more joy than you did now. You kissed him again. “Shuichi?” you said, laying your head against his chest, right beneath his chin.

“Yes, my love?”

You paused, thinking through what you were about to say, pondering if it was really what you wanted. It was, you concluded. “I think, if it’s all right with you, I’d like to move in with you officially. I can break the lease on my apartment, sell most of my furniture, and, well... we can begin the rest of our lives together.”

“Nothing would make me happier, _____,” he said, “but are you sure? I thought you wanted your independence.”

“You’ve more than eased my insecurities. I don’t feel like I need to keep my options open or have a backup plan.” You looked at him, an easy grin on your face. “It’s not that I wasn’t committed before, Shuichi, but I realize now that I’m ready to take our relationship a step further. I love you, and it’s not just those three words. It’s a feeling, an incredible connection between us that I don’t fully understand -- and I don’t need to. I just know that love you. That’s really all there is to it.”

He sighed softly, touching your face, his hand warm in the chill of the night. “I love you, _____.

You don’t know how much your love and trust mean to me. I promise to be a constant presence in your life, no matter the challenges or ordeals that may come our way. You are my heart, my utmost priority. I want nothing more than to be worthy of you and your love. I will strive for that.”

“We can strive for each other,” you said, leaning up for another kiss. “Shall we get home, then? There’s no time like the present, and as you know, I have a lot of things to pack. We might need a bigger apartment.”

“Pack whatever you’d like,” Shuichi replied with a chuckle. “Fill as many boxes and suitcases as you want. As long as you’re among them, I care little of what you bring.”

Chapter End Notes

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It was Sunday afternoon.

The sky was clear, the purest blue shining through the small puffs of cloud. Autumn was showing its colors, the landscape consumed with reds and golds, the foliage shedding their leaves in compliance with this shifting of the seasons. A chilly wind puffed through the air, a gentle touch of cold on your face and bare hands.

You held close to your hot drink, enjoying the flavors of fall and the comforting warmth it provided. Pumpkin and spices were prevalent during this time of the year, and you took care to enjoy the features of the local coffee shops and bakeries.

You couldn't help but feel a little nervous as you stepped off the bus, your boyfriend behind you. Meeting Shuichi's mother, whom he spoke of so highly, was intimidating. What if she didn't like you? Would that be enough to sway Shuichi's opinion of you?

He was a bit of a mama's boy, and you had always been warned against dating mama's boys.

Given the situation, however, you could make an exception. Shuichi was still independent, and made his own decisions. He lived in his own apartment, closer to work, likely so he wouldn't disrupt the lives of his mother's new family, his stepfather and stepbrother.

Shiori had raised her son as a single mother, no easy feat in any day and age. It was no wonder why he loved her so.

“You seem apprehensive.” Shuichi touched your shoulder. “Why?”

“You have never met the parents before, Shuichi?”

He chuckled. “No, I suppose not. One of the benefits of never committing to a relationship, I suppose.”

You sighed. “There's this sense of lingering dread. I always think of the worst case scenarios. What
if I embarrass myself and your mom doesn't like me?” It seemed so sophomoric to say that, but the concern was very real.

“_____.”

You looked at him. “Yes?”

He touched the side of your face, letting his thumb stroke your cheek. “She will love you. As I do.”

You took a deep breath. “All right. I believe you.”

“Do you?”

“I’ll try to believe you.”

“Have faith, ____. You'll see.” He kissed your forehead, his hand reaching for yours. “This way.”

You walked through the neighborhood -- it was a nice one in a more rural part of the city, especially beautiful this time of the year due to the many trees that were cared for. Their leaves had piled on the ground, sure to be raked soon, dotting the grass with a palette of vibrance.

Your drink was warm in your hand, Shuichi’s hold in the other as he led you along. “Did you grow up here?”

“No,” he said. “When my mother remarried, she moved in with my stepfather and stepbrother.”

“It must be expensive to live out here, and probably one hell of a commute during traffic hours.”

“My stepfather works in real estate as the owner of an agency. He does travel quite a bit, but he often works from home when he’s not away examining a property.”

“So living out here works really well for them.”

“It does.”

“You know, you never really talk about your stepfather. I’ve heard plenty of your mother but little about him. Do you get along with him?”

“Yes,” Shuichi said, giving you a curious glance. “My mother remarried when I was sixteen, so he never really played a fatherly figure in my life. He allowed me my independence as I was a good student and orderly son. I gave him no trouble, and he gave me none. He treats my mother well, and I’m happy for them.”

“What about your stepbrother?”

“Kokoda? He looks up to me as an older brother. Like me, he has no other siblings.”

You leaned your head against Shuichi’s shoulder as you walked. “I’m sure you were a great role model for him. He’s in college now?”

“Yes, he has a couple more years.”

“Good for him.”

You arrived shortly at the house, an architectural beauty of a modern build, framed with cultural accents. “Wow,” you said. “This is really impressive.”
“If you ask my stepfather, he’ll be glad to tell you about its history and restoration.” Shuichi rang the doorbell.

You took a deep breath.

“It’s all right. No reason to be nervous,” he said, glancing at you, adoration apparent in his eyes.

The door opened, revealing a woman in her mid to late forties, her black hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. “Welcome home, Shuichi,” she said, embracing her son. “How I’ve missed you. It’s been so long since you came home.”

“Well,” he replied, returning her hug. “I’ve missed you, too.” He immediately placed a comforting hand on your back after he pulled away from her. “This is _____., this my mother.”

“_____,” Shiori said, holding your offered hand with both of hers; she gave it a gentle pat. “I’ve heard so much about you. You’re just as lovely as Shuichi says.”

“Mrs. Minamino, it’s such a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Call me Shiori, please, dear,” she said. “Welcome to the family. Please come in.”

Shuichi held the door for you as you wiped your shoes and removed them. He did the same, following you inside. “Look,” he whispered, “It’s been less than sixty seconds, and you’re already on a first-name basis.”

“While I appreciate that, I’m pretty sure she’s just being polite.”

“Welcome, Shuichi, _____,” a man, presumably Shiori’s husband, said. “I hope the bus wasn’t too crowded this morning.” He was tall, a large pair of glasses sitting across the bridge of his nose. He had a warm smile on his face.

“Not at all,” your boyfriend said. “As you know, this is _____., this is my father, Kazuya Hatanaka.”

You shook hands with him. “It’s good to meet you. Thank you for inviting us, Mr. Hatanaka.”

“Kazuya is fine. From what I hear, you’re the first lady Shuichi’s ever brought home to meet Shiori. We’re assuming you must be special.”

“Oh, don’t set expectations like that!” you said with a nervous laugh. “I’d rather underpromise and overdeliver than the other way around.”


Shiori had prepared a banquet, and the house smelled wonderfully of a homemade meal. The dishes were placed on a lazy susan at the center of the circular dining room table. There was quite a spread!

“You must be hungry,” Shiori said as she handed out bowls of rice. “Please eat.”

“Shuichi says you’re quite the chef,” you started, “and I believe him. This is delicious.”

His mother smiled at you. “He mentioned that you’re talented in the kitchen, too. I’m glad. I always worry that he’s not eating well. He never learned to cook with me; perhaps he’ll listen to you.”
“_____ takes good care of me, Mother,” Shuichi said. “She’s an excellent cook.”

“We've been cooking together more often,” you assured her. “Eating healthy isn't always easy, but it's certainly doable if you can cook.”

“Shuichi says you're moving in with him. I'm glad you both are getting along so well. It's a shame that we didn't get the chance to meet you sooner. Life has been busy, especially with getting Kokoda back to school.”

“I loved college,” you said. “For me, it was a time to find myself and really discover what I'm passionate about. What is Kokoda’s major, if I may ask?”

“He's either going with finance or entrepreneurship,” Kazuya said. “He originally thought he could be like Shuichi and head right into the real world, but sharp as he is, he felt like he needed a formal education first.”

“I was a finance major. If he would like some advice or guidance on how to navigate that path, I'm happy to help.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful,” Shiori said. “We'll get your phone number after lunch and encourage Kokoda to contact you. Maybe you'd even like to meet here for a second visit.”

“Your home is lovely,” you said. “I’d love to come visit again.”

“You like it?” Kazuya said. “I bought this during the global financial crisis in 2008, shored up the structure, and had it restored to its original beauty with a few modern twists.” He continued to tell you about his project, describing the historical importance of this house, and why he thought it was so vital to preserve it. He rambled on and on throughout lunch, even when you were all finished eating. It wasn’t that you thought the content of his passion was boring… but there was only so much information you could handle.

“Father,” Shuichi said, taking advantage of a short pause in the conversation, as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I thought while I was visiting, I would help you install that virus protection on your laptop and ensure it’s running correctly.”

“That’s a good idea. With you and Kokoda gone, sometimes it’s a struggle with all this new technology.” Kazuya scooted his chair back. “Thank you for lunch, my dear,” he said to Shiori as he and Shuichi disappeared down a hallway.

“How often does Shuichi visit you?” you asked as you stood, helping his mother clear the table.

“Not nearly as often as I’d like,” she said. “But he has his own life to live, and I respect that. If he spends all of his time with me, he probably wouldn’t have had a chance to meet you.”

“He seems like a doting son. He speaks very highly of you.”

“He is the best son I could ever ask for.”

“I believe it. He's handsome, successful, intelligent, kind…” You picked up a platter, and to your horror, you knocked over the remains of a glass of red wine, spilling its contents onto the white tablecloth. “Oh, no! I am so sorry, Shiori!” You mentally kicked yourself for being so clumsy as you straightened the wine glass.

“It’s nothing that bleach won’t fix,” she said, quickly stacking the rest of the plates on the table. “Please don’t worry about it -- it’s not even very much wine. Why don’t you put these in the sink,
and I’ll take care of the tablecloth?”

Relieved that she wasn’t angry, you did as she asked, even going as far as to start washing the dishes.

When Shiori returned, she walked into the kitchen, pulling out a few containers from the cabinets to store the remainder of lunch. “You don’t have to do the dishes, _____ . You’re our guest.”

“No, no,” you said. “It’s the least I could do. My dad and I always did the cooking, and my mom would clean up afterward. It’s only fair to distribute the chores.”

She seemed fine with your answer, and she laughed. “You know, you could say that I’m used to cleaning up messes. Shuichi is a wonderful son, but he wasn’t always so well-behaved. When he was a child, he threw the worst tantrums. He would make a mess of things simply because he could, drawing on walls, chewing on clothes -- there was a time when I would hand him a cup of juice, and he would simply pour it right on the carpet! I’m glad those days are gone.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize he was such a difficult child. But I promise that will be the last mess from me, if I can help it.”

“_____ , it’s really not an issue. This is why we have tablecloths in the first place. They are meant for spills, drips, and crumbs. Accidents happen.”

As you continued washing, you mused, “That’s gracious of you to say. Truthfully, I can be a bit of a klutz sometimes, so I wasn’t sure how I’d keep that promise.”

She laughed again. “I know why Shuichi likes you.” She opened the refrigerator to put away several containers. “He’s never been one to walk into a relationship -- not just romantic ones but also friendships. Beneath his polite exterior, he’s quite cautious about those whom he lets into his life. His teachers always said that his classmates loved him, but he hardly ever brought home any friends.”

“That sounds about right,” you agreed.

“You’re honest,” she continued, “perceptive, and understanding. Surely, he sees that in you, too.”

You were flattered by the compliment. “I don’t know about all that, but I’ll tell you what I like about Shuichi. I’ve dated my share of guys, and none of them are nearly as thoughtful and resourceful as he is. He’s always so empathetic with me. I’m lucky to have him -- you did a wonderful job raising him.”

Shiori beamed at you. “_____ , birds of a feather flock together. I see the way my son steals glances at you, even over something as simple as a meal, and I’ve never seen him so happy. If my feelings are right, I’d wager that you’re going to have a very joyful life together. You’ll make each other happy.”

You had only known this woman for less than an hour, but you already liked her. “That means a lot to me, Shiori, and I’m sure Shuichi feels the same.”

“How am I supposed to feel?” Your boyfriend stepped into the kitchen, swiping the clean plate from your hands and beginning to dry it.


He chuckled, the sound a soft echo in his throat. “She is certainly a wonder.”
“Speaking of wonders,” Kazuya said, leaning on the kitchen countertop. “My company just finished remodeling a rental property in the mountains. You two have been together for just about a month now, hm? How about celebrating by staying at the cottage? If you can test out all the new features for me, it’ll be our weekend getaway gift to you. The entire place has been remodeled, including the kitchen and bathrooms, the backyard untouched nature for miles. There’s even a brand new hot tub on the porch out back. It’s sure to be luxurious and romantic.”

“Well, if you really need someone to guinea pig it for you...” you started, a jest in your tone.

Kazuya laughed heartily. “She’s a keeper, Shuichi!”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Pretty quick update! I have the next two chapters already written, so I should be posting them within the week. If you couldn't tell, I really want to get to the third arc because that’s where all the excitement is. This chapter’s more of a tease than anything, but I think it’s funny because I’m hilarious.

Please enjoy! :3

Ah, you guys are the best! <3 Your feedback keeps me going. Seriously. Thank you to Azelpop, FannibalToast, SailorCupcake, Queenasunasama, Yeah_I’m_Crazy_So_What, oscar_milde, Mei Mei, HikaruXKaoru and LadyAmazon!

As you both walked back to the bus stop that night, carrying leftovers that Shiori insisted you take, Shuichi gave you a knowing look.

“What?” you said.

“I would call that a successful introduction, wouldn’t you?”

You nodded. “I think they like me?”

“My mother loves you.”

“She was very kind to me. She even told me about you as a child, said you threw tantrums, destroyed things, and poured your juice everywhere. Who would have thought that you were such a demon child?”

Shuichi paused for a moment, and you could have sworn you saw a glimmer of guilt in his eyes. “Well,” he said, “good thing I grew out of that phase, hm?”

“She’s very sweet,” you continued. “I like and respect your mother a lot. I can see how you grew up to be who you are. Clearly, she had an impact on you.”

He sighed, his breath a thin cloud on the cold air before dissipating. “She has.”

“And your stepfather? He’s hilarious. And generous, too. Who would have thought he’d give us his newly remodeled rental property for a whole weekend?” You smiled at your boyfriend. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Our one-month anniversary.” Shuichi squeezed your hand. “That is special.”

“Aside from my dog disappearing and some freak breaking into my apartment, it was the happiest month of my life.” You stopped to gaze into his eyes. “Shuichi, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“And you are mine,” he said, kissing you on the lips. “You are my wonder, ____. Let’s get you all sorted out this week with the move, so we may fully enjoy this upcoming weekend.”
“Have you seen how many boxes I have?”

“I’ve caught a glimpse or two. I’m sure we’ll manage.”

“You say that now.”

“If we need to, we can rent storage space or even look for a larger apartment.” He gently tugged you along with his free hand. “I’m looking forward to sharing a home together in a more permanent way.”

“You won’t have to live out of a suitcase anymore, hm? Looking forward to that?”

“Yes, well, I would like my closet back. I won’t have to iron my work clothes every morning.”

“I’m sorry,” you said with a small laugh. “I know living with me in my apartment was a huge inconvenience. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you being there for me when I needed you the most.”

“It comes with the territory,” Shuichi said. “Relationships are a give and take. I know you’d do the same for me, if I were in need.”

“Anything, Shuichi.” You were at the bus stop now, and you leaned your head against his shoulder as you waited. Even in the chilly autumn wind, you felt warm in his arms.

After each work day, you and Shuichi packed away your things, sorting them out in cardboard boxes.

You organized them. For such a small apartment, you were impressed by how much stuff you had. You had several boxes labeled for donations -- here, you piled old books, knick knacks, clothes, kitchen appliances, and everything else you figured you would no longer need. In some ways, it felt liberating, shedding your belongings. You had always wondered what it would be like to live a more minimalist lifestyle.

Shuichi sat on the floor, his legs bent in front of him, trying to put together an old food processor for donation. You had since been gifted a newer model.

You reached out, your fingertips grazing his shoulder, and you leaned down to hug him from behind. “Hey, handsome,” you said. “Having fun with that puzzle?”

“It really is a puzzle, isn’t it?” he said, a perplexed expression on his face. “I’m unsure of how this goes together.”

“Well, the blade is upside down -- you’re not going to be processing much food that way.”

Shuichi craned his neck around to look at you. “Perhaps you would prefer to tackle this mess of a modern innovation?”

“But it’s so entertaining to watch you do it.”

“Entertaining?” he hummed, his voice lowering to a flirtatious pitch.

It happened so quickly. He somehow tucked his arm around you waist, shifting you around his torso until you ended up on your back, laying on the floor. He climbed over you, both of his knees on one side of your hip, his hands supporting his own weight on either side of your shoulders.
“What the heck, Shuichi?” you cried, unsure of how you even ended up in this position, your boyfriend above you, hair hanging in graceful locks. You looked at him, watching the mischievous expression on his face. “What?”

“I find this entertaining.” He leaned in to kiss you, his lips enticing and warm. It was an invitation, a suggestive beckoning for you to join the dance.

You accepted, touching his face, letting your fingers run across his smooth skin and into his hair, nails dragging gently against his scalp. You kissed him, flirtatious whimsy in each caress of your lips, as you pulled yourself close.

Shuichi shifted his weight, one hand moving to support your upper back. He brought you closer to him with an effortless press of his arm.

You admired his firm shoulders, the muscles in his chest, the way they flexed when he moved, however subtle. One arm locked around his neck, your other hand on his face, tracing his jawline as you swept your tongue across his bottom lip, which only seemed to encourage him. The kiss was playful, a continuation of the dance he had so eloquently proposed.

He broke away after a few moments. “Let’s take this somewhere more comfortable,” he whispered against your lips.

“You’re the one who threw me on the floor,” you quipped.

“I can just as easily throw you on a bed.”

You felt a wave of excitement wash over you, a deep longing, a fire kindled inside you. His sultry voice made you want him, and you weren’t entirely sure in what ways. You just wanted him here, touching you, kissing you, whispering words of passion in your ear.

Shuichi tugged you to your feet, kissing you deeply and turning you around in his arms. He rested his chin on your shoulder as he tucked your hair aside. “I love you,” he said, giving your ear a gentle nibble.

You were about to respond when you heard a rapping at the door. “We should get that,” you said reluctantly, as you turned your head to him for one last kiss.

He nodded, following you to the door.

“Hello~!” your friend sang, grinning as you opened the door.

“Botan! What are you doing here?” you asked. “Come in!”

“I was just in the neighborhood and thought I’d come by and see if my two favorite people needed any help with packing.”

“Oh, we're all right,” you said. “My lease isn't officially broken for another week and a half, so we have plenty of time.”

“Good, because dinner sounds like more fun! There’s that new Italian place around the corner. How about we go there?”

You glanced at your boyfriend. “What do you think, Shuichi?”

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt to leave the packing behind for a couple of hours.” He glanced at the
chaos behind him. He would never complain, but you knew the mayhem of your endless possessions was wearing on him.

“Let’s go, then,” you said, leaning up to kiss Shuichi on the cheek. “Let me put on something presentable.” Your t-shirt and sweats weren’t going to cut it for a nice Italian restaurant.

Botan tilted her head to the side with a broad smile as she saw _____ round the corner. “You must feel so much better, Kurama.”

“Mm?” He reached for his coat from behind the closet door.

“_____ texted me. It seems you said those perfect three words after just a bit of prompting. She was so excited!”

Kurama smiled in return, exhaling softly. Although he did not necessarily appreciate his friends meddling in his love life, he very fondly looked upon the memory of their recent love confessions.

“I’m guessing you haven’t told her about the fox inside?”

“Not yet. We’re taking a small vacation in the mountains this weekend. My stepfather has invited us to stay in his new rental property. I plan on telling her then. There shouldn’t be any interruptions or distractions.”

“Oh, really?” Botan sighed. “How romantic! I wish you the best of luck. I’m sure everything will be just fine.”

“I hope so.” He could not suppress the uneasiness in his chest. As much as her love warmed his heart, he knew he was foolish for not telling her already. It was absurd -- he had never felt more apprehensive about anything in his life. Risk-taking was a routine part of his history as Yoko Kurama, and even with death at his door, the intimidation of torture and humiliation, he never feared. It wasn’t until he fused his soul with that of Shuichi Minamino that he understood the depth of emotions and how they served his humanity. It was then he learned what it was like to have something to lose.

Nothing alarmed him more than threats on his loved ones, most recently on his human mother. Nevertheless, those threats fueled his purpose, turning anger into cunning efficiency, granting him the ability to best leverage his expertise and adapt as necessary to eliminate the peril.

The danger with _____ was intangible. He could not eliminate it by destroying it as he so often did. That unnerved him, the fact that it was out of his hands.

“Are you all ready to go?” Botan asked as _____ returned, purse in hand, scarf tucked beneath her chin.

“Yes,” she said, weaving her arm through Kurama’s for his hand. “You, Shuichi?”

He nodded -- her bright eyes and sweet smile were all he needed to soothe the nerves. His heart softened anytime he looked at her.

You walked to the restaurant together, chatting about your weekend, from your Friday evening confession with Shuichi at the lake to Sunday afternoon’s lunch with his family.

Botan seemed interested in every last detail, just like any close friend would be. You noticed that
your boyfriend never joined in on this conversation unless prompted -- it endeared him to you how he was reserved, almost shy, about your relationship. He was so affectionate with you, but he held back with others, at least partially out of respect for you, you thought.

“I’m so happy for the both of you!” Botan said, a huge grin on her face. She even let out a girlish squeal.

You almost blushed at how enthusiastic she was. “Thanks,” you said. “I’m really excited about moving in with Shuichi.” You looked at him, and even though he didn’t say anything, he didn’t need to -- his gentle eyes were telling enough, and you gave his hand a squeeze. “I couldn’t ask for anything else.”

When you finally arrived at the restaurant, you realized just how busy it was.

“Oh, my,” Botan said. “I had no idea it would be this crazy.”

“I’ll check with the host and see how long the wait is,” Shuichi offered as he made his way through the crowd.

“Maybe we should go somewhere else,” you said.

“But doesn’t lasagna sound delicious?” Botan laughed. “Besides, even if it’s a wait, it means we get to spend more time together!”

“I suppose you’re right,” you said. “Speaking of which, I did want to ask you something. I’m embarrassed to say that I don’t know the answer to this.”

“What?”

“Do you know when Shuichi’s birthday is? I tried asking him once, and, classically, he dodged the question. I should have asked his mother.”

Botan looked thoughtful for a moment, pursing her lips, her index finger on her bottom lip. “You know, I don’t. We’ve never celebrated his birthday, not even with our small group of friends. Wow, I’m embarrassed, too!”

“I’m getting the sense that he really doesn’t want us to celebrate his birthday,” you said. “I guess it’s no big deal, but I just wanted to know. I want to do something for him, even if it’s a small gesture.”

“Well, once you find out, don’t forget to tell me!”

“If he hasn’t told you by now, don’t you think it’s best not to press the matter?”

“That’s why you’ll be the one pressing the matter, sweetie! He can’t ignore you for long! There are consequences to dodging your girlfriend’s questions!”

“Oh.” You laughed. “I see how it is.”

Shuichi returned. “It’s about a 45-minute wait. Would you ladies prefer to go elsewhere?”

“I don’t mind either way,” you said. “But Botan seems to be craving lasagna.”

“It does sound rather lovely!” She nearly sighed at the thought. “I haven’t had Italian cuisine in so long!”
“Italian it is, then,” Shuichi said, accommodating as always.
OKAY, DARLING READERS. I told you I'm on a roll, and I wasn't lying!

Admittedly, this chapter is kind of uneventful. I'm basically setting the stage for more exciting things to come. You'll thank me later. ;)

Thank you to those who have left comments recently: siruru, cezarina, Kactuskat16, LadyAmazon, SailorCupcake, FannibalToast, Mei Mei, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, and oscar_milde! Please remember you are all eligible for my raffle. If you haven't entered already, please feel free to do so! I welcome you. Details in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday afternoon, right after you returned home from work, you pulled clothes from the study closet, wondering exactly what to bring on your weekend getaway. You had already moved a good portion of your belongings to Shuichi's apartment in small increments. There was still a bit of packing to be done, but most everything was stowed away in organized cardboard boxes and left for the movers.

Shuichi walked past the study to the master bedroom, peeking through the open door. He must have seen your dilemma and stepped back. “_____?”

“Mm?”

“Pack lightly, if you can, my love. We're only going to be there for a weekend.”

You tilted your head to the side. In the month you had been dating, he had never dictated to you or even suggested how you should do things before. While you weren’t offended, you wondered what he was up to.

He smiled at you. “If you're not opposed, we can take my motorcycle up to the cottage. It's faster, and we can weave through traffic. The only downside is limited space.”

“You have a motorcycle? How come I wasn't aware of this?”

“I don't ever recall you asking. I don't use it often as our commute to work is short enough.”

“Then why not use it when we visited your mom?”

He chuckled. “What Mother doesn't know won't hurt her.”

“I'm curious. Did this motorcycle come from some rebellious desire for freedom? Or is it simply for practicality?”

“I won it at a charity auction that I attended with one of my clients. All proceeds were donated to fund a children’s community center. As little as I use it, I don't think I would have bought one of my own accord. Nevertheless, it has its occasional uses.”
“All right, then. Maybe we can share a suitcase?”

“It should be easy enough. Clothes and basic toiletries. My stepfather says we should have everything else we need waiting for us.”

You grinned. “Sounds good.” You were about to go back to packing when you realized something. “Shuichi?”

“Yes, _____?”

“I’ve... never been on a motorcycle before.”

To your surprise, he laughed, his eyes reflecting genuine amusement. “Literally, all you have to do is hold on.”

“If I fall off, I’ll kick your ass.”

“If you fall off, you probably won’t be doing much of anything.”

“That’s very comforting.”

He stepped toward you, pulling you into his arms. “I think you’ll be fine,” he said. “But if you prefer, we can take a cab—”

“No, that makes it sound like I’m scared.”

Shuichi kissed your temple, holding you close. “Your choice, _____,” he said, his voice a light tease, “though I never pegged you as someone to accept challenges for the sake of it.”

“I’m not. Not usually.” You sighed. “But let’s take your motorcycle anyway.”

_____________________

Truthfully, the motorcycle wasn’t too bad. It carried you out of the city quickly enough, and the wind in your face, chilly as it was, made it easier to tolerate the switchbacks of the mountains. What you didn’t realize you’d enjoy most, however, was holding tight to Shuichi. His body took the brunt of the cold for you, and you cuddled up to him as closely as you could without your helmets clashing.

The ride up was riveting, the fresh mountain air filling your lungs with the smell of earth and fresh pine. You thought you could feel the moisture in the air the farther you ascended.

When you arrived, Shuichi pulled into a small, unpaved lot.

You slipped off the motorcycle, pulling off the helmet as well.

“You did well,” Shuichi said. “No falling off.”

“You’re funny.”

The cottage was nothing short of impressive, settled near a flowing brook. You crossed a narrow bridge to arrive at the front door, lush vegetation surrounding the well-kept property. It seemed small on the outside, finished with clean vertical planks of painted wood -- it took on a more modern stylization, with sharp edges in its construction, very geometric in design. You realized the amazement of the juxtaposition of having something so contemporary in the middle of an otherwise pristine forest. Shuichi punched in the keycode and opened the door, letting you inside first. You stumbled around to find the light, and you when you finally switched it on, you were
breathtaking.

The inside was open, the roof raised with gorgeous planks in the ceiling, granting a spacious view of the living area. “It’s so inviting,” you said, admiring the furniture, the colors complementing the wood floor and gorgeously rustic stone in the kitchen. “Your stepfather is really good at this.”

“I agree,” Shuichi said. “No wonder he is able to make a living out of it. I’m impressed.”

“Wow.” You wandered into the master bedroom, feeling rather in awe at just how well the concept worked. It was homey, but it was also modern. The built-in shelves behind the king-sized bed, luxurious linens, a cozy nook beneath the window, the fireplace in the corner of the room -- it was all so beautiful.

“You like it?”

You looked at Shuichi. “It’s going to be a really nice weekend.”

“It seems that my stepfather really thought this through.” He found a complimentary bottle of wine on one of the side tables, a short and sweet note inscribed to the both of you.

“You do know we’re going to have to one-up this for your mom and his wedding anniversary, right?”

“I’m sure we’ll think of something,” he said, setting the bottle down.

You took his hand. “Come on. Let’s go explore. I want to see the rest of this place.”

He followed you without protest.

The remainder of the cottage was just as well-designed as you expected, the theme seamlessly presented throughout each room. Even the bathrooms were impressive -- they were spacious, marbled with stones and smooth tiles. There was only one other room, and while it was not as notable as the master bedroom, it was still charming in its own right. You peeked through the sliding glass door in the back. Outside, on the patio, the raised hot tub was the most impressive feature, its smooth wood blending into the foundation below it. A set of stairs circled around the tub, allowing users to dip their feet in at the top or slowly sink into the simmering water.

Because it was dark, you would have to explore the surrounding area tomorrow, perhaps go on a hike. Maybe you could ride down to the nearest grocery store and shop for some picnic items. The forest did seem like a wonderful place for a relaxing weekend.

“Will you tell me something, Shuichi?” you said as you turned to face him. “Honestly?”

“Anything, my love,” he said.

“When exactly is your birthday?”

“December 29th.”

“So just a few months away, right in the middle of two of the biggest holidays.”

“That’s right.”

You shrugged off your coat as the inside began to feel warm. “I guess you just don't want to celebrate, huh? Is that why you never responded when I asked before?”
He sighed a soft laugh as he removed his jacket as well. “Birthdays don't seem so important, not after you've had so many of them.”

“And that's okay,” you said, embracing him, nuzzling your face into his chest. “I just wanted to know. We don't have to celebrate, either. I only want to acknowledge the day of your existence, mostly because I'm very glad of it.”

He hugged you tight, resting his chin atop your head. “I'm thankful for yours.” He recited your birthdate without skipping a beat, year and all.

“That's not fair -- you didn't even have to ask for it. As my boss, you have my personal information.”

“Last I recalled, life isn't fair,” he replied, humor in his voice.

“I was always told that life is what you make it.” You took a breath, letting yourself relax in his arms, breathing in his scent. It was so peaceful, being here and enjoying his company. “So let's make it worthwhile.”

“Let's do that.” He looked at you, his eyes gentle, the splendid green drawing you close.

“I do have one more question.”

“Mm?”

“Do you like animals?” You had to ask. Animals, especially dogs, played such an important role in your life. If Shuichi couldn't tolerate them… well, that would complicate matters.

He smiled at you, smoothing your hair. “You needn't worry, _____. I like animals just fine. I'm certainly not as passionate as you, but I think few people have your grit.”

“Are you sure?” you asked. “I've never heard you say anything about animals aside from your involvement with helping me find Yugen. I don't want to force something on you if you're uncomfortable with it, but I would definitely like to adopt another dog in the future.” It was hard to say -- this meant you were finally accepting the fact that Yugen was gone.

“I admit that I prefer plants, but that's due to their low maintenance and versatility. Candidly, I have nothing against dogs, and knowing how much they mean to you, I encourage you to bring one home whenever you're ready. I'll even go with you to the shelter, if you'd like, and the responsibility of care will belong to the both of us.”

You beamed. “You have no idea how happy that makes me, Shuichi.”

“Actually, I think I do.” He touched your face, tracing your jawline with a delicate feather caress of his fingers.

“Maybe you do,” you said, leaning into a kiss. “Thank you.”

He loved her more than he thought he was capable of loving anyone.

He loved his mother, Shiori, of course, but it was a different sort of relationship. She was his guardian, her selfless love taming even the ruthless Yoko Kurama, the spirit fox bandit that led a ring of thieving terror in Demon World. He owed her everything for opening his eyes to the virtues of human emotion and compassion, the sacrifices she made for his well being.
His love for _____ was something he couldn't quite explain. He owed her nothing. It was simple and complex at the same time, full of wonder and ardor.

Love was an interesting phenomenon. It was just biology, right? Chemicals in the brain? Synapses firing electric signals at each other? Silly human sentiment?

No, it was more than that.

And, truthfully, even if it could be boiled down to an exact science, that didn’t change the way it made him feel.

Kurama adored _____, harboring deep affections for her. He thought she was beautiful, bearing both a mature and youthful charm. He loved her mind, her clever quips, her questions. He acknowledged her intellect, her holistic approach to the future. She was forward-looking, as he was, and he thought they complemented each other well.

Her touch was invigorating, awakening his spirit in a longing spark and a comfortable amble at the same time. It made him want more every time he engaged with her.

It didn't surprise him, given his human male biology, but with _____, the desire was different. It was more than physical pleasure, the carnal throb in his core. It transcended beyond the flesh and into his heart. It was warm and fulfilling, and it made him feel rejuvenated with each passionate kiss, every embrace.

He brought her close, his hands around her waist, thumbs caressing each curve through her clothes. He kissed her, his advance smooth and sensual, feeling her move against him with each tender pursuit of his lips.

She was open with him, accepting of his touch, even as his hands began to wander. His kisses trailed down from her lips to her neck, his tongue teasing, his mouth sucking at her skin. When she moaned, her nails scratching his back through his shirt, he stopped briefly, a shiver running down his spine.

He swept her off her feet, one arm tucked under her legs, the other supporting her back; she pulled closer to him when he did so, catching his lips in another kiss.

Kurama carried her to the bedroom, setting her gently on the bed without breaking the kiss. Her arms were still around him, and she tugged him to her. For a moment, he felt a wave of ecstasy, her clear acquiesce filling him with desire. He fell onto the bed with her, hands guiding her chin to deepen the kiss. He never wanted to let her go.

He loved her.

And because he loved her, he pulled away from the kiss, sitting up straight. “_____,” he said, taking a deep breath, “we need to talk about something before we continue.”

“I wanted to talk about something, too, Shuichi,” she said as she blushed, the precious pink in her cheeks that he adored so much. “I… I actually wanted to talk about… sex.”

Chapter End Notes

As I said, you'll thank me later. ;)

[58x802]
I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Chapter Summary

Throwing my thanks in the chapter summary because I've exhausted the character limit under the notes section. ^_^; Sorry.

Sincere thanks to those who've recently left comments on my work: SailorCupcake, oscar_milde, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, FannibalToast, Expressmomo, Mei Mei, and LadyAmazon! <3 Thank you!

Chapter Notes

I tried to come up with a clever, or at least less conspicuous, title for this chapter, but this one, blunt as it is, works well for the content, I think. LET'S HAVE A HEART-TO-HEART. This is the long-awaited smut chapter. I do have few things I want to say before you continue reading, so I ask for your patience!

I don't usually write smut for two reasons.

First, it's not usually integral to the plot of any story. Sex and intimacy can very well be, but the actual depiction of the act I find, in most cases, doesn't really lend a whole lot to the plot or the character development. You can often use a fade-to-black method to tell the same story with no consequences. I value concision when writing. Even the fluff, or arguably "filler," I write serves a purpose in setting the scene, foreshadowing, or developing relationships.

Second, I can find smut very frustrating. Personally, I've struggled with my enjoyment of sex over the years because the way sex is portrayed in the media, in erotica, in movies is, almost categorically, a very different experience than mine. I used to think I was alone in this feeling, and I was very disheartened.

Then, I did my research. I was a resident assistant for three years in college. Among our curriculum was sex education. I took this part of my job very seriously, going as far as to haul bags full of flavored condoms from our campus health clinic and purchasing 30 bananas from the grocery store to teach my girls how to use condoms properly. (The guys at the check-out were no doubt wondering about my apparent banana fetish.)

I learned about the mysterious female orgasm, the "unicorn" as so many call it. I learned that only about 20% to 25% of women, depending on the study, can come with vaginal penetration alone. I learned that it takes, on average, 10 to 20 minutes for women to achieve an orgasm, even with the proper stimulation -- and most women require even more time! I learned that between 10% and 40% of women report having difficulty or inability to orgasm, and up to 50% of women do not achieve orgasm during sexual intercourse, even with additional stimulation!

The last statistics there are particularly interesting to me because the clitoris is an organ that serves no reproductive purpose. It is literally there to make women feel...
good. So why is it that so many women report having so much trouble with enjoying sex or having an orgasm when we are equipped with an organ whose ONLY purpose is to bring us pleasure?

The problem is that most women don't understand their bodies. I think this is brought about with the miseducation and portrayal of what a "normal" sexual experience is supposed to be through the depictions that we see every day. Quite frankly, women aren't taught how to enjoy sex, how to masturbate, or how to communicate with their partners.

I don't think most smut helps. The smut I've read follows a linear pattern with little to no communication between partners, nonexistent conversations about birth controls and STDS, and ends in an explosive orgasm in which both participants magically climax at the same time. This is why I find it frustrating -- smut, at least for the most part, is not realistic for many readers out there and quite possibly contributes to the lack of education, and even self-esteem issues and sexual frustrations that women may have.

To bring this conversation full circle, if I'm going to write smut, it's going to a) be integral to the story and b) aim to educate and, at the very least, depict what a healthy relationship looks like.

Here is my disclaimer: You, the reader character, are about to have an amazing sexual experience. I am by no means suggesting that this is how your experience should be or is because all bodies function differently and react to a wide variety of stimulation. What I've written here is what I feel is potentially most relatable for most of the reader population. There is nothing wrong with you if you don't or can't achieve sexual gratification in this manner -- and if this is the truth for you, I encourage you to continue searching to find something that does work for you. Kurama is, in my mind, the perfect boyfriend, so he's going to be accommodating and will utilize communication in a way that represents what a healthy relationship should be. Kurama is also quite experienced, so while a lot of us are trying to teach our partners how to treat us during sex, Kurama already has a good idea on how to experiment and what the RC may like.

If I haven't scared you off yet with this ramble, I do have to say that I'm very happy with the way this chapter turned out. I wrote this a couple of months ago, and I've been editing it ever since. I sincerely hope that you enjoy this. Feedback is always wonderful! Please be honest. If the consensus is I suck at writing smut and should stop, it won't hurt my feelings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She wanted to talk about sex.

It was not ideal timing, but he promised himself that he would let her drive the conversation, whenever she chose to bring it up. This part of their relationship was about empowering her, letting her talk things through, and having her express how she felt and what she wanted to do.

She was flushing -- it was adorable, really, but he knew she must have felt flustered. Culturally, women weren’t supposed to talk about sex. Many men viewed them as objects of pleasure and lust,
subject to their whims. If Noboru’s behavior was any indication, women were not treated with dignity in that regard. It was the unfortunate truth for many women.

Kurama did not want that for ______. He respected her too much, and he wanted to give her a safe space to communicate with him.

Talking about sex was difficult enough, and women were never taught how to approach it. It was a topic for men; it was their world, after all. He could tell that she felt sufficiently awkward, her eyes diverted to the floor, her hands fidgeting. He could even smell her apprehension. “Poor girl,” he thought.

He knew he could not force his agenda in this moment.

She finally felt comfortable enough to be open with him, and that was an honor in itself. If he interrupted her now, he wondered how long it would take her to find the courage to breach the subject again.

Kurama had put off his confession for this long. He could wait a little while longer. He breathed in, letting his anxiety calmly melt away, his gaze softening.

He would be however she needed him to be.

“I… I actually wanted to talk about… sex.”

You could hardly believe the words that came from your mouth. It was a sudden urge. You lost yourself, as you so often did, in his touch, his arms, his passionate kisses -- and you were curious. But before moving further, you wanted to be sure. You had to strike up the conversation, as awkward as it was for you.

“What about it?” he asked, tenderness in his eyes.

You sighed, wondering if you should have brought it up at all. “This is so embarrassing,” you said, covering your face with your hands.

Shuichi gave you a small smile, gently pulling your hands down. “Why is it embarrassing? It’s an expression of love.”

You sighed again, breathing out some of your nerves. “You’re right.” You looked him in the eye, those beautiful eyes. He was taking you seriously, a thoughtful understanding reflected within them. “I had a dream about us having sex. It happened before we started dating, actually, the night before the conference in Inoji began. It caught me off guard. I wasn’t sure what to think.”

“Have you been with anyone before?”

“No,” you said, glancing away. “I’ve had boyfriends before, but I’ve never felt comfortable getting to that point.”

He squeezed your hand. “Do you want to?”

You didn’t respond right away. It seemed like such a big decision for you.

“You don’t have to have an answer right now,” he said, his voice kind.

“But do you want to?”
He let out a humored sigh. “_____, I love you. There is no amount of physical pleasure that could compel me to pressure you into anything before you’re ready. I don’t want sex unless you do. It’s an experience meant to be shared by the both of us whenever that time comes.” He brought your hand to his lips, kissing your fingers. “And since this is your first time, I want it to be memorable for you because you chose it.”

Shuichi really was the perfect boyfriend. You buried your face in his shoulder. “Thank you,” you whispered. “I’m guessing this wouldn’t be your first time?”

“No,” he said, stroking your arm. “Though, admittedly, it’s been a while.”

“I think I want to,” you said.

“Are you sure?” He looked at you. “You saying that with your face buried in my arm doesn’t exactly inspire confidence.”

You took another deep breath, sitting up straight. “Yes,” you said, this time firmly. “I’ve thought about it, and I don’t want to have any regrets. If I were to die right now, I think I’d be most regretful that I never shared this experience with you.”

Shuichi studied you for a moment, even raising an eyebrow. “All right,” he replied, satisfied with your response. “Tell me about your dream.”

“What?”

“Your dream. What happened? What did you like? What did you not like?”

You looked down at your feet hanging over the edge of the bed. “I remember it clearly. You wanted to help into something more casual at the beach, so we went up to my room. I brought out a sundress, which you liked, and you began to undress me.”

“What happened next?”

“We kissed.”

“We’ve never done that before.”

“Stop it.”

“Sorry,” he said with a small chuckle. “What then?”

“We somehow wound up in bed, and we were both naked. I remember you kissing me, touching me. I wanted more.” You blushed again. “That’s it.”

“Well, we didn’t get very far, did we?” Shuichi had an amused expression on his face.

“Okay, I lied a little -- it wasn’t a dream about sex. It was a dream leading up to sex.”

“Is that when you woke up?”

“Yes.”

“It always is. I have a proposal,” he said. “I can run to the store for some condoms--”

“You don’t need to do that.” As ecstatic as those words made you -- clearly, Shuichi wasn’t bluffing when he said he wouldn’t pressure you into anything as he didn’t even expect to have sex
on this trip -- you were ready. “I’m on birth control,” you said. “I’ve been on it for years now. It’s to regulate my periods, so as long as we’re both STD-free, condoms aren’t necessary.”

He paused for just a moment before tightening his grasp on your shoulder, bringing you close. “Well, in that case, we can skip the store. It’s wise of you to ask, and I assure you that I’m clean.” He kissed your temple. “I propose we enjoy ourselves and go only as far as you’d like. Tell me if you’re uncomfortable,” he whispered against your ear. “I want you to enjoy this. At any point, you tell me, and I’ll stop -- don’t just bear it for my sake, all right?”

You nodded, the assuring glint in his eyes enough to put you at ease.

Shuichi kissed you, softly at first, his lips courting yours in graceful request. He touched you, soothingly, hands moving along your shoulders and down your back.

It was no different physically than your many previous intimate moments with him. But the thought of sex, the idea of giving yourself to him changed the way you perceived his advances. You knew he would never hurt you, but you couldn't help but feel a little nervous.

He waited for you to relax into his kiss, responding with a sweep of your tongue, before moving onto your neck, his lips trailing his tantalizingly warm breath against your skin. His hold on you was firm but gentle, and his hands began to roam, first down to your waist, fingers dipping into every inch of your curves. He cupped your breast, lightly running a thumb over your nipple.

You gasped, not realizing how sensitive your body would be. Your reaction made him stop, and you looked at him. “It's okay,” you said with a small smile. “You caught me off guard, is all. It feels good.”

Shuichi kissed you. “I’m going to continue, then, _______,” he whispered against your lips. “Tell me if you're not enjoying it. Otherwise, I can be relentless.”

His words sent a shiver up your spine, but he did not give you time to recover. He nibbled on your ear -- it didn’t hurt, but his teeth surprised you. His tongue was warm on your skin as he kissed your neck at the base of your head, nuzzling his way underneath your hair.

You weren’t about to let him all the fun, and you turned around in his arms, pushing him onto the bed. Before he could say anything, you kissed him on the mouth. You just about felt his long eyelashes brushing against your cheek as he blinked in surprise.

He reacted quickly, however, and ran his hands along your torso, from your shoulders to you waistline and even down to your hips, where you straddled him. When he got to the hem of your shirt, he tucked his fingers underneath it, and moved back upwards along your back, beneath the cloth. His touch lit a spark in you, as though he set the whole trail alight with a passionate fire.

You let out a small moan into his mouth, and in that mere moment of weakness, Shuichi flipped you over onto your back, your head supported by a plush pillow. He kissed you this time, guiding the movement, as he slipped his tongue into your mouth. One hand tilted your chin up to deepen the kiss, subjecting you to his oral ministration, as the other touched your body, fingertips grazing from your breast to your stomach and then to your thigh.

He knew what he was doing. While he caught your lips with his own, his hand wandered, underneath your shirt, brushing against the warmth of your skin. When he arrived at your breast, his hand slipped underneath you, finding the clasp of your bra and releasing it in one effortless motion.
You realized that you had forgotten about your own hands, and you reached for Shuichi while still locked in an amorous kiss. You began to unbutton his shirt, your fingers fumbling as you shuddered in anticipation.

He briefly broke the kiss. “Easy,” he said, touching your hands. “We’re in no hurry. There’s a reason why making love is different than sex. Love takes time.” He went back to kissing your neck, nipping gently at your skin, which elicited another moan from you. “Relax, my love.”

Both of his hands were underneath you as he straddled you from above, holding you. He trailed his kisses down your neck, to your collarbone, and to your breasts, stopping at the neckline of your shirt. He looked at you, enjoying your wanting expression, and gave you a mischievous glance. He lifted your shirt slowly, tantalizingly, drawing it until it was bundled above your bra, his hands moving along your stomach as he did so.

Shuichi lifted your bra up as well, revealing your bare breasts. You suddenly felt shy, but the apprehension dissipated quickly as he kissed one of them, his tongue circling your nipple in a deliberately drawn-out caress. His hand worked at the other one, not wanting it to feel ignored, his fingers massaging the outer breast before moving on to the delicate nipple.

A fire in your core was kindled, and you arched your back as another small cry left your throat.

Shuichi responded in kind, moving down your stomach, leaving a line of kisses in his wake. When he arrived at the waistline of your pants, he first traced your outer thighs with his hands down to your knees, his thumbs teasing the inner part of your leg. On his way back up, he applied more pressure as he approached your groin area. He observed the way your body responded, and he agilely moved his fingers between your legs, stroking lightly at your sensitive clit through your clothes.

You gasped, your hips involuntarily moving closer to him. Shuichi smiled at your reaction, undoing the button to your pants and slowly unzipping the zipper. He was drawing this out, building up your desire as he taunted your body. He kissed your left hip bone as he pulled your pants down, and with some help from you, the article of clothing ended up on the floor.

He tugged off your shirt and bra as well. He kissed you gently, as he pushed you back into bed, his arms wrapped around your upper back. He held your near-naked body close, your chests pressed together. “Are you comfortable?” he whispered against your lips.

You nodded, feeling grateful that he was so conscientious about your level of comfort. “I am,” you said, touching his arms where they met his shoulders. You leaned in for another kiss.

Shuichi returned the kiss, letting his hands draw along your shoulder blades and down your waist. He touched the small of your back before looping his fingers along the sides of your panties. He didn’t remove them, however, instead shifting his weight backward and spreading your legs apart by gently pulling at your knees. With two skilled fingers, he brushed your clit through the thin cloth in intentional strokes that sent waves of pleasure through your body.

His touch made you feel the fire inside blaze even hotter. You tried not to be too vocal about it, but when Shuichi looked up at you, his eyes full of inviting arousal, you couldn’t help but let out a cry.

Any noise that came out of your mouth only seemed to embolden him, and he applied more pressure with each stroke. This occurred over a period of several minutes, his fingers patiently easing each and every sound from your throat. When your hands grasped at the blanket below you, longing to grab a hold of something to ground this intense sensation, Shuichi stopped.
You watched him with a perplexed expression on your face as he began to unbutton his shirt, slowly, deliberately, teasing you with each movement of his deft fingers -- you knew what they could do now, after all. You realized you had never seen him shirtless before, and as the cloth fell from his shoulders, you noticed his firm chest, his sculpted abdomen, his smooth skin. You didn’t know much about his exercise routine aside from the occasional weekend jog with you, but whatever he did, you hoped he kept it up.

“You like what you see?” he said, his voice lowered into a seductive tone.

You nodded, unable to speak. You were incredibly turned on, swallowing the saliva that had gathered in your mouth.

“Good.” He unfastened his belt, again slowly, sliding it from the pant loops before letting it fall to the floor with a small thud. He unbuttoned his pants, removing them in a teasingly slow fashion, before climbing toward you in just his trunks. “Because I’m finding you harder and harder to resist.”

Your legs were still spread, and Shuichi settled in, pressing his hips to yours. The pressure made you moan as he leaned forward, kissing you. You felt the bulge hidden in his undergarment, the warmth of his crotch against yours. Without giving you a moment, he began to grind against you, the friction of just a few strokes nearly enough to send you over the edge. Any sounds you made were caught in his kiss.

You tasted him, his tongue gliding effortlessly past your lips. The kiss was passionate, lustful even. He teased you, chasing after you each time you pulled away to catch your breath, diverting your full attention back to him. One hand traced your jawline sensually; the other ran through your hair, his fingernails skimming along your scalp.

“Do you want this?” he whispered as he broke away breathlessly, ceasing the grinding for a brief moment.

In his eyes, you saw the genuine longing, the raw passion. The desire was there, but so was the love. “Yes,” you replied, without hesitation.

Kurama was no stranger to sex. He was glad that _____ had not asked him more about his sexual history. He preferred not to lie to her, but truthfully, any previous sexual activity had occurred when he was known as the notorious Yoko Kurama, well over two decades ago.

He was different then. His view of sex was different then. Demons had very high sex drives, and they often satisfied themselves through brothels, seeking out the most sultry women to gratify their carnal desires. Yoko was no different. Although he certainly enjoyed his escapades of thievery and deceit, they were high-stress jobs, and he needed the company of women to assist in meliorating the burden.

Since becoming human, he saw in himself the propensity to love like he had never known before. Such lustful activities, without the blessing of intimacy, lost their appeal. He still had the bodily desires of a human man, but he did not wish to objectify women for such a carnal purpose, and until he found someone with which he could have a sexual experience, not just physically but emotionally, he exercised restraint.

Kurama loved _____ . Ever since she had stepped foot in his life, she made it better. He loved everything about her -- her quick wit, her modest nature, her selfless compassion. He never broached the topic of sex with her, allowing _____ to bring it up whenever she was ready. He
meant what he said when he told her he didn’t want sex until she did.

She lay there, beautiful, inside and out. Her apprehension at first was understandable, and he loved it -- the shy, unsure glances she gave him made Kurama’s heart soften for her. She deserved to enjoy her first time.

He had never been too concerned about the physical pleasure of women he had bedded in the past. Generally, demons weren’t. Women were seen as tools with which to relieve their sexual urges -- sadly, some humans weren’t much different in that respect. As Yoko, he had mastered the art of pleasing women, not because he wanted them to enjoy themselves, but because he savored the power dynamic, the puzzle that was each woman's orgasm, as they were all different. It was satisfying hearing them beg for release, teasing them until they shuddered and moaned. He was merciful in bed and generally gave them what they wanted, but only at his amusement.

Kurama kissed her again, pulling away only to remove her panties, admiring the lacy cloth now moist with her fluids. He smelled her bodily desire from the beginning, the pheromones obvious to him. Her emotional state was less conspicuous, and Kurama took great care to safeguard her trust.

Still, he enjoyed the sounds she made, the shiver of her fragile body, so susceptible to his ministrations. He stroked her clit again, his fingers particular about how he touched her, and he watched her reaction. The tastes of women were disparate, after all. There was no one way to please a single woman -- their bodies all reacted differently, and solving each puzzle brought him a sense of achievement. Kurama found it exceptionally arousing to decipher _____’s.

His middle finger circled her warm sex, feeling the wet release of her lust. With skillful proficiency, he slipped first one finger and then two inside of her, rubbing her clit with his thumb. _____ cried out, not in pain, but in ecstasy, her back arching as he repeated the simple motion, slipping in and out multiple times, applying a consistent and even pressure with his fingertips to the vaginal wall closest to her clit. The passage with smooth, slick with her fluids, becoming more so every second he let his digits linger inside. Again and again, he delved inside her, enjoying her helpless mewls as he coaxed them out of her. “Good,” he thought, throbbing with desire. “She is ready.”

Kurama removed his trunks, watching the delightful expression on her face as she saw his manhood for the first time. He prized the way he made her blush, the pink creeping into her cheeks. He returned to her, leaning over her stimulated form. “Tell me if it hurts,” he whispered, positioning himself.

Her eyes said it all -- they were beautiful eyes. Kurama noticed them the moment she walked into his office. They were spirited, so full of life, inquisitive and coy. Even now, they expressed the same qualities, and to his gratification, there was a glimmer of adoration, of love, in there as well. He could not be more blessed to have her look at him in such a way.

He waited for her to take a breath before gently applying pressure with his hips, easing inside of her, slowly, to both rouse her senses and alleviate any discomfort.

A small whimper escaped her lips, and Kurama kissed her face, her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead. “Are you all right, my love?” he asked.

“Yes,” she breathed, her arms wrapped around his neck. “I just wasn’t expecting it to feel like that.”

He looked at her lovingly. “Would you like me to stop?”
“No, keep going. I want this.” There was no lie in her eyes.

He waited a moment as he kissed her mouth, allowing her to adjust to him before starting a pace. He thrusted into her, leisurely at first, lubricating her further with each swing of his hips. Kurama could feel her body relax as she became used to his manhood, the strain inside her evolving into pleasure.

Her hands moved from his neck up to his head, where her fingers combed through his hair. He loved the feeling of her touching him, caressing his skin, her fingernails lightly running down his back.

As her comfort increased, he quickened his pace, angling his thrusts to test her reception.

It was then that she reacted with a punctuated moan, the very sound sending shivers down his spine. “Shuichi,” she cried, her hold on him tightening with each thrust.

Although her reaction made him throb even more, there only one twinge of longing that her pleasure could not satisfy: “_____, my love,” he thought, tenderly. “If only you could have known to cry ‘Kurama’ just now.”

But his reflection dissipated as he turned his attention to her again. She was on the brink of orgasm -- he could smell it. He gripped the small of her back, accentuating the angle and hitching one of her legs over his arm, feeling the supple curve of her bottom with his hands. It was intoxicating, the raw pleasure he experienced with each length he drove inside her.

A few more well-aimed thrusts, and she came for him, pulsing around his manhood, as waves of delectation filled her body. Kurama kissed her, muffling her moans of pleasure. He loved it, the feeling of her tightening around him as he continued moving through her organsm.

Only when she was finished, the last pulse fading from her body, did he find release for himself, spilling into her as he gave a small cry of his own. He shuddered as it ended, having never felt such a strong climax in either of his lifetimes. So this was love-making -- intense passion mingled with lustful play, exhilaration to the body coupled with a euphoric journey.

He pulled out, rolling to her side, brushing a few stray hairs from her flushed face. “How are you, my love?” he asked.

Her eyes were a little watery, but the pink in her cheeks was strong. “That was the best sex I’ve ever had,” she said, looking rather shy again.

He chuckled, kissing her forehead. “Well, I suppose we set the bar high. We’ll just have to keep doing better. More experimenting, perhaps.”

She nodded and cuddled up next to him, resting her head on his lightly damp chest. “I love you,” she said.

“I love you, ______.” The last waves of pleasure now gone, Kurama held her close, relishing the touch of her bare body against his.

Chapter End Notes

There it is. As always, I am eternally grateful for your feedback. There are potentially
a few more scenes I'd like to write down the road, but only if this smut receives a warm reception. Otherwise, it's too much work to write something ya'll don't enjoy, and if I'm horrible at writing smut, I can always fade to black or something. Thank you to those who are willing to leave me a comment on this matter!

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
I cannot thank you all enough for your feedback on the last chapter! ^_^ Thank you to Kactuskat16, TK091, oscar_milde, LadyAmazon, FannibalToast, Mei Mei, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), SailorCupcake, Yeah_I’m_Crazy_So_What, and Perfect-to-Stay for your comments! I'm so grateful to all of you. <3

The general consensus seems to be that you wouldn't mind reading more smut. And, of course, as long as it helps develop Kurama and the RC, I don't mind writing it. This chapter I had originally planned on writing because I think everyone needs a bit of time to organize their thoughts after their first time. I had debated about whether or not I wanted this reader character to have had previous experiences in the past with ex-boyfriends. While most women have already had sex for the first time by age 24, I settled on not because I think having sex for the first time is either an experience that you can relate with or is something that you may be looking forward to. And, really, Kurama is perfect, so I think he's a great person to share that with.

You'll find that this chapter is a mix of educational and kind of sexy (or maybe really sexy -- I dunno). The last one was very emotional and intimate, and I wanted to show how the RC felt about her experience afterward and how what she's learned impacts her view of sex going forward. It's a pretty defining moment for both her and Kurama, after all.

As always, thank you for any feedback or thoughts you may provide! I think, unless I'm caught by some sort of fluff-writing whimsy, the next chapter will be the finale for the second arc.

The light filtered through the curtained windows, beckoning you from your dreams. You woke up next to Shuichi as you did every morning. Only… “Eep!” You were reminded of your intimate adventure last night, and you buried your face in the pillow, flushing at the memory.

Your stirring must have woken him because you felt his arms pulling you close, spooning you from behind. “Good morning, my love,” he whispered, kissing your neck.

His bare chest was warm against your back, and even though you loved the feeling, it was almost difficult to believe what had happened the night before.

“_____?”

Your silence must have concerned him. “I was just thinking,” you said, touching his arm with your hand.

“How about?”

“What do you think I’m thinking about?”
“That’s a dangerous question.”

You laughed, craning your neck to look at him. “No, it’s not.” You turned around so you were facing him, pulling the comforter close. “I was thinking about last night.”

“Did you enjoy it?” he asked, his fingertips caressing your shoulder.

You gave him a shy glance. “I... loved it.”

Shuichi leaned in to kiss your forehead. “I’m pleased to hear that. That’s all I wanted.”

“How did you…” You paused, wondering how to phrase your question. “How did you become so good at it?”

“At what?”

“You know. How did you know what to do? I’ve never felt like that before. I don’t even know what to do, and it’s my body.”

The gaze in his eyes was gentle, if not amused. “You’ve never masturbated before, have you?”

“What does that have anything to do with it?” you said, the blush creeping into your cheeks again.

You couldn’t help but look away.

“It’s all right,” he said. “You don’t have to be embarrassed, ____. I promise you’re in a safe space with me -- there is no judgment here.” Shuichi touched your face, stroking your cheek with his thumb. “You asked me how I know, and it’s because I know how the female orgasm works. Well, as much as a man can, I think.”

His words were comforting. You didn’t quite understand them and the complexity that they entailed, but you heard the sincerity in his voice. “Can you teach me..?” you asked, finding the courage to look at him again.

“I can’t teach you what only your body knows, but” -- he kissed your forehead -- “I’m happy to provide some guidance.”

“How do you know all of this? You masturbate, I assume?”

“There’s nothing mysterious about the male orgasm, I can assure you. It’s about as straightforward as it comes. No pun intended.” Shuichi smiled. “The female orgasm, however, is far more nuanced, and is actually different for every woman. Discovering the endless combination of stimulation, physical and emotional, that can bring about your climax is the exciting part of it. I encourage you to masturbate. You will learn what you like, what doesn’t make you feel good, and how your body reacts to varying stimulation. It’s a journey of self-discovery, really.”

You were quiet, thinking about what he said.


You shifted, letting him reposition you on your side, so that your back was against him. It felt reassuring with him behind you -- you felt safe, protected.

“Can I show you?” he asked, respectful of your boundaries as always.

“Please,” you said, trying to relax in his arms.
He took your hand into his, guiding it beneath the covers and between the warmth of your legs. He arranged your index and middle finger right where your clit was, parting the folds with relative ease. “This right here contains over 8,000 nerve endings. You’re touching only the external surface of it -- most of the clitoris is actually inside you. It becomes engorged with blood when you’re aroused, and the blood remains there until, hopefully, released by orgasmic spasms.” With a gentle motion of his hand, he applied pressure to your fingers, brushing your clit in steady vertical strokes.

You breathed in sharply, arching your back, surprised by just how sensitive it was. Your reaction was involuntary, almost.

Shuichi chuckled. “8,000 nerve endings, but this small erogenous zone spreads the sensation to 15,000 other nerves in the pelvic region. You had no idea it was this sensitive, hm?”

“No. Not at all.” You should not have been surprised after the events of last night, but you were.

He kissed your neck, his lips brushing against your skin. The warmth was enticing in the comfortable chill of the morning. “I’ll leave you to it, _____,” he said, rolling out of bed. “I’m going to shower.”

You watched after him, still naked, as he walked toward the bathroom. The heat rose to your cheeks, like the steam coming from the hot water of the shower. He was beautiful. The male body was of fascination to you -- of course, you had never had the courage to explore it, but Shuichi seemed incredibly open to your wandering eyes, not even the least bit bashful.

It made you wonder just why you were so embarrassed by it. The human body was a biological phenomenon, was it not? It was natural. Nakedness was natural. Sex was natural. How was it that you, and potentially so many women, felt so awkward by it?

Your fingers moved, unsure of what to do. It was frightening, almost, touching yourself, exploring your own body.

Why did you feel that way? It was your body more than anyone else’s -- even more than it belonged to Shuichi, and you let him touch you.

Comforted by the sound of the running water in the bathroom, you began again, swiping your fingers slowly across your clit.

When Shuichi finished his shower, you stopped your experimental session as he stepped out of the bathroom. He had a towel wrapped around his waist and another small one around his shoulders for his hair.

You had an even better view of his chest, his smooth skin, his athletic build than you did last night. It made your heart race.

He smiled at you. “How are you doing?”

“Good.” you said. “It’s not quite the same feeling, but it’s interesting. It’s more than I’ve tried before.”

He sat down on the bed next to you. “There is no pressure. Achieving orgasm isn’t everything. There are plenty of pleasures to be had from intimacy. As long as you enjoy it, that’s all that matters.”

“I know.” You returned his smile. “I guess I just have a lot to learn.”
“And you will.” He leaned over to kiss you, the caress of his lips tender and sure. “Why don’t you get out of bed and ready for the day?” he suggested. “We have the day ahead of us, and then the night is ours. We can do whatever you’d like.”

You agreed, leaving your experimenting behind for the moment.

The day went by smoothly. You both took the motorcycle down to the nearby town, where you had brunch, wandering the nearby hiking trails though most of the morning. Being surrounded by nature in a relatively quiet location seemed to do wonders for you -- it was so peaceful compared to the city. The moist, piney air was soothing, the trickling sound of flowing water never too far away. Shuichi in particular seemed to glow in the forest, admiring the flora that grew so densely in the rich earth.

You stole glances at your boyfriend throughout the day. He would look at you with a soft smile, a teasing look in his eyes, a reminder of your intimacy from the night before. You would be swept away by the mere memory of it, recalling the intense pleasure you felt at his touch, the close connection with him as your bodies intertwined.

It was interesting how comfortable you felt being vulnerable with him. Sure, there was some initial anxiety, and you were certain there would be more of those silly butterflies in your stomach as your relationship evolved, but you enjoyed being overwhelmed with Shuichi. It was exciting, and you trusted him wholly. He would never do anything to hurt you or make you uncomfortable.

For a late lunch, you stopped at a popular winery in town, able to taste the offerings of the local region. Shuichi seemed amused by your enthusiasm, entertaining your desire to try as many wines as possible. He finally cut you off at the third flight, joking about how you might fall off the motorcycle if you drank too much.

When you returned to the cottage, groceries for dinner in tow, you cuddled up against him in bed, ready for a nap after your day adventure.

Kurama watched her sleep. He had dozed off for a while, holding her in his arms. He couldn’t remember the last time he napped so easily. Her head lay on his chest, moving gently with each breath he took, her hand resting across his stomach, clutched in his.

He was pleased that she enjoyed their time together last night. He certainly did. His accommodating patience paid off in earning her trust and letting her decide what she was comfortable with in bed. There was so much he wanted to share with her about love-making, leveraging her pleasure, and helping her feel like the beautiful woman she was.

She deserved it. She deserved everything.

Of course, lingering at the forefront of his mind was the secret of his demon nature. It was less exciting than sex -- and there was a hell of a lot more anxiety involved. He wanted to tell her tonight, finally confess his history and the story of his existence.

When she stirred, he kissed the top of her head, while stroking her hand. “Hello, my love. Would you like to join me in the hot tub?” he asked.

Anything to settle their nerves before he took the figurative plunge.

“That sounds nice,” she said sleepily, rolling away with a yawn. “I’ll be right there. I have to find my bathing suit.”
Kurama kissed her one last time before leaving. “I’ll get the water going.” He quickly changed into his swim trunks and headed outside, the air nippy against his bare skin. He removed the cover of the hot tub, tested the temperature of the water, and adjusted the control panel so the water swirled in easy bubbles.

He stepped up the curved stairs of the tub, placing his towel on the wooden deck, and slipped into the water, letting the heat take away the edge. He intended to tell her, take his time in answering her questions, sharing with her the narrative that defined who he was. He wanted her to know that he loved her, that his heart was hers, whether she would accept it or not. Then, the choice was hers.

His resolve didn’t last for long, though.

______ slid open the glass door, exiting the cottage, dressed in her two-piece swimsuit. He had seen her naked last night, but the way the cloth of her bikini clung to her skin, highlighting each of her curves, stretching in just the right places, left him breathless.

It was nearly dark outside, the dusk summoning the beautiful fairy lights strung along the porch.

You smiled at him, tossing your towel on top of his as you joined him in the water. As soon as you stepped onto the bench inside the hot tub, you felt the warmth cling to you, a welcome contrast in the chilly autumn air. You slowly eased yourself in, letting your body adjust to the change in temperature.

“Hey, handsome,” you said, sidling up to Shuichi, hugging his shoulders.

He had a look of awe on his face. “You are beautiful,” he said, taking your hand and kissing your fingers.

Before he could say anything else, you pressed closer. “Can I try something?” you whispered, your lips nearly touching his.

“Anything you’d like.”

“Are you really feeling up to it?”

Shuichi chuckled softly. “______, for you, always. And if not immediately, rest assured, I can be convinced in mere seconds.”

You smiled shyly -- it was flattering to be the focus of his affections. “I think I want to explore a little,” you said. “While I’m learning about my body, I also want to learn about yours.”

“Well,” he started, his eyes glimmering with playful tenderness, “I’m happy to advise.”

You touched his chest, your warm hands a contrast to the cool air. Even in the dim light, you could see the steam lifting from your skin as they wandered up to his shoulders, his collarbone, his neck. You felt the smooth skin beneath your fingertips, kissing him even as you caressed his body.

He kissed you, his eyes closing in the comfort of your hands. He found your waist, bringing you close, able to shift you effortlessly in the buoyancy of the water.

You leaned into him, settling in his lap, one leg on either side of his thighs. You returned his kiss, melting into his arms in the warmth of the hot tub. In this elevated position, the water came to just above your waist, leaving your upper body exposed to the air.
Shuichi touched you, sliding his hands up to your back, warming you from the chill of the night.

You trailed your fingers from his chest, down his stomach and to his waistline. Through the cloth of his swim trunks, you found the bulge of his erection. With your lips occupied with the kiss, you touched him, gently wrapping your hands around him, stroking the tip of his manhood with your thumb.

He grunted softly into your mouth, surprising you with his guttural reaction, and you stopped momentarily.

“Are you okay?” you asked, pulling your hands away.

His hands brought yours back to him. “It’s fine,” he said, amusement in his eyes. “It’s quite sensitive near the tip and feels wonderful when you stimulate it. You can even apply more pressure, if you’d like. Trust me, _____, you can do no wrong.”

Assured by his words, you started touching him again, fondling his manhood through his swim trunks, relishing every strain of his body as he pressed against you each time you ran your fingers against him.

It was almost relieving to you, knowing that you were able to pleasure him the way that he had pleasured you last night. Of course, it was also intimidating, having never done this before, especially when you knew this was not Shuichi’s first time being touched by a woman. But his reaction to your ministrations seemed to indicate you had nothing to worry about. Feeling a little more confident, your hands moved to his hips, tugging gently at the waistline.

Without you even needing to ask, Shuichi responded, removing his swim trunks while you were still in his lap. He did so in such a graceful manner that you barely noticed him shifting in the water, lifting you up just enough to slide the clothing off. He set the water-laden trunks aside as he brought you close again, his hands around your waist.

You kissed him, letting your lips trail along his jawline to his neck, where you lightly nipped and sucked on the skin right below his ear. Meanwhile, you grasped his manhood again, able to access the whole shaft without the interference of his trunks; as you tightened your hold, massaging him with each deliberate stroke of your hands, he let out a small moan. “_____,” he breathed against your ear. “You are a tease.”

His throaty call of your name ignited something inside of you, kindling the fire at your core, feeding the flames that fueled your desire. “You say that like you’re not enjoying it,” you replied, your voice low and soft. You slipped off his lap, letting your feet touch the bottom of the hot tub -- this model was deeper than you were used to, and you were up to your shoulders in the warm water.

Shuichi watched you, an interested expression on his face. “Just what mischief are you planning under there?” he asked, referring to the swirling bubbles that obstructed his view.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” You began to pull down the bottom piece of your bikini, briefly ducking beneath the water to remove it from your ankle. When you broke the surface of the water, you smoothed your hair back, running your fingers along your scalp in an obvious attempt to tease before tossing the article of clothing at Shuichi.

He caught your bikini effortlessly in one hand, paying it little mind as he set it on the deck behind him. His longing was apparent in the way he looked at you. “Get over here,” he said seductively.
You stepped toward him, and he reached for you when you were within his grasp, pulling you back into his lap and immediately catching you in a passionate kiss. He held you by the waist as you engaged with him, touching the sides of his face with your wet hands, deepening the kiss. You adjusted your position, your nervousness melting into the water. With the tip of his manhood at your entrance, you were about to lower yourself onto him, when his hands caught you by the hips.

He broke the kiss, looking sincerely into your eyes. “You’re sure you want to?” he asked. “You’re not too sore from last night?”

“Not at all. You were gentle.” You loved that he asked, but you were really okay. You leaned in for another kiss. “Please. I want you.”

Your words were enough to satisfy his inquiry, and he slowly lowered you onto him. You could feel his manhood stretching you as he entered, filling you in a way that made you moan into his mouth.

Shuichi kissed you, his lips lingering against yours in playful tease. As he distracted your mouth with his tongue, he also touched your clit, beginning to stroke it in a firm rhythm that coaxed more whimpers from your throat.

You clutched his shoulders, your head rolling back as the pleasure began to trickle through your body, each caress of his fingers drawing more desire, more craving for some sort of release that would surely come later. You began to move, leveraging your weight on your knees -- the water made it easy. You were a little unsure at first, but with Shuichi’s fingers as a guide for where you wanted to feel the friction, you established a pace that appeased the both of you.

Still, you needed more if you were going to come.

Shuichi seemed to understand, and he halted your movement, hands beneath your thighs. “Let me help you,” he whispered, shifting you off of his lap. It must have been difficult for him, ceasing before he had the chance to climax. Nevertheless, he slid into the deep water with you, and he brought you close, turning you so that your back was to him.

You felt his erection behind you, caught against the small of your back, as he brought you to the edge of the hot tub, the floor near the sides more elevated than in the center. You were able to rest your forearms on the edge of the tub to ground yourself, and Shuichi pressed you against the wall, his fingers finding your sensitive clit again. He applied more pressure with each stroke, caressing and pinching, and sending you into a fit of sexual delight as he worked you in a way you never thought you would able to experience yourself.

The water continued to swirl around your shoulders, warm and satisfying. You weren’t sure how long this lasted, but each second was heavenly. Shuichi’s ministrations were unrelenting, which was exactly what you needed, the consistent stimulation to your clit. His other arm was around your waist, fondling your breasts through your swimsuit top. You were close, and it must have been apparent in your moans.

You could feel his breath against your neck, and he gripped the cloth of your top with his teeth. He tugged at the knot of the halter string, releasing it with just a few attempts, the cloth falling from your neck, floating in the moving water. He removed his hand from between your legs to unhook the clasp on your back, and he placed the clothing on the deck as he did with your bikini bottom earlier.

“Shuichi,” you cried, arching your back as he massaged your breasts, his thumb teasing your nipples in slow, deliberate circles. It was tantalizing, the way he touched you, the way he knew
exactly how to pleasure your body, taking advantage of your most sensitive areas.

“Shhhh,” he said, kissing your neck, his lips curving into a smile. “You’re going to disturb the wildlife.”

You were about to respond with some sort of retort, but Shuichi gently pushed you against the wall of the hot tub again, his hands along your inner thighs as he parted your legs, lifting your feet from the floor for a moment as he slipped his manhood inside of you, gliding easily along your slick inner walls. He began to thrust, and you moaned desperately, this sensation different than what you felt last night. It seemed that this new position from behind was even more stimulating, each advance filling you, stroking your insides exquisitely. You felt the first spasms arrive, even though you weren’t quite there yet.

Shuichi only picked up the pace, his hips meeting yours with each thrust, the friction sensually gratifying. His fingers found your clit again, rubbing and stroking, and it didn’t take much for the sensation to overcome you, your cries becoming more pronounced.

With this perfect combination of stimulation, you came, your insides clenching around him in convulsions that pulsed currents of revelry throughout your whole body. You fell limp, and if it weren’t for Shuichi’s strong arms and the support of the hot tub walls, you thought you might have sunk into the water.

He continued for a few more seconds, reaping the last of your climax before shuddering, his hold on your tightening as he finally came with a groan. He kissed your neck tenderly, breathlessly, after his orgasm passed. “How was that for trying something new?” he said, whispering in your ear.

“Good lord,” you sighed, unable to find the words to answer his question. You could only crane your head around to kiss him.

“That good, hm?” He released you, turning you around to face him in the water, where he kissed you deeply.

You embraced him, resting your head on his chest. “That was... just amazing, Shuichi. We’ll have to try new things more often.”

“Whatever you’d like, my love.” He guided you toward the bench. “Why don’t you go shower?” he said. “I’ll take care of everything out here.”

You nodded, wrapping yourself in a towel as the chilly air nipped at your skin.

Shuichi kissed you one more time before turning toward the control panel on the hot tub.

You picked up your bikini pieces, stealing one more look at his naked body, before stepping inside. Your heart was full, and you felt more relaxed than you ever had.

If only you could see the Makai insect land on your shoulder, painlessly plunging its needle-thin mouth into your neck. It injected the contents of its biological purpose before flying off, finding its way back to its master.

Chapter End Notes

Mwahahah! I'm looking forward to showing you the next chapter! ;)

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: *An Expression of Thanks*. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on [Tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) for updates and insight on my writing process!
You showered, washing away the chlorine and any physical evidence of your adventure in the hot tub. Your body felt relaxed, your head clear. It was an intimate and life-changing experience you had with Shuichi, and you were glad you took the opportunity to be with him this weekend.

You loved him. He was the first man in your life whom you trusted wholly, unconditionally, and it made you feel so warm. You would look at him, and he would make your heart flutter. If this was the honeymoon phase of your relationship, you never wanted it to end -- and still, you knew that your love could stand the test of time.

Shuichi gave you hope. For what, you didn’t know. A bright future, maybe? The existence of true love?

It didn’t matter. You were happy with him. It was that simple.

After you changed into fresh clothes, you stepped into the kitchen to start on dinner. You heard the rushing water turn off in the non-master bathroom, so you knew Shuichi would be out in a moment.

As you began rummaging through the groceries you picked up in the afternoon, you saw movement outside beneath the fairy lights. You stepped closer to the sliding glass door to get a better view. You froze, your eyes widening.

It was either a hallucination or a miracle. “Yugen?” You recognized the golden fur, the imposing stature, the noble expression. You saw his eyes, sparkling with sentience and understanding. The Akita sat right outside the door, his tail wagging slowly, welcoming your approach. Despite being missing for weeks, he looked to be in excellent physical condition.

The moment Shuichi shut the bathroom door, Yugen turned around and ran.

“It's Yugen!” you cried out to him. “Shuichi, I’m going after him!” You knew what you saw, and you opened the sliding door, darting after your dog as he disappeared into the forest.

Shuichi called after you. “_____! Wait!”

“There's no time! He's run off.” You chased him into the surrounding forest that bordered the property. You saw how thick the trees and underbrush were, and realized he could be anywhere.
“Why would he run away like that?” you asked yourself, coming to a stop.

“Please,” Shuichi said, catching you by the wrist before you could take off again. “I need to tell you something.”

You saw the urgency in his eyes. “What's wrong?” You turned to him.

He released your wrist and sighed, his gaze on the ground before forcing himself to look at you. “_____, what I'm about to tell you is going to change your world, even going as far as impacting your perspective on life as you know it.”

“I'm listening,” you said, wondering exactly what was so paramount, what made him so anxious.

“Your Yugen is not a dog. He's of the demon species, an apparition that escaped from the pits of the Demon World. I understand you don't know all of what this means, but he is dangerous, and you cannot continue to chase him.”

You couldn't believe what he just said. “Shuichi, what are you talking about?”

“I don't know why he has attached himself to you, but he's a threat, _____. He’s been in hiding, masquerading as your dog. You're in danger every moment Yugen roams free. I need you to trust me on this matter.”

“How do you know all of this?”

Shuichi took a deep breath, gathering both of your hands. He held them tightly in his. “I'm also of the Demon World. I've wanted to tell you this since the beginning of our relationship. No moment seemed appropriate.”

“Is it appropriate now?” Your gaze shifted, doubt creeping into your thoughts. “Shuichi, this is insanity.”

“I know.”

“I don't believe you; I don't believe any of this. You have to be mistaken.”

He turned your hands over, one on top of the other, placing a small seed into your open palm. “I'm not,” he said. “I am human in this body, but my soul is very much demon, and so are my abilities.”

The seed was enveloped in warmth, a subtle glow, and began to sprout, far more quickly than a plant should have been able to grow, especially without water and sunlight. Unsure of its intentions, you took a step back, letting the sprout fall to the forest floor. It only grew taller and stronger, taking root in the rich soil, turning into a patch of flowers, revealing vibrant shades of pinks and purples.

You weren't sure how to feel -- it was both amazing and daunting. The uncertainty made your breath catch in your throat.

“I don't mean to frighten you,” Shuichi said. He had not come any closer when you shied away. “I only want to show you. Please, _____. Talk to me.”

You wanted to trust the sincerity in his eyes, the flawless evergreen that you had fallen for on so many occasions. You wanted to run to him, be held safely in his arms. You wanted to kiss him, have him tell you that everything would be okay. But you were past that, and the more you thought, the more apparent your naiveté became.
“If what you're saying is true, then you lied to me from the beginning,” you finally said, your voice quiet, barely above a whisper.

“Yes, through omission,” Shuichi said. “For that, I'm sorry. I only have reasons, not excuses. I wanted to protect you.”

“Protect me from what? What's your involvement in all of this?”

“I was tasked by the prince of Spirit World to apprehend Yugen, remove him from the Living World so that you and anyone else he comes in contact with may be safe.”

As much as you loathed to believe it, the recent events in your life began to come together. That was why Yugen was the perfect dog with zero training. That was why he seemed to understand your human words, far better than any animal should have been able. That was why he disappeared from your life without a trace, able to find you in the mountains, miles away from the city. All of your efforts, all of your emotional energy was wasted on someone who tricked you into sharing with him your home, caring for him, and letting him violate your privacy in the most devastating way possible.

And then, to have someone who knew the truth come into your life and continue to let you live this lie, promising love and devotion, compromising your mental health and safety, you weren't sure how to respond or what to think. He toyed with your emotions, took advantage of your susceptibilities.

“_____ I know this is a lot to absorb,” Shuichi said, offering his hand. “Will you come back to the cottage with me? I will tell you everything, I promise.”

You looked away, training your gaze to the ground. You couldn't look at him. You couldn't describe your hurt, this potent feeling of betrayal -- more than anything, you no longer wanted to feel vulnerable.

“Is this real?” you asked, forcing yourself to meet his eyes. “How could you do this to me? You lied to me about who you are, stringing me along in this pursuit. Does our relationship mean nothing to you?”

“_____--”

“Don't,” you interrupted, closing your eyes to fight back the tears that threatened to spill. “How can I know that everything isn't a lie? What happened this past month? Is our time together just an assignment to you, a ruse to get to Yugen? Am I just bait for you to get your mission done?”

Shuichi stepped closer to you. “I will answer every question you have with full transparency. Please understand that my feelings for you, our relationship, us, are separate from my assigned task.” He had an expression of genuine concern on his face. “_____, I realize I haven't been honest with you. That's my fault -- it's not and should not be your burden to bear.”

You watched him approach, stepping carefully around his flowers.

“I love you, _____,” he said, closing the gap between you. He touched your cheek with a hand, smoothing your hair from your face.

No matter how tenderly he said it, the expression seemed hollow. You shook your head slowly, a small motion, suspicion plaguing your mind.

He saw your doubt, his eyes softening as they so often did when he was being affectionate -- but
this time, you could see a tinge of unease in them. “Those three words are not easily spoken, and I swear I mean every one of them,” he said.

You looked at him, the regret in his eyes, the desire to make things right with you, pleading for your forgiveness and acceptance. In your heart, you wanted to embrace him, tell him that you would both get through this. His hand on your face was warm and comforting. You could pretend this never happened. He could have your forgiveness, and you could start anew.

But you couldn't give it to him. Not right now. You were hurt, and you weren't just thinking with your heart. There were two betrayals, committed by the two whom you thought you trusted most in your life. The deception cut you deeply, revealing a wound that not soon heal. Not knowing whom you could trust now, you needed to protect yourself.

You reached up and gently pushed his hand away. “Please don't touch me,” you said, taking a few steps back to create distance.

He was quiet for a moment, shaken almost. “If you don't want me to, I won't,” Shuichi finally said, a deep somber reflection in his eyes.

You had so many words, so many things you wanted to say. Your thoughts were many, vying for a place on your tongue. Your emotions ran rampant, a sharp pang in your chest the most prevalent of them.

“I gave you everything, everything I had to give,” you started, no longer able to hold back the tears. “I-I gave you my heart, my love, my trust. I… I slept with you.” The realization made you feel ill. “How could you… how could you do this to me..?”

“______…” His voice gave out when he spoke your name. He watched you with sorrowful eyes. “I'm sorry,” he managed to say. “I wanted… I thought…” For the first time since you had known the charismatic Shuichi, he couldn't find his words. “I never meant to hurt you.”

You couldn't stand still anymore. You couldn't stem the tears. Part of you wanted to collapse on the ground and cry, but you couldn't do it here. You couldn't be vulnerable with him anymore. Instead, you turned around and hurried away, your feet moving as quickly as they could, hoping that he wouldn't follow you.

He didn't.

He stood there, ashamed, fractured by her revelation, the way his actions had impacted her. He would never forget the look in her eyes, the hurt, the betrayal he had committed, the breach of her trust. No matter how unintentional, it was done, and she was the one who received the cruelest blow.

His own heart bled, his world shattering around him. It hurt more than he thought it ever could, more than the torture he had endured at the hands of even his most sadistic enemies. He could suffer the most grotesque torment, the tearing of his flesh, the breaking of his bones. But this was different. This was a pain of the heart, the most crushing kind. Cuts and bruises healed; bones and ruptures mended. The heart was fragile. He did not know how he would ever recover from this.

He lost her, the only woman he had ever loved. The only thing more devastating was the pain he inflicted upon her -- he would have to live with that.

Kurama was silent, head held low, disappointed in himself. The light in his eyes dimmed, and he closed them, his eyebrows furrowed. To think that things could have been different had he been
more honest with her, more open, more transparent. The realization stung. It was like salt on an open wound. She didn't seem disturbed by his demon nature so much as his deception, though he wondered how she felt about the confession itself. Would he ever know?

He understood her reservations. He should have trusted her with his darkest secrets before now.

Regret and guilt consumed him, gnawing away at his thoughts. His uncertainty, his indecision, his own fears became her anguish. How could he be so foolish? His distrust of her, his doubts of her love and acceptance, brought this upon them. And how could he expect her unconditional trust when he did not offer it himself?

He looked after her; he could smell her tears, her deep sadness, and knowing how potent her hurt was, he felt an agonizing remorse. He watched helplessly as his only chance at happiness slipped away, like grains of sand between his fingers. But he would not chase her. Not now. He would respect her wishes, following her at an undetectable distance. No matter how she felt, he was still responsible for keeping her safe.

Was their relationship irreparable? Could he possibly salvage it?

He felt grim, though he wanted to hope. He could give her time; they could take a break. He would do anything to win her back if it were possible. He would beg for forgiveness, follow her to the ends of the earth. He would pledge his everlasting love and devotion, make any promise she wanted to hear.

No, it was too late. She hated him.

An excruciating throb in his heart, Kurama started after her, ensuring she wouldn’t notice him.

Was this the end? Was this the last time he would touch her face? He would never forget how she pushed him away in that moment, rejected him, the tears in her eyes. He didn’t want to remember her in that way.

“What the hell did you do?” A figure rushed at him at full speed, aiming to tackle him to the ground.

Kurama dodged to the side at the last moment, sharp teeth nicking his arm. Blood splattered on the grass. He landed, gripping the injury with his free hand, studying his adversary. “You!”

An Akita, cloaked in the traditional golden fur, stood in the clearing, his muzzle bloodied. “You've overstayed your welcome, Kurama.”

“So you heard us,” Kurama said, scowling. “I had an expectation of privacy.”

“You caused enough damage today. She’s inconsolable, weeping in the forest, grieving over a demon who never should have been in her life. You told her about both of us, about the Demon World. Now, she’s in even more danger, knowing the truth.”

“No, she deserved the truth. I only regret not telling her sooner.” He lifted a rose from underneath his hair, summoning his whip.

“Then you are deluded. The less she knows, the better.” The Akita bared his teeth, his lips curling back in a fearsome growl. “If you do not leave right now, I will have your throat.”

“Come and tear it out, then,” Kurama threatened, his voice low. “I have neither the time nor patience for you.”
“Your sentiments echo mine. It has been a long time since I’ve had a good fight. It would be my pleasure to silence the legendary bandit.” He charged at Kurama, fangs drawn, ready to plunge his teeth into soft flesh.

Kurama was not deterred, manipulating his whip so that his enemy had to change course or risk being cut open by the thorns.

The Akita leaped to the side, avoiding the attack with graceful ease. He then shifted, his flesh contorting into a larger beast, a bear-like demon, a brute far larger than his enemy. His claws were as sharp as knives, his body more agile than its mass would lead an opponent to believe. A successful swing of his paw would mean certain death. He came at Kurama with a roar.

Kurama flicked his wrist, sending his whip toward the bear’s head, wrapping its spiny length around his throat. His attack was successful, but the bear flexed his neck muscles, his fur like armor, turning his powerful jaws onto the whip itself. With a crack, he snapped the rose whip in half, the splintered weapon falling to the ground.

The bear stomped, readying himself for yet another attack, while Kurama poured his energy into the surrounding forest, deciding to take advantage of the lush vegetation as his defense.

But then they both stopped.

“Do you feel that?” the bear asked, a rhetorical question. “I didn’t think they’d come so soon.”

Kurama glowered at him. “Explain.”

“We have to ____. Now.” The shapeshifter took the form of an agile deer, leaping through the undergrowth.

There was a strong demon stench in the air, the subtle ripples of energy harder to detect. Kurama was cautious, but he ran after the deer, thinking this new presence was far more of a threat.

A shriek ripped through the air, causing his blood to run cold. He was right.

”____,” he thought, rushing to her as quickly as he could.

His first mistake was withholding the truth. He would not risk losing her as his second.

Chapter End Notes

I really like writing angst. There's something about sadness and hurt that makes you feel alive, as painful as it may be. It's potent and bitter, and it makes you thankful that you can feel emotions at all. This is what it means to be human.

So, like I said, this scene inspired me to even start this fic. This is the cradle of EtS before I even knew what the previous 36 chapters contained. I know I've shared this with at least one of you in a comment, but I've always struggled a little bit with Kurama fics I've read because inevitably, the RC/MC discovers his identity and just accepts him. I would accept him, but that's because I've been in love with him and YYH for fifteen years of my life. If I were actually dating a guy who told me that he was a demon, I'd probably a) think he's crazy or b) think I'm unsafe with him or c) both -- I think this is the reasonable way to behave, given the circumstances.
I really wanted to write a fic in which the RC is logical enough to not accept him, to be a little bit daunted by his demon nature, and be upset by the fact that he waited so long to tell her the truth when he was putting her in danger the whole time. For me, this is the ultimate way to respect Kurama's character -- by giving him a love interest who's cautious and intelligent in the way she approaches their relationship.

Yusuke was fortunate in that he had Keiko who loved him before even he discovered he was part demon. Kurama has no such blessing, so this is his struggle, and if the RC loves him enough to make this work, his struggles will become hers.

When you want to develop characters, you have to break them a little first, and the catharsis achieved by them overcoming their grief and fears is what makes them stronger. Yes, I realize I sound like an ass. XD But that's just the writer in me talking.

This is the end of arc two. <3 GET READY FOR SOME PLOT. HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT! THANK YOU FOR READING! <3

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
A Thousand Years

Chapter Notes

Welcome to arc three! I have no idea how long this is going to be! I keep on coming up with new ideas, so we're just going to start writing and figure it out along the way.

The time between updates going forward will probably be a little longer -- I apologize. I'm introducing a lot more plot, and while it's just as fun as the fluff and relationship-building, it requires me to ensure that I'm staying consistent and weaving everything together. So, hang in there! I will continue working on this, just at a pace that allows me to control the quality! With that said, it's quite possible that chapters will be longer.

I want to thank everyone who is reading this. <3 It's because of you that I'm enjoying this writing process so much -- I'm very glad you're on this journey with me!

Of course, I want to give a special thanks to those who comment on my works: CrossYourTeez/Kactuskat16, oscar_milde, perfect-to-stay, SailorCupcake, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), cezarina, LadyAmazon, FannibalToast, TK091, JenSpartiates, and Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What. Thank you for all of the invaluable feedback you give me! I am so grateful!

Without further ado, please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The forest was dark, damp, and truthfully, you didn’t know where you were going. The light of the moon and stars filtered through the canopy of the trees, acting as your only guide.

It didn’t matter, though. Nothing mattered.

Heartbreak didn’t even begin to describe how you felt. Your heart wasn’t just broken -- it had been mauled by the monster called betrayal. Your sobs were irrepresible, and when you thought you could go no farther, blinded by the tears, you settled beneath a particularly large tree. You looked up toward the branches, hoping to stem your crying, letting the tears fall back into your eyes.

Instead, you could only wipe them away with your sleeve, your body wracked with a new bout of sobs.

You needed Shuichi now more than ever. You wanted to cry into his chest, feel his protective arms around you, let him calm you with his soft assurances. You had let yourself succumb to weakness, giving far too much influence to the one person who could ravage your heart. It was the ones you loved who hurt you the most.

And you couldn’t go back to him. Not now.

You hated yourself more than anything, for being so foolish, so naive. Your guarded nature was what brought you so far in life, and for a pair of evergreen eyes, you abandoned what made you strong and self-sufficient.

You covered your mouth, barely able to force back another cry. When you lost Yugen, your heart
crumbled, but Shuichi was there to pick up the pieces. Now, he was there no longer, and not because he didn’t want to be, but because you didn’t know how you could let him back into your life. You could have stayed and listened. You could have returned with him to the cottage to ask your questions and hear what he had to say. Instead, your heart bled, frail and afraid, and you wouldn’t stem the blood flow.

You didn’t know how to save yourself from the hurt.

You took a deep breath, brushing the tears out of your eyes. Just when you thought you were done crying, the tears came again, silently flowing down your face. You had no control over your emotions once they broke through -- that was why you refused to wear them on your sleeve.

But that wasn’t the only thing you felt. You reached up to your neck, only to find what you thought was a bug bite, the area swollen. It was agitated, itchy and even a little painful. When you applied pressure, it stung.

You shook your head. You couldn’t worry about it right now.

What next? You would not find the courage to return to the cottage. You couldn’t. You couldn’t face Shuichi. You couldn’t look into his eyes and not cry, and you couldn’t afford to cry with him. When you cried, you were weak, and you couldn’t be vulnerable with him right now.

You knew Shuichi, or so you thought. You knew that he was a master manipulator. He would reassure you with his gentle promises, the sincere look of concern in his eyes, and your resolve would crumble.

There was no other alternative -- you had to end this relationship, if it wasn’t obvious to him already. You had always promised yourself that you would never let yourself be put in a situation where you would tolerate abuse, no matter what form it came in. And as much as it pained you, made your heart throb, you could not return to Shuichi. It would go against everything you had fought for, the strong woman you wanted to be.

You sure didn’t feel strong right now.

You sniffed, dabbing your nose with your sleeve. When you heard rustling in the distance, you froze. At first, you thought it was Shuichi, but the sound came from the opposite direction of the cottage. It could not have been him.

Quite possibly, it was Yugen. You wanted to find him before, and now you didn’t want to be found. Ironic, that.

For the first time since you left Shuichi, you thought about the content of what he said. Demons. If Yugen really was a demon, you would stand no chance if he meant to do you harm.

But you didn’t have the opportunity to even run.

Figures emerged from the undergrowth and from behind the trees -- you could count a total of five of them in the poor lighting. You could see none of their other features, not even their faces, and even if you could, they were obscured by cloaks and masks.

“Ah, so you came to meet us?” one of them said, his voice deep. “Perhaps the extent of our services aren’t required, after all.”

“W-who are you?” you asked. You were trapped between these five figures and the tree behind you.
“That doesn’t matter. Our orders are clear. Find the girl and kill anyone who gets in our way.” He nodded toward you. “Take her.”

When two of them reached for you, you couldn’t suppress a chilling scream.

One of them had a cloth that he pressed over your nose and mouth, and in mere seconds, you were out cold, unable to observe the events that would follow.

____________________________________

“Gentle, now. We’re to deliver her alive and unharmed.”

The largest of the five picked her up, taking care to hoist her limp body over his shoulders.

“Boss, do you sense that?”

“What?”

“Two demons. Strong energies. We should leave.”

“We are.”

A stag burst through the forest, ramming its antlers into the demon closest to him. He did not hesitate to swing around, leaping into the air and shifting into a large stone golem, landing on his enemy with a disgusting squish of flesh, his weight seemingly shaking the earth. “Four of you now? Manageable.”

“Arban the Deceiver. They warned us about you,” the leader said, not sparing his dead ally even a glance.

“I have not gone by that name in many years.”

“Well over a thousand, from what I’ve heard. Impressive how long you’ve tolerated this world of human pond scum.” He motioned for his remaining party to leave. “Create the portal. We’re going.”

“Leave, if you’d like. Run away with your cowardly tails between your legs -- I'll even spare your worthless lives. But not with her,” Arban said. “She stays with me.” He grabbed a tree with his bare hands, leveraging his strength and tearing its very roots from the earth. He swung it at the leader, who dodged by leaping upward, running along the trunk and kicking Arban in the face. The force of the attack sent him flying backwards, crashing into the forest.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the three demons began crafting the portal, utilizing their energy to create a rift between worlds. It was wide enough to fit one, and the largest of them, bearing their target, was about to vault into it. He was in midair, when a sharp and spiny whip caught him, mercilessly slicing his limbs from his very body. He barely had enough time to cry out, his life ending immediately.

Kurama dashed forward, catching ______ before she hit the ground.

The two demons dropped their assigned task of opening the portal, instead taking fighting stances. “Give her here, and we won’t cause you any trouble. It's the girl we want,” one of them said.

“She’s human. What could you possibly want with her?” Kurama said, holding her limp body close. While keeping an eye on his enemies, he scanned her, ensuring there were no serious injuries. The only thing of note was the bug bite on her neck.
“It's of no consequence to you.”

“On the contrary, it's of significant consequence to me. If you take a single step closer, I will strip the meaning from your very lives. Whoever your master is, you'll wish you betrayed him instead.”

“This isn't a debate,” the cloaked leader said, turning his attention to Kurama. “You hand her over or we'll forcibly remove her. We have no misgivings killing you in the process.”

“You can certainly try,” Kurama said, his pitch lowered to a threat, eyes narrowed.

“Don’t be stupid. We have no quarrel with you, and we don’t wish to take any unnecessary risks on her life.”

“Then don’t.” Arban returned as a stag, charging toward the leader. “Go back to Demon World, vermin.” He picked up speed, hooves pounding against the forest floor.

As he approached, the leader waved his hand toward him, a canon of energy forming in his palm. He released it, sending out a burst of electricity toward Arban, who veered to the side just in time.

The other two cloaked demons did not stand idle. They attacked Kurama, forcing him to move.

"I cannot leave her side,” Kurama thought as he narrowly dodged the first advances with her in his arms. If he gave the enemy an opportunity, they would surely separate them -- he was outnumbered, which did not bode well. And given _____’s condition, he could not run with her. His only chance was to stall these two until Arban could offer help.

He ducked to one knee, resting her bottom half on the ground while leaning her torso and head against him, one arm around her shoulders. He summoned a handful of rose petals, channeling his energy into a storm of razor-sharp petals and thorns -- they swirled around him in a ten-foot radius, acting as a barrier. It required very little of his energy to maintain, and as long as these demons were unable to breach it, _____ would be safe.

As he suspected, they backed away, watching the swirling petals cautiously.

Arban shifted again, taking the form of a demonic cougar, fur blazing in flames. He leaped at the leader, fangs bared, claws drawn. He first swiped at his face, sending a splatter of blood through the air; he then sank his canines into his shoulder, grounding his hindlegs and tossing him against the trunk of a tree. Without missing a beat, Arban growled, jaws parting as he lit a ball of fire in his throat. He discharged it at the demon, the heat singeing the air as it propelled toward him, making contact in an explosive blast.

Kurama watched from the safety of his petals and thorns technique, analyzing the two fighters. Arban was impressive, able to shift in and out of forms to his advantage. When he needed strength, he could be a stone golem; speed, a stag; power, a demonic cougar. When he changed his form, he did so effortlessly, skin and bones warping without hesitation. This was the mark of a skilled shapeshifter.

The leader of this small group was less obvious in his strategy. Kurama had yet to get a good look at his face.

The tree behind Arban’s adversary went up in a blaze, smoke billowing in the surrounding area. Arban stood still, eyes narrowed in focus. He watched the fire, burning the tree alive, smoldering, and from the flames came the leader of the group, walking toward him as if nothing had happened. The only difference was his missing cloak -- it had been seared right off, revealing the face of a rugged warrior.
“Gan,” Arban said. “I thought it was you. I barely recognized your voice. You’ve grown strong in these thousand years, a mere boy when I left the Demon World.”

“Perhaps you should return. The khan may forgive you.”

“There’s a laugh.”

“The khan is always looking for loyal servants.”

Arban growled, his fur bristling like wildfire. “I think I’ve had enough talk. You should try to kill me, if you can. Because you’re not getting what you came here for unless I’m dead.”

Gan opened the palm of his hand, revealing another electrical current, hot and flickering in the dim light. “Such a shame. You were the master warlord, Arban, and you’ve reduced yourself to this, hiding in the shadows of the Living World, following this girl around in a futile attempt to protect her. With her gone, perhaps you can finally make something of yourself.” He turned from Arban to Kurama and ____, pointing the orb of accumulated energy at them.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Kurama said. “Not with her here, not if you want her alive.” It felt wrong using her as a shield, but it was the truth.

“You’re right.” Gan raised his hand back toward Arban, letting the blast of electricity loose.

The attack hit him hard, sending him flying, this time much farther than before. Arban hissed in pain as his body made contact with a large boulder, the only thing stopping his forced momentum. The stone crumbled on top of him, crashing down in a din.

“Now,” Gan said, “it’s just you. You can’t keep this up forever.”

“What is it you want with her?” Kurama demanded. He was both interested and stalling for time.

“You obviously care about her. Perhaps it’s better if you didn’t know.”

“This khan of whom you speak -- who is he?”

“You have a lot of nerve. We don’t know who you are, another demon wandering the Living World where you don’t belong. And yet, you’re asking all the questions.”

“My curiosity is an affliction.” Kurama looked at ____, who was still out cold. She seemed all right; her breathing was calm, her heart rate steady. Depending on the strength of the agent used to knock her unconscious, she should awaken in a few hours.

“Our time grows short, and I tire of this stalemate.”

“As do I. Perhaps we can come to an arrangement.”

“Don’t bother.” Arban returned, barely scratched, shaking the impact off of his blazing fur. “You cannot trust them. They are here on behalf of a ruthless king, who doesn’t know how to lose. You are familiar with him.” He looked at Kurama. “Or have you forgotten Yul?”

Kurama’s facial expression did not change, only a fierce gleam in his eyes.

“Yulkhan is the appropriate term of address,” Gan said. “First you deceive him, betray him, and now you scorn him. I thought he may be delighted to have you return to his service if you were penitent, Arban, but now I think it is best to leave you be, wallowing in your contempt. As for you, hand her over. Now.” He then turned toward the storm of petals, his own flesh contorting into that
of a stone golem, a smaller version of what Arban had created earlier. The petals only skid against his rough skin as he stepped into the swirl, absolutely no damage done.

“Another shapeshifter,” Kurama thought, releasing his hold on the storm. He made brief eye contact with Arban, a silent agreement reached within their exchanged glance. The petals began to fall to the ground, now harmless. Kurama stood, grasping his whip, and with a flick of his wrist, he curled the weapon around Gan’s ankle. He pulled, bringing the demon to the ground with a heavy crash.

Arban dashed in at that moment, again shifting into the demonic bear form he had taken earlier when fighting with Kurama. He took _____ from him, as gently as possible in his large claws, and lumbered away.

“After him!” Gan called, picking himself up. The two remaining demons obeyed, chasing after Arban.

Kurama stepped in front of him before he could follow. “You wish to go after her? You must fight me first.”

“You know as well as I do the line of succession goes to the victor of the Makai Tournament every three years. There are many demons stronger than Yul after his fall a thousand years ago. Does he truly believe he can triumph?”

“A thousand years is a long time.” Gan shifted, fleshing contorting, returning to his original form. “You speak as though you knew him.”

“I did.”

“Who are you, demon?”

Kurama began sifting his energy, saturating the plant life around him. “Someone you should not have crossed.” The trees began to close in, long pikes of sharp bamboo shooting from the ground. Lightning struck from above, delivering small bolts of electricity through the air.

Gan took a cautious step back, eyebrows furrowing. He was nervous, beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

“I see you recognize my energy,” Kurama said, his voice low and threatening. The wind seemed to pick up, a strange feat beneath the canopy of the forest, and it was rich with demonic power.

“You’re Kurama. Yoko Kurama,” Gan said, eyes widening. “I heard you were alive, taking refuge in a human body, but I didn’t think you’d be my adversary today.”

“Knowing that, perhaps you prefer to surrender.”

“If I so easily concede, Yulkhan will be my end. He will kill me.”

“Then choose your fate. Certain death by me or a chance on the run to live out the remainder of your pathetic life.”

Gan stood where he was, drawing a blade. “I cannot betray my master.”

“Good answer. I’d rather not keep loose ends.” Kurama’s fingers tightened around the handle of
his whip.

He charged toward Kurama, sword raised, giving a warrior’s cry.

Kurama loosed his weapon, aiming to tear his opponent to shreds.

Gan dodged to the right, narrowly avoiding the whip. He then blocked the whip’s next strike, at the cost of losing his sword, which was yanked to the ground as the thorny length wrapped around it. He barely avoided the next attack, the whip making contact with his stomach, cutting a deep gash, though his clever maneuvering protected his vitals. Left with no choice, Gan ran aimlessly at his enemy.

Kurama swung his whip again, but right before it made contact, Gan shifted. His flesh became soft, bundling into a blue slime-like creature. The whip sliced right through him, and his new body reformed, sailing past Kurama. Gan shifted again as he made contact with the ground, turning into a large cat, claws creating traction as he bounded through the forest.

His blood was heavy in the air, and even in the dark, Kurama followed him easily. Gan was already injured -- death would find him soon.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Revelations

Chapter Notes

Ah! Admittedly, I struggled a little bit with this chapter. ^_^; I’m happy with it now, though! I wanted to find a good balance between what to reveal and what information to show you later. :) Please enjoy!

And, of course, thank you to those who have commented: Mei Mei, Queenasunasama, FannibalToast, LadyAmazon, jumponthechandelier, Sara Yu, TK091, Yeah_I’m_Crazy_So_What, CrossYourTeez, SailorCupcake, and perfect-to-stay!

Arban ran as quickly as he could on three legs -- the fourth he used to cradle _____ to his chest, where she was shielded by his own body. This demonic bear form he favored was defensively strong, agile enough to avoid attacks, rewarded with a strong sense of smell and quick reflexes. His thick fur was plated like armor, deceivingly tough, able to fend off the average blade. He hoped he could provide ample protection for his charge, even if he had to take a few blows.

Two cloaked demons followed after him, skimming through the treetops in an attempt to stop him. They loosed sharp daggers at him, only to have their weapons glance off his fur, falling to the forest floor. This did not deter them, and they continued the chase, no doubt reevaluating their strategy.

He ambled onward, each stride carrying him farther from the center of the forest. If he could catch them off guard, he could launch a counter attack and put an end to this dispute. However, such a tactic seemed unlikely, given the circumstances. His priority was to protect _____.

One of the demons managed to dash ahead, stopping in front of Arban. “Cease this at once. You won’t make it any farther.”

“You have two of you already fallen. Must more of you die?”

“You are a worthy adversary, Arban the Deceiver, but no more of our men will die today. Give us the girl, and we’ll be on our way. Otherwise, we’ll force your hand. The khan is waiting.”

Arban seethed, lips curling in anger. “You would steal a girl from her home on a tyrant’s whim. You have no honor. You will not take her, not while there’s still breath in me.” He felt the ground beneath him crumbling, and he leaped to the side, taking _____ with him.

The demon behind him had cast a spell, forcing a void to appear in the earth. While Arban was occupied, the first demon sent a thin needle toward his face. It had to be dipped in some sort of toxin.

Arban dodged it, ducking behind shrubbery, rolling to the ground. He strengthened his front legs, ensuring he wouldn't crush _____ as he held her. He pulled away, glancing at her to ensure she was all right from their sudden tumble, only to be horrified by his discovery.

A needle was lodged in her shoulder.

He plucked it out and looked to the two demons. “What have you done?”
“Exactly what we intended. The first needle was a distraction for you. The second was meant for her. She is poisoned. It is a fast-acting agent that will begin attacking her nervous system.” One of the demons held out a vial in his hand. “We have the antidote. Hand her over, and we’ll administer it.”

A growl ripped from Arban’s throat. “Give it here. I’ll do it.”

“No. You don’t have a choice. Wait a few seconds longer, and she’ll begin to suffer the consequences. As her guardian, you have only one choice, if you care for her life.”

In a flash, Arban shifted from a bear into a giant frog, tongue whipping out to snatch the vial. He succeeded, yanking it from the hand of the demon and returning to her side.

“Wrong move,” the demon said. “That in your possession is a fake. The real antidote is elsewhere on our persons. Either give us the girl, so she lives, or chance finding the antidote. You have mere seconds to make a decision before the poison begins causing irreversible damage. Her body will shut down, and she will die.”

He glared at them, sparing the unconscious _____ a sympathetic glance. Thoughts raced through his head, and he desperately sifted through his options.

“Her window for treatment is closing.”

He saw no other alternative. “Fine,” he spat, shifting back into his Akita form, taking a few steps back as he let the demons approach.

They rushed to her side, no doubt relieved he had conceded. Otherwise, they would have to answer to the khan for their failure. One of the demons removed a syringe and vial from his cloak, administering the antidote with careful precision.

Arban’s attention was on her, watching her breathing quicken. “What’s going on?”

“We’re just in time. In cooperating with us, you saved her life. She should be back to normal soon,” said the first demon.

The second demon suddenly went on the offensive, stabbing at Arban with a dagger, forcing him backward.

The Akita sprung away, avoiding the blow. He suspected they might do something like this, and he had the mind to shift when the demon opened up another hole in the earth, collapsing the very ground that Arban stood on. He fell, trying to claw his way to the surface, but the crater became larger and larger, and he slipped farther. It was in this moment that the demon threw a spray of needles, each one of them tipped in lethal poison. Arban tried to avoid them, shifting into a bat as to not fall, but he could not dodge them all -- they sank into his leathery flesh, and he hurried, flapping his wings enough to bring him back to the surface. He saw a portal prepared, suspended a few feet from the ground, the demons hoisting _____ over one of their shoulders.

Furious, Arban shifted into a stag, a sharp pain pulsing through his body as the poison began its fatal course. He charged at them, hoping to get to her in time, though his efforts were futile.

From the underbrush came a large cat, half-limping as it ran, crashing into Arban. They tumbled to the forest floor.

“Gan!” Arban snapped. “You’re alive!”
Gan didn’t respond, raw fear in his eyes. He was bleeding badly, but he mustered the last of his strength, leaping toward the open portal after his companions -- they had just traveled through it, carrying their target. Vines came whipping out of the ground, entangling Gan, forcing a terrified screech from his throat as they wrapped around his limbs, pulling him back to the Living World. The portal shrank quickly thereafter, the way between the two worlds shut.

Kurama arrived, a fierce accusation in his eyes. “You let them take her.” His anger was directed at Arban, who could barely find the strength to stand.

The words only wounded Arban’s pride insofar as he had failed his charge. He did not care what Kurama thought of him. “I can open another portal,” he gasped, crumpling to the ground with a pained grunt. “But I’ve been poisoned.”

Kurama saw the needles in his shoulder. “By what?” He looked over at Gan, the vine suddenly tightening around his throat. “Where is the antidote?” he demanded. No serious operative would carry a poison for which there was no cure -- the risks were too high, and poison was too useful a tool to not be able to reverse its effects. These men were not assassins, after all.

Gan sputtered something about keeping an antidote on hand, and with just a little more encouragement from his captor, he shifted back into his original humanoid form. Kurama dug into the small bag at his belt, able to extract the antidote and inject it in Arban.

The cure worked almost immediately. Arban was back on his feet, returning to an Akita, the form he had utilized most often during these past few years. His lips curled at the sight of Gan. “You let him live?”

“I don’t think you are in any position to question my strategy. He led me to you, just in time to remedy the poison coursing through your veins. Otherwise, your nervous system would be overwhelmed, and you’d be on your way to a painful death.”

Arban said nothing in response. Instead, he paced around the entangled Gan. “We should kill him. He is only a liability now.”

“No,” Kurama said. “He will lead us to _____.

“I know where they’re taking her.”

“Then you’re finally willing to share?” The look in Kurama’s eyes was steely, cold and distant, the tone of his voice sharp. “This whole ordeal could have been prevented had you not withheld your knowledge.”

“Had you walked out of her life when I warned you to do so, this surely would have been prevented,” Arban snapped. “You bedded her, didn’t you?”

Kurama was taken aback, incensed at the violation of his privacy. “I will not honor that with a response.”

“It’s pertinent, believe it or not. You are of Demon World. You should know that the value of a woman to demons is only in bearing offspring, their very worth defined by their ability to mate. It is not just cultural but biological as well, as female demons are, as a general rule, objectively weaker than their male counterparts. There are few female warriors who can hold their ground in battle -- exceptions include Mukuro and Kokou. As such, female demons are not considered sexually mature until they have been bedded, fulfilling their biological calling.

“The Makai insects could not locate her with certainty until she was no longer a virgin, when her
demon energy was finally released, no matter how subtle. That is why they were in Living World for so long, wandering until they could identify her. They were not searching for me, as you suspected; they were looking for her.”

It all made sense, given Arban’s account, requiring no further explanation. Nevertheless, Kurama was most stunned by the discovery of her ancestry. “You are saying she’s part demon?” he asked.

“Far more human than demon. She inherited a minuscule amount of demon energy from an ancestral parent.”

It was a revelation. The pieces fell into place for Kurama. That was why Spirit World was certain the insects were looking for a demon -- the energy print was that of a demon, but they never realized her captors were attempting to locate her by a small portion of her energy. They all suspected it was her dog, Yugen, at the time, his energy rubbing off on her. They assumed wrong. A terrible mistake.

Further, since Kurama and _____ shared their first intimate night together, her demon energy became traceable to the insects. It was obvious now that her heritage was exposed, and as much as he regretted not thinking this through sooner, he realized he had no way of knowing without that vital piece of information. This turn of events was truly a surprise.

“My identity, too, has been revealed to you,” Arban continued. “You should already have many answers.”

“Only more questions. I know who you are, a small amount of your history when we clashed a thousand years ago, and virtually nothing else. Unless you wish to string a hostage along, you will be transparent with me. Or have you forgotten that _____’s life depends on it?”

Arban looked at him, equally agitated. “Very well. Then, let us form a temporary alliance to retrieve her. I assure you in the present that her life is well-guarded. Yul wants her alive and unharmed. Otherwise, she’s of little use to him.”

It was what Kurama expected. As restless as he was to find _____, he was enraged that someone would even dare to abduct her in the first place. The thought of anyone harming her summoned his ire, a silent and deadly wrath seething beneath his calm exterior. Yul would atone dearly for his misdeeds -- Kurama did not make idle threats.

Now feeling confident that Arban would cooperate with him, he willed the vines to constrict around Gan’s neck until it snapped in a sickening fracture. He died immediately.

Arban looked on, an apathetic expression on his face. “Shame,” he said. “He had so much potential.”

“It’s too late for regrets now. You’re the one who favored killing him.”

“I was. It was necessary.” The shapeshifter looked at him. “We are about to embark on a journey to rescue _____ from a cruel and vengeful lord who will do anything to keep her in his grasp. It will require risk and, likely, much sacrifice. I trust you are ready, demon?”

“I made a promise to her,” Kurama said, for a moment, letting the sentiment seep through. “She is worth any amount of risk or sacrifice.” The thought came to him easily, and without hesitation, he knew he would do whatever necessary to rescue her.

“Good.” Satisfied with his response, Arban shifted into a cloaked humanoid, his face hidden with a mask, not unlike the demons they had just fought. “The mercenaries you saw were from an elite
group of hunters, a peculiar species of demon. Their strength goes to the highest bidder,” he said, “but they are versatile, skilled in nearly all techniques, including traveling between words. When I killed the first of the five, I obtained access to his talents. In this form, I can bring us to the edge of Yul’s territory.”

“No. Take us to King Enki’s stronghold.”

“Why?” Arban was irritated at the prospect of delay. What could possibly be so important that Kurama would wish to go elsewhere first?

“We must find another ally.”

“Who, exactly?”

“His name is Hiei. We will need his Jagan.”
Come take a gander at my 500 Kudos Flash Raffle! I encourage everyone to participate. The deadline is this Friday, October 18th!

This chapter focuses on just the reader character and a few OCs. Time for some reflection and discovery. :) We'll see more of Kurama and Arban's journey next chapter!

Thank you to my commenters: Jiru, FannibalToast, TK091, Mei Mei, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), LadyAmazon, CrossYourTeez, SailorCupcake, oscar_milde, NiBi, Kouryuu, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Kitsune_to_tenshi_chan, and Queenasunasama! <3 Your thoughts are much appreciated and very fun to read. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A dark ocean lay on the horizon, its ebb and flow predictable but cold. You walked in the shallows, letting the chilling water run over your feet, all the way up to your knees. You heard the desperate cries of the gulls as they escaped the pending storm, gliding away in a flock so large that their bodies covered the sun.

You saw Shuichi in the distance, a little higher upon the shore, his beautiful red hair a vivid contrast to the grey of the world. His eyes were equally stunning, a forest green that beckoned you forward. He held out a hand. “_____,” he said, “come with me. We can leave this place.”

You could not move. You refused to, your ankles deep in water. He had hurt you, and you weren’t sure you were willing to forgive so easily.

But was this dark ocean where you wanted to stay? If Shuichi was the only one who could take you elsewhere, sweep you off your feet and away from this place, would you go with him?

You shook your head. How could you look at him again? How could you let him touch you after what happened? You were so numb to it all, and you weren’t sure if you could forgive him for his trespass.

“My love,” Shuichi tried again. “I can take you away. Let me save you.”

It was too late. There was nothing he could do to convince you otherwise. You stepped away from him, backing into the ocean.

In moments, he began to fade, his presence drifting away. You thought you would feel relief, but you only felt cold and lonely. Tears stung at your eyes as he left, and you felt the briny water wash over you, consuming your whole body.

You opened your eyes, a pounding headache the first sensation you felt. There was no ocean. The world was not grey.

Your hands were bound tightly in front of you, your ankles in the same condition. You felt like you were moving, the uneven bump of wheels sore on your hips and shoulders. You pushed yourself
up, noticing that you were in some sort of outdated vehicle, light leaking through the intricately
carved wooden windows. The roof was made of wood as well, sanded and polished. The clip of
hooves against a worn road were all you could hear as some beast pulled you along to an unknown
destination.

“Stop the carriage,” a voice said. “I think the girl is awake.”

Your heart beat quickly in your chest, as the back of the carriage opened, revealing two cloaked
figures. You remembered what had happened, and you pulled away from your captors, knowing
full well that you had nowhere to hide. The carriage was only a few feet in length, just enough for
you to lay down.

“Ah, you’ve finally come to,” one of them said. “You were a difficult objective. We had no idea
you had such powerful allies, Arban the Deceiver among them.”

“You had best hope you were worth the trouble,” the second one said. He was taller, larger, his
voice gruffer. “We lost two allies because of you, and General Gan is no doubt dead or being
tortured this instant.”

“Don’t blame her, Batu. It’s not her fault -- we knew the dangers before we set off. Yulkhan
wouldn’t have sent General Gan with us otherwise. The sooner we get her to Yulkhan, the sooner
we get paid.”

“I say we stop for a while. We’ve had quite a start on her allies, and I need a good meal. Don’t tell
me you’re not hungry.”

“I’d much rather feast when we’re inside the city walls.”

“Don’t be a pussy, Jochi. We’ve earned it, being the only two to survive the assignment. Why
don’t you go hunting? I’ll stay here and guard the girl.”

“Very well,” Jochi said. He must have been hungry to have complied so easily. “But don’t do
anything stupid. I know you haven’t felt a woman’s touch in days, but she’s not yours to have.”

“Bah, get going. I’m starving!” Batu pulled the hood of his cloak down, revealing a scarred face.
He must have fought many battles in his days, though by appearance, he couldn’t have been older
than in his thirties. He looked human enough, his short hair greased back. The most notable feature
was the ravenous desire in his eyes.

You shuddered at the thought of it, curling into a tighter ball to slide yourself away.

“Come on,” he said, climbing up and grasping you by your ankles. “I bet you’re cramped from
being tied up like that. If you behave, I’ll cut your bindings. Come join me outside. We can get a
fire going. Humans are so fragile and prone to cold, after all.”

You couldn’t do anything as he yanked you closer, so close that your legs dangled off the side of
the carriage. He took you by the arms, not so gently picking you up and tossing you over his
shoulders. “Put me down!” you demanded, understanding that you were in no position to be
making such requests.

“As you wish.” Batu dropped you the ground, kneeling beside you. He grabbed your chin, forcing
you to look at him. “You’re a pretty one. No wonder why the khan wants you for himself.”

You pulled yourself away, turning your head to the side. “Who is this khan?” you asked. “What
does he want with me?”
He laughed. “Of course you don’t know. Humans live an unsuspecting life. You’re in the Demon World now, sweetheart. This is your new home. You’ll be living in the palace, the very lap of luxury, which I’m sure you’ll enjoy once we get you there. As long as you serve your lord, he will surely treat you well.” He twirled another length of rope around your neck, giving it a tug as to tighten it. He then grasped your hands, cutting the bindings as he promised, doing the same with your ankles.

You sure didn’t like the sound of what he said. “Why me? I don’t have anything to do with you demons.” That wasn’t true. Apparently, based on your recent discovery, you housed one and dated the other, but you doubted the pertinence of the realization in this conversation.

“I don’t ask questions. The khan often has women brought to him from Living World. That’s where me and my associates prove our worth. He doesn’t usually send a horde of genetically engineered insects to find them, though -- you must be special.”

“Ugh.” You certainly didn’t want to be, grimacing at the thought.

He tied off the other end of the rope to himself, dragging you around as he gathered wood for a fire. It was humiliating, being led around like a dog, but you supposed you had bigger things to worry about.

Batu was right about one thing -- it was cold, and you shivered, hugging yourself. You had not bothered to grab a jacket when you ran out of the cottage to follow Yugen. You only wore a thin sweater.

He noticed your shuddering, pulling the rope so that you came to him. He was much taller than you, and he wrapped an arm around your shoulders. As much as you dreaded his touch, you had to admit that he was warm.

“We can’t have you freezing to death, can we? Won’t get compensated for damaged goods.” He didn’t let you out of his grasp, pressing your body close to his.

Batu managed to start a fire with what small branches he had gathered, and you welcomed a source of warmth that wasn’t your captor.

“Now…”

You were filled with a sense of dread as Batu grabbed you from behind, his hands wandering around your waist. “Get off of me!” you said, trying to push him away.

He was far stronger than you, holding fast. He didn’t even seem fazed by your reaction -- you wondered if this was how he thought women were supposed to behave when he touched them. He tucked your hair behind your ear, almost tenderly. “Why don’t we have some fun, you pretty thing? The khan doesn’t need to know.”

“Let go of me!” you cried, letting out a scream.

“Shhh…” he said, kissing your neck, each touch of his lips making you flinch in disgust. “There’s no one out there who can hear you. We’re still miles from any civilization.”

You tried your hardest to pry him off of you, but you were weak in comparison.

“Just let it happen.” Batu forced you to the ground on your back. “Can’t have you scraping up your knees, can we? Humans have such delicate skin.” He pinned you down, pulling you closer by the hips.
“Stop it!” you tried again, futilely trying to kick him away.

“Or you’ll what?” He laughed cruelly, pushing your legs away with no effort at all. His eyes were hungry, looking you up and down, as though drinking in the curves of your body. “No one can save you. You’ll live, I promise. You might as well enjoy this, sweetheart.”

“Please leave me alone.” You weren’t above begging if it meant you could appeal to his compassion. You didn’t think it would work, but it was worth a try. Although you were offended more than anything, your helplessness made your heart beat rapidly in fear. This demon could do literally whatever he wanted with you, and you were without the power to stop him.

Batu seemed taken by your plea. “I love it when they beg,” he said, climbing over you, his hands groping your breasts through your clothes.

You suppressed a cry -- you weren’t going to give him the satisfaction. Instead, you reached up and struck him across the face. “I told you to STOP IT!”

Your attack did absolutely nothing; there wasn’t even enough force to move his head. “I like them feisty, too.” He grabbed your wrists, pinning them above your head with just one of his hands, the other touching you as he pleased. He came to the hem of your shirt, lifting it up and letting his fingers run along the skin of your stomach. “You’re warmer than you let on.”

You watched him, the dread obvious in your eyes now. When you felt him touch the waistline of your pants, you tried to fight him again, only to succeed in a pathetic struggle.

“How could it come to this? You did not have a good sense of time, but just hours ago, it seemed, you were in Shuichi’s arms. You felt safe and happy. You didn’t have this awful headache. You didn’t have to worry about the possibility of sexual assault or where your captors were taking you. You knew nothing of demons, and you wished you still didn’t.

“You’re more trouble than she’s worth.”

You gathered the courage to roll over on your side so you could steal a glance at what was happening. Oktai was tall and handsome, his appearance closely resembling that of a human, with the exception of his pointed ears and tattoo-like markings across his cheekbones.

“That’s enough. No more excuses,” Oktai said. “My patience wears thin, and you hardly seem
apologetic. We have no use for operatives who cannot follow our instructions.” He raised his staff, a vivid light shining from the stone at the top of it.

“W-wait!” Batu said, holding his hands in front of him in an attempt to calm Oktai. “Let me explain what happened.”

“No. You had your chance.” A burst of energy came from the staff, shooting toward Batu in a beam of light. Upon contact, he burst into flames -- but only for a second before he fell to the ground in a pile of ashes.

You could smell the sickening aroma of burnt flesh, and you turned your head away from the newcomer -- although he had assuredly saved you from a terrible assault, he was, per his display of power, even stronger than Batu.

He neared, squatting down next to you. “You're safe now,” he said, his voice kind. “I'm sorry for not arriving sooner. Did that brute hurt you?”

You looked at him, noticing the vivid blue in his eyes, the perfect azure on a cloudless day. They put you at ease, somehow.

Oktai reached for you, offering his hand. “Let's get you off the ground. You certainly don't belong there.” When you accepted, he gave you a gentle tug, pulling you to your feet. He glanced at your neck disapprovingly, waving his hand over the rope Batu had tied around it. It fell to the ground in a coil, the knot magically undone. “These mercenaries can be rough sometimes. That's why we sent General Gan with them. It looks like I should have gone with them, too. Your mistreatment will be addressed, the violators punished.”

You had yet to find your words.

“_____ right?” he said. “It's a lovely name. You are the guest of our esteemed lord and will be treated as such.”

“Who are you?” you managed to ask.

“Oh, my apologies. I’ve forgotten to introduce myself. I am among Yulkhan’s council, one of his most trusted advisors. You may call me Oktai.” He swept an elegant bow. “Your presence is requested at the palace, my lady.”

“Who is Yulkhan?”

“I see you have many questions. I understand. This is your first time discovering these new truths.” He smiled at you, brushing his blond bangs out of his eyes. “I’ll answer all your questions along the way, if you’d like, but I think it’s best if we get moving. There are many demons running unchecked in these lands, and while I’ll do my utmost to protect you, I’d rather avoid conflict, if at all possible.”

It was strange how a friendly face could hone your trust. Still, you were not about to throw caution to the wind. “What am I doing here?” you said, feeling an immense desire to return home. You could go back to a normal life. This was far too much adventure for you.

Oktai tilted his head to the side -- there was an innocence in the way he carried himself, despite the show of strength you saw earlier. “Don’t you want to find out?” He walked away from you, pacing over to the carriage and releasing the beast that pulled it -- it looked like a six-legged horse, its head slim like that of a goat, horns and all. An interesting creature. The very sight of it made you reevaluate your alternatives.
You thought through the clinking of the beast’s tack as Oktai tightened the saddle’s strap and adjusted the bridle. You realized you had no choice. You could either go with Oktai or, if he wasn’t inclined to force you along, you could go off on your own. That seemed like a horrible idea. You knew nothing about this world and its inhabitants, and you weren’t sure you would survive it, even if you did.

While you were with Oktai, you could learn and, hopefully, be kept safe. He seemed affable enough, and, of course, as much as you didn’t want to think it played a part in your motivations… you were curious.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Beast

Chapter Notes

Ugh, I NEED TO WRITE. I just got home not too long ago from a happy hour night out with coworkers, and my introverted self is mentally exhausted. :D I can only hang out with RL people, like, once a month.

I really like how this chapter came out! Hope you enjoy it, too! No reader this time, just our favorite demons!

Thank you to Mei Mei, LadyAmazon, FannibalToast, CrossYourTeez, SailorCupcake, TK091, and Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What for your comments!

If you like having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, check out my 500 Kudos Flash Raffle! I encourage everyone to participate. The deadline is tomorrow, Friday, October 18th! You have one more day to join!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kurama had never before attempted to find Hiei. There was never a need. On the rare occasion when Hiei wanted something, he was always the one to reach out. With his Jagan, it was easy for him to locate anyone.

Nevertheless, last Kurama heard, Hiei was in Demon World, tasked by Enki to return humans to Living World if they wandered into the Makai. He instructed Arban to open a portal to the king’s stronghold, where they would begin their search.

Before they left, Kurama did two things. He called Botan to give her an update on the evening’s events -- she was alarmed and said she would go directly to Koenma with the news. A demon kidnapping a human was a grave offense. Botan was also tasked with the entry code at the cottage, where she would clean it up before Monday as not to create any suspicion with his family. And finally, Kurama texted the most senior member of his team at the firm with instructions on how to handle this upcoming week -- he would be out of the office on a family emergency until further notice, and _____ was similarly unavailable to come in to work.

Arban opened his hand, an orb of energy collecting in his palm, and he forced it into the space in front of him, a fluctuating power pressuring a rift between the two worlds to open. It was slow at first, almost as though Arban had to persuade the portal to materialize, but once he did, the gate seemed to glide open easily. “You first,” he said.

Kurama nodded, leaping into the portal without hesitation. Arban followed shortly after, and the portal sealed off as soon as they landed on the other side.

The air was thick with energy, the very essence of the earth trapped within it. It jolted and crackled with each breath they took, threatening to come alive. The two new arrivals were familiar with it, a nostalgic power seeping into their very bones. It was almost an intimate feeling, the call of home, summoning the demons back to her, where they belonged.

It had been years since Kurama had set foot in the Makai, the last time being his participation in
the third Demon World unification tournament. And every time he returned, he experienced a pulse of excitement, a deep longing in his core that welcomed him and the demon heart inside. Yoko Kurama resurfaced, if only a little, his cunning and ambition heeding the call of the wild Makai.

“So this is the state of Demon World,” Arban said, resuming his Akita form again. “It reeks of miasma and the foul corpses these empires were once built upon.”

Kurama glanced at him from the corner of his eye, wondering why Arban spoke so lowly of his birthplace, what should have been his home.

“It is telling of its inhabitants. They are all desperate for chaos when it is truly order they need. They are hungry with an insatiable greed, a monster clawing its way to the facade of civility -- or not. Many do not even attempt to mask their avarice.”

“You think us all beasts.”

“Am I wrong? What other definition of demon is there? It is in the name of our very species that our true natures surface.”

“Are humans any better?”

“Humans are capable of showing one another compassion, even across species. They feed the hungry, shelter their poor. They rescue animals and children; they care for the earth. This occurs to varying degrees, efforts often obstructed by the gluttonous elite, those with profit motive, but the whole of humanity is good. There is redemption in the race of humans; I do not see the same potential in my demon kin.”

Kurama did not know whether he agreed or not. He saw shades of grey, having lived among both humans and demons. Yes, there was compassion in the human race, but there was also darkness. The same could be said about demons. The lower class demons were primal, lusting after both blood and carnal pleasures, but the more evolved demons were intelligent, wise, even. Not all of them were ruthless and cold. Some had honor and respect, harboring a love for life and progress.

Perhaps he only felt that way because he wanted redemption. He wanted the possibility of being a better person, a better man for those he loved. His heart clenched at the thought of _____, and he began walking toward the city. “Save your sentiment. We have work to do.”

Arban did not disagree. He paced forward, walking beside his ally, however temporary their arrangement would be. It wasn’t long before they reached the city, stepping within the borders, welcomed by chatter and industry. It was bustling, the so-called capital of Demon World, where Enki ruled. His stronghold was located at the center, towering above the land, both fortified and beautiful.

“This Hiei,” Arban said. “How do you know we can trust him? We have formed an, at best, tenuous alliance because we share a common goal. This Hiei demon, one nefarious enough to have the Jagan implanted in him, has no such objective.”

“We can trust him,” Kurama said. “We have to.”

“Describe him. It is best if we diverge. We will cover twice the ground this way.”

“Agreed. He is short in height, human in appearance, black hair, Jagan eye covered in a headband.”

“Even better, let me take your physical form. If Hiei is a friend, as you imply, he may very well recognize me before I find him.”
“No.” In practice, it was a good idea. However, the thought of allowing this shapeshifter to have access to his memories and thoughts was vulgar. Kurama was far too private to let someone in like that, his secrets too well-guarded.

Arban was not offended at his refusal -- he understood the amount of trust and vulnerability the request required. A demon as cautious as Yoko Kurama, someone with as many enemies as he did, would not easily surrender that information. It was worth a try to quicken their search, though Arban did not expect Kurama to acquiesce.

“I have a better idea,” Kurama said. “You followed _____ extensively for the last month, hidden in plain sight. Do you remember Kuwabara?”

“If you're referring to the ugly one, yes. What about him?”

“Do you remember his voice? What he looks like? Can you mimic his physicality without touching him?”

“Something close. My memories of him are few.”

“Do what you can.”

“You want me to look like an idiot?”

“Just an… excited human. Hiei would know Kuwabara’s voice anywhere, and any wild outburst would surely lure him here if he's in the area.”

Arban sighed, his eye twitching in agitation. “She'd better be safe after this, demon.” He took a breath as he changed, growing taller, thicker, his hair gelled together atop his head. His eyes were narrow, fists large, shoulders broad.

Kurama took a step back, watching the shapeshifter. Something was… off about his rendition of Kuwabara, the face not quite right, but that didn’t matter. As soon as Arban opened his mouth and screamed -- “HIIEEEEEEEE! WHERE ARE YOU, YOU LITTLE PUNK?” -- Kurama realized that if his friend were in the vicinity, he would come. The voice was spot-on.

“ANSWER ME! I KNOW YOU’RE HERE SOMEWHERE!” Arban began stomping around in typical Kuwabara fashion, garnering the attention of many demons in the area. “HEY, HAMSTER LEGS, WHERE ARE YOU HIDING?”

“He’s good for only having seen Kuwabara a handful of times,” Kurama thought.

Demons looked on, some of them legitimately curious; others licked their lips, hungry for human flesh.

Kurama would have been concerned about a human wandering the Makai, but Arban could handle himself. He was a formidable fighter, able to shift from one form to the next to accommodate the situation. A few lower-class demons searching for their next meal would meet a grim fate, indeed, should they be impulsive enough to attack him. Kurama turned, about to find another path through the city to join the search effort, but there was no need.

Already, Hiei appeared. “Quit your bellowing. You sound like a dying cow. What the hell are you doing--” He stopped, noticing the flaws in Kuwabara’s physicality, and the scowl on his face deepened. “You’re not Kuwabara. You're even uglier.” He drew his sword, slashing at the fake.

Arban was quick, propelling himself backwards to dodge the blow whilst shifting into his Akita
form again. “You're right. I'm not Kuwabara,” he said, landing gracefully on his paws. “You must be Hiei.”

“And who the hell are you?”

“His name is Arban.”

Hiei glanced over his shoulder. “Kurama. You better explain why you had someone mimic that idiot to find me.” He sheathed his blade.

“I need a favor.”

“What? Is the world in danger again?” The last part was said in a condescending tone.

“I'm afraid not.” Kurama could be equally snarky. He tilted his head toward the entrance of the city, inviting him to follow.

Hiei joined him, Arban close behind. Once they were out of earshot of any prying demons, Kurama removed his phone from his pocket.

“This is _____,” he said, showing him their one photo from Inoji. “Hiei, I need you to find her.”

“What?” He studied the picture, taking note of how close they were, how happy Kurama seemed in it. Already, he began to understand.

“She was abducted. By Yul.”

Hiei's eyes widened, if only for a moment. “She's involved with Yul? Do you know what Yul does, Kurama? He snatches humans from the Living World and makes them his slaves -- he has a particular fondness for women.”

“I am aware.”

“Retrieving her would mean breaking into his fortress. Even Enki’s not bold enough to confront him. Yul has been a topic of controversy at his table for years now, amassing his empire, despite the decree of the unification tournament. Even if she's still alive, you'll never make it out with her unscathed.”

“She’s alive,” Arban said. “I am sure of it. Yul spent a small fortune tracking her down with his genetically engineered Makai insects. He would not kill her so easily.”

“And who are you?” Hiei said, eyeing Arban with a distrustful gaze. “I’ve heard of you before. Arban the Deceiver. You betrayed Yul over a thousand years ago. I believe that makes you a liability to both him and us.”

“Believe what you’d like. Rescuing _____ is my priority, whether I have your help or not.”

“Then you need to pull your weight. You were in Yul’s council. What makes you so sure she's not dead already? He does what he wants with human women and then eats them afterward. How do you know she hasn't already suffered the same fate?”

“Because she's far more valuable to him alive than dead.”

“You know something we don't,” Hiei said. “And as long as you're withholding information, I've no interest in risking my hide for a human girl.”
“Any further knowledge isn't pertinent information,” Arban said. “She's captive in Yul’s palace, and we need to get her out. It's simple, demon. Or do you not understand?”

“Don’t be a fool,” Kurama started, his eyes cold. “If I recall, you agreed to be transparent in matters regarding _____’s capture. To minimize the risk to both her and our party, we need to know everything.”

“And since when do you reveal everything about yourselves to strangers? I've watched over this girl since the day she was born, always the silent guardian. I left a life where I was a highly regarded warrior, subjecting myself to the humans of the Living World. I assure you my motivations align with yours.”

“I'm not asking for a detailed account of your history or personal feelings -- only the relevant information, whatever you understand about Yul and why he has gone to such lengths to abduct her.”

Arban was quiet for a moment, glaring between Kurama and Hiei. “I know less about this matter than you think,” he finally said. “Even when I was one of his master warlords, privy to nearly every strategy in expanding his empire or fighting his battles, I did not know the secret to his great power. He guarded that jealously, sharing it with no one.”


“The beast?” Hiei said with a scoff. “That’s only a myth, a bedtime story to scare children.”

“No.” The gaze in Kurama’s eyes serious. “Demon World was not always in a state of chaos. Even long before the first Demon World unification tournament, well over a thousand years ago, Yul conquered many lands in his day. He established order, a tenuous peace wrought from fear. He was able to do this because he controlled a monster, a vicious and bloodthirsty beast loyal only to his command. No one knows how he was able to tame it or even what pits of Demon World it came from. But those who resisted him were eradicated.”

“Eventually, someone betrayed Yul,” Arban said. “Someone close. I don’t know who. The beast disappeared. I have reason to believe _____ is the key to bringing it back.”

“That’s absurd,” Hiei said. “A huge stretch in logic. Even if this beast really did exist, how could a human girl revive it?”

“Because _____ is his descendant.”

Kurama was shocked, stunned into silence. The thought that his beloved was related to Demon World’s greatest conqueror, even many generations apart, was inconceivable. The realization didn’t make him love her any less, but the possibility was extraordinary. What were the chances?

A small smile tugged at Hiei’s lips, and he chuckled. “Now you have my interest. A human girl with the power to revive an ancient monster?” He looked at Kurama. “Per my assignment from Enki, I’ve spent the last few years helping humans who have wandered into Demon World. I’m bored. I might as well help one you like.”

Chapter End Notes
I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Hello! Good evening! I just finished the dough of my sourdough bread, and it's happily rising on my kitchen counter right now. I always feel giddy when I have sourdough to bake in the mornings! :D In other words, I AM IN AN EXCELLENT MOOD FOR WRITING.

I've decided I want this arc to focus on primarily two things: 1) The reader character's development as a woman, someone who comes upon a position of influence, even if it might not seem like it, and how she uses that power to rise above and 2) Kurama's development as he discovers what it means to be in love while trying to consolidate his identities for his future with the RC (details to come, as I don't want to include spoilers).

In order to set up a successful objective number one, I'm going to delve into the RC's dilemma a bit -- thus, these next few chapters might seem a little slow, but there's key information in every one of them that will fuel her knowledge and allow her to make important decisions down the line. Of course, while she's learning, she's also trying to figure out her feelings for Shuichi. ;) She's got a lot on her plate! So just imagine you're in her shoes -- I suppose that's the point of a reader-insert, anyway -- and think about how you're going to use this information to manipulate the situation. ;) You don't have all the pieces yet, but you will as things evolve. It's a puzzle, really.

As always, thank you to those who left me comments: Mei Mei, FannibalToast, SailorCupcake, LadyAmazon, CrossYourTeez, Queensunasama, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), and Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What. Your thoughts and opinions keep the muse flowing! <3

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oktai knelt to the ground, his hands woven together. “Here,” he said, “let me help you. These umagi are tall.”

“Oh, thank you.” You slipped your foot into his hands, and he hoisted you up, your other foot in the stirrups. After you were settled on the umagi, the horse-goat hybrid, Oktai took the reins.

“There's some rough terrain we must traverse, so I'll lead him through the thick of it. You may relax and enjoy the scenery. I understand it has been a long journey for you, but rest assured most of it is behind you.” He handed you a blanket he pulled from the carriage earlier. “Keep warm. The winds can be high.”

A cloaked figure appeared in Oktai’s path, who you could only assume to be Jochi. He carried a small hare-like animal by the ears, the unfortunate victim for dinner. “Greetings, Oktai,” he said. “I see Batu was not on his best behavior.”

“Not exactly. His impudence had to be punished.”
“Take the girl if you’d like. It’ll save me the trip, but I require payment.”

“Of course.” Oktai reached into his flowing robes, fetching a leather pouch. He tossed it to him.

Jochi looked at the size of the pouch, dumping its contents into the palm of his hand. “This isn’t nearly enough. Where is the sum we agreed upon?”

“Your companion nearly assaulted Yulkhan’s guest, and I had to come all the way here to fetch her myself. I don’t think you’ve fully completed your end of the bargain -- the sum is fair for the work, especially now that you don’t have your companions with whom to share it. If you’d like to re-negotiate, you may take it up with the khan.” Oktai began walking, leading the umagi by the reins. “I even put a little extra in there for the umagi. It’s a fine beast.”

Jochi didn’t dare respond, and you and Oktai quickly left him in the dust.

You were glad of it, leaving behind your captors. At least your new guardian was pleasant. “Where exactly are we going?” you asked, feeling the animal move in a steady gait beneath you.

“To the heart of the empire, Xanadu. That is where Yulkhan resides and where you’ll be staying.”

“Can you tell me about Yulkhan?”

Oktai grinned, giving you a glance as he tilted his head back. “Yulkhan is wise, powerful, and a surprisingly good conversationalist. He has been around for a long time now, and his goal is to unify the Demon World so there can be peace.”

“Is there no peace now?”

“Tenuous peace, at best. Thanks to the unification tournament, there seems to be less bloodshed among those accepting of the terms. But King Enki, the ruler of Demon World, is a weak leader. He has not the ambition to keep the peace or innovate future solutions. He wishes for peace but does not work for it. When you tell demons to stop fighting, you’re working against their very nature. Peace isn’t feasible long-term with quick fixes. Anyone who wishes to be a king in Demon World must be forward-looking, flexible, and determined. That is the only way to achieve a fruitful reign.”

You quieted, thinking about all he said. While, yes, this Demon World seemed chaotic, the existence of demons had to be framed in more than just black and white. There were shades of grey, many shades, and you already realized that this was more than just a war for right and wrong. It was far more complicated than that.

When Shuichi told you he was a demon, you weren’t thinking straight, far more affected by his deceit than the content of his words. You hadn’t had the time to really think about what it meant to be a demon. You weren’t even sure in what context he was a demon. You had many unanswered questions.

In your world, demons existed in mythology, religion, occultism, and folklore. They were often malevolent but not always.

And what little you knew about demons did not necessarily mean that you knew these demons. It was entirely possible that the many renditions of demons in the modern-day world were all wrong. You were certainly learning more by the minute here.

“Are you demon?” you said to Oktai. “I hope it’s not rude of me to ask.”
“I live to serve, my lady,” he said. “All questions are fair game; I have nothing to hide. While I do have demon blood in me, I am actually only half-demon. My mother is human, and my father is demon.”

“Are there many half-demons here?”

“No. Unfortunately, those like me don’t survive long. I was only able to flourish under the tutelage of Yulkhan. He protected me while I was able to become strong, found me the best teachers, and unlocked my potential. Now, I serve him on his council. He respects my thoughts and opinions.”

“It must be nice feeling appreciated.”

“Indeed, my lady.”

“If it’s not too much to ask, will you stop calling me that?”

“Mm?”

You sighed awkwardly, not wanting to insult your guide. “I don’t know why you keep on addressing me like that. To be honest, it’s making me kind of uncomfortable.”

“What would you prefer?”

“Just _____ is fine. It’s what everyone else calls me.”

“I may be able to get away with that indiscretion, but I hope you understand that once we get to the palace, you’ll be addressed by a title by nearly everyone. The servants in particular will be required to do so. It may be worth getting used to.”

“I’ll worry about that later. But at least for now, I’d appreciate it if you’d be less formal with me. I don’t know anyone else here, and it’ll make this place feel a little more familiar.”

“I suppose that’s fair. Well, then, _____, what other questions might you have? I imagine you have many, and we’ve only explored a few. I fully expect to answer only a fraction of them by the time we arrive in Xanadu.”

For the first time since yesterday’s afternoon with Shuichi, you laughed. You were glad that Oktai had a sense of humor. It put you at ease. You wouldn’t let your guard down until you learned more about this world and its inhabitants, but it was nice to feel some semblance of amusement again.

“Are you sure?” you said. “Because if you give me the liberty to ask questions, I will, and you’ll probably be tired of me before we even get to our destination.”

He craned his neck to look at you, his eyes glimmering in the afternoon sun. “I like an inquisitive mind. Go ahead. I insist.”

“All right. Tell me about Xanadu.”

“Not exactly a question, but I’ll allow it. It’s open-ended enough.” He continued along his way, leading the umagi on. “Xanadu was founded 1,500 years ago. It’s a beautiful place, the center of Yulkhan’s empire, unobstructed by industry and major developments. It is spring now -- you must feel the remnant chill of winter. You’ll begin to see blossoms soon, the birds flitting among the treetops, the calm pools of water in the gardens. Do you like nature, _____?”

“It can be beautiful,” you said, “but it can also be devastating.”
“As is anything else in life,” Oktai said. “Flowers bloom all the more beautifully after a storm passes.”

“They can.”

“Oh?

“Just being realistic.”

“Your heart’s been hurt before. Recently, I assume.”

You looked to the side, your thoughts running rampant. How did he know? You weren’t about to pour your heart out to a near-stranger, but you had to admit he was observant. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You don’t have to,” he said, “but I want you to know that time heals all wounds. Your life is about to change, ____. You can leave the hurtful world behind you and join us here in Demon World. You are most welcome here, and I think you’ll find a sense of purpose and destiny greater than anything you’ve experienced in the Living World.”

“Why do you call it the Living World?” you asked, deciding it was best for you to learn all you could before voicing any opinions about your being expected to stay here. “It makes it sound like all of you are dead.”

“Well, the name does sound like a misnomer, doesn’t it? The reason why the earth, which houses the majority of the human population, is called the Living World is because there used to really only be two worlds: Living World and Spirit World. The Spirit World is where sentient beings, both human and demon, go after they die. It is neither heaven nor hell -- more like a purgatory, if you would. King Yama of the Spirit World sealed off a portion of the Living World into another dimension, forbidding demons to cross over to harm humans. This new dimension is where we’re standing right now, termed the Demon World.”

“This is common knowledge in Demon World?”

“Yes, humans are far more oblivious to the realities of their lives. But they don’t have to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yulkhan yearns for a world of peace. There is too much chaos, demons fighting demons, humans fighting humans, even conflict among the two races. There should only ever be bloodshed if necessary. Otherwise, people can be put to better use. They can be innovating, creating art and music, developing research and seeking the truths of the universe. They can find enlightenment and enjoy a world where there is no hunger or disease.”

“That all sounds great,” you said, fully aware of the exaggerated optimism. Promises of peace were almost always too good to be true. Historically, those in power made assurances, garnering support, only to fool those who had sworn loyalty to the cause. Greed and corruption were commonplace, and as much as you would like to believe Yulkhan might be different, you would be cynical, at least at first.

Oktai gave you an amused glance, a stray wind tousling his blond hair. “Talk to him yourself, if you don’t believe me. You’ll see how sincere he is, and I guarantee you’ll likely want to join his cause.”

The journey lasted the remainder of the day, the red skies fading to a pale coral as the Demon
World sun began to set on the horizon. The umagi carried on tirelessly, hooves touching the ground at a resolute pace. More impressive was how quickly Oktai walked, never with labored breath, and without complaint.

“Here we are,” he said, several hours later. “Xanadu. We just have to make it up these rolling hills, beyond the walls, and we’ll be there.”

The skies were clear, without the clouds that seemed to plague the rest of Demon World. The air was chilly, and you pulled the blanket closer to you to keep warm. You could see the palace in the distance, the highest point of Xanadu as the rest of the city surrounded it. The structure didn’t seem particularly impressive, but that was because you had no sense of scale. As you approached it, led through the quiet city by Oktai, you noted its grand design.

The architecture was original, like nothing you had ever seen before, a blend of different elements and features. It was colorful, the roofs painted in shades of blue, arching outward as though defying gravity. Domes were etched in painted gold, patterns of flowers and leaves inscribed along the smooth white surface. Pillars thicker than trunks of the oldest trees supported these intricate ceilings, towering upward, spaced evenly at the entrance. Grand doors, surrounded on both sides by statues of only what you could assume to be fearsome guardians, required more than a single servant to maneuver them -- they had to weigh hundreds of pounds each. A magnificent flight of stairs led to the palace. You had no desire to count the steps, but you guessed there were well over a hundred.

Oktai stopped here, handing the reins of the umagi to a servant. “This is it,” he said, reaching for you. “Be careful. You might be a little sore from that long ride.”

You slid out of the saddle with little effort, your legs numb. You were actually kind of eager to feel the ground beneath you again. “It’s beautiful,” you said, your eyes on the palace.

“I agree. I’m certainly glad you think so -- this will be your home.” He motioned for you to follow. “Come with me. It’s a lot of stairs to climb, but you’ll have a warm meal, a bath, and a bed waiting at the top.”

All three of those things seemed like marvelous offerings to you. You were exhausted and hungry. These steps were nothing compared to the thought of food and sleep. You didn’t need much, but it had been a long day. It was difficult, but you skipped up the stairs, following behind Oktai as quickly as you could. You were met by those large doors, which were propped open by metal weights, the palace well-lit even in the dark of the night.

Oktai led you into the palace, robes flowing elegantly behind him as he walked.

You noted a group of women as you walked past one of the inner chambers, each of them garbed in layers of elegant silks, many of them adorned in jewelry or flowers. They were all beautiful, and their familiarity as human made you pause. They had not noticed you, talking among themselves as though the evening was a time of laughter and gossip.

You stopped, remembering what Batu had said about bringing women here from the Living World, and your fists clenched in disgust.

“Yulkhan’s harem,” Oktai said, noticing the focus of your attention.

You gave him an alarmed look, your fears confirmed.

“This is not your fate,” he replied, place a warm hand on your shoulder. “You’re here for a greater
purpose. The khan will explain in the morning, but for right now, I’m going to show you to your chambers, where you can rest.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. :) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Gravity

Chapter Notes

So remember how I wrote a songfic for Kurama? Well, I wrote one for the reader character to help summarize her feelings. This song is called "Gravity" by Vienna Teng, one of my favorite artists. Please enjoy!

The next chapter will be the RC meeting Yul. ;)

Thank you to CrossYourTeez, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, FannibalToast, LadyAmazon, and Mei Mei for the comments. <3 Really appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The palace was huge, and you were given a whole wing to yourself. It harbored a number of chambers, including a spacious bedroom, a luxurious den with an indoor fountain, and a small kitchen, among other things. You were introduced to your own servant, a young girl named Qara. She was, as far as you could tell, human, young, no older than fifteen years of age. When introduced to you by Oktai, she was quiet, her eyes diverted to the floor. She said nothing more than “Yes, my lady” since she had been left with you.

You didn’t have the energy to ask her any questions or attempt to draw any truths out of her -- as curious as you were, you would have to do that in the morning. The day had been a long one, and you weren’t sure how long you had been awake. All you knew was the time you'd been unconscious wasn’t exactly restful. You ate the hot meal Qara prepared for you, took a warm bath in the lavish in-ground tub, and went straight to bed.

You were exhausted from the day’s events, having not even a moment of reflection for yourself. You tried to sleep. The bed was comfortable, plush with pillows and thick blankets to ward away the cold. Qara stoked the fires for you, letting the warm coals radiate heat throughout the night. Given how tired you were, there was no reason why you should not have been able to fall asleep immediately.

But this new world raised many questions. What was your place in it? It was strange that there was this whole other dimension you never knew existed before today. You wondered if all humans were as oblivious as you. It was overwhelming, the amount of information you had learned since the moment you were abducted by those cloaked figures.

Furthermore, it was insane that anyone from this dimension would specifically seek you out and go to all that trouble of abducting you. There was nothing special about you. You were an ordinary human living an ordinary life. You had no spectacular achievements and knew no unique knowledge.

Why would they come after you? What happened in the time leading up to your capture?

Your heart clenched, sending a jolt of pain through your body.

Hey love,
Is that the name you're meant to have... for me to call?

Your mind drifted to thoughts of Shuichi, the time you spent together this past month. You saw him when you closed your eyes, his gentle smile, the tenderness in his gaze when he looked at you. You heard his voice, the soft baritone, reveling in the way he called your name. You remembered his touch, the warmth of his skin, the silkiness of his hair, the way he smelled of roses.

Every moment brought you joy, every memory of him -- the only exception was the night before when he explained to you the nature of his existence, his truth. It hurt so much, knowing he had deceived you, that he let you love him without understanding everything, denying you the choice that was yours to make.

But aside from all of this, he made you happy. And if he made you so happy, was it wrong for you to want to be with him? Was it wrong for you to accept your weakness, to desire his love and affection, even if he hurt you?

Look love,
They've given up believing
They've turned aside our stories of the gentle fall

You couldn’t subject yourself to this. You couldn’t allow yourself to be vulnerable with him -- it would go against all of your values in life. Up until you began dating Shuichi, you cultivated your independence carefully, ensuring you would never be reliant on any one person. It was those who you loved who could hurt you the most, after all.

When Shuichi came along, he moved past those boundaries with ease, forging a sense of trust with you that brought down the guarded walls you built to protect yourself. You gave him everything you had to give, thinking in each moment it felt right.

You fell for him harder than you had fallen for any man in your life. You believed everything he told you, and even now, you could hardly believe any of his words were lies. He was sincere with you -- the way he held you, kissed you, and even made love to you. There were no lies in his eyes when he spoke about his feelings for you. He promised so much during his confession. He only withheld the truth from you, lied through omission, but nothing about your relationship was false.

But could you believe him? Could you set aside his trespass and move on?

But don't you believe them
Don't you drink their poison too
These are the scars that words have carved
on me

He was a demon. Upon initial realization, it left a wound across your heart that could only heal as a scar. You still didn’t know much about demons, but if they were anything like Batu, you didn’t want to be anywhere near him. You shuddered at the thought of your encounter with Batu earlier today. It was horrible.

But Shuichi was not like Batu. He was gentle and kind; he treated you well in the short time you'd had known him. You remembered him going out of his way to make you feel comfortable when your apartment was a mess, when you thought you had lost Yugen. He went with you everywhere, helping you search for your dog, even though they were apparently enemies. You remembered your conversation in Inoji, when Shuichi let you decide how to handle your relationship in the
office. Since then, he abided by your rules, always allowing you to set those boundaries. You remembered the night you pricked your finger on a rose from the bouquet he brought you. He rushed to your side immediately, cleaning and bandaging your finger without so much as a complaint.

You remembered meeting his mother, someone for whom he cared deeply. If you had any doubts about his feelings for you, at least he loved you enough to bring you to see his family. He didn’t have to do that. If your relationship was a farce, he would not have invested the time and care in sharing them with you.

Hey love,
That's the name we've long held back
From the core of truth

You couldn’t not think of him. Shuichi was in your thoughts, fond memories of your time together. You loved the way he teased you, the way he made you blush. You loved the flitting feeling in your heart when you saw him in the hallway at work, knowing you would have to save any physical affection for later. You loved waking up next to him, feeling his arms around you, his breath on the back of your neck.

Now, it hurt to think about those memories. You shut your eyes tight, tears seeping into your pillow, the emotions flooding you. Did that mean you no longer loved him?

“No,” you thought. “It means I miss him.” You hated yourself for admitting to it, for allowing your heart to be so helplessly open to someone who had so much power over you. You were at his mercy, even though his truths cut like daggers in your chest.

So don’t turn away now...
I am turning in revolution
These are the scars that silence carved
on me

You couldn’t deny it. Your feelings were fact, as much as they didn’t make sense to you. You should have hated him for lying to you, for withholding information that was well within your right to know before proceeding with this relationship.

But you didn’t. You didn’t hate him. You didn’t think you ever could.

You thought about that night, those minutes spent together in the forest. You would feel angry about his transgression, but when you imagined his eyes, those beautiful green eyes that carried you to him, your heart would soften. The resentment would dissipate, and you would only be left with the pain.

When you really thought about it, there was nothing he could do about being a demon. It was his heritage -- he could not change it any more than you could change yours. He must have been afraid of your reaction to have kept it a secret from you up until now.

Nevertheless, his silence, his reluctance to tell you the truth, hurt you the most. The wound had not yet healed, but you already knew this would leave the deepest scars.

Fortunately, scars faded over time.

This is the same place.
You were back to square one.

It was the worst place to be.

You wanted catharsis, and this back-and-forth thinking was only stalling the healing process. You clenched the pillow beneath you and shifted positions in bed, trying to find something more comfortable so you could finally fall asleep.

The truth was you couldn’t afford to be bothered with Shuichi right now. With this new turn of events, you had to focus. You had to protect yourself, and your volatile emotions surrounding Shuichi could only harm your ability to strategize. On principle, whether you forgave him or rejected him was fine -- you just needed to discharge your pent-up emotions and purge your heart of this conflict.

On the one hand, you wanted to forgive him. You wanted to be with him, to feel his arms around you again, to accept his love and devotion.

But on the other hand, reason called you away from him. If he was willing to deceive you once, reason stood to have you believe he could do it again.

Your memories were vivid, and you thought back to that night. He said he was trying to protect you. You didn’t accept that at the time, but now, considering how the events unfolded, you understood. Perhaps he thought that by hiding the truth from you, he could preserve your naiveté -- normally, simplemindedness was not a virtue, but you could see how ignorance was bliss.

However, his efforts were not enough. Would it not have been better for you to know? At least, then, you could make your own decisions and attempt to protect yourself.

You nearly laughed at the thought. You couldn’t protect yourself against these demons. Your captors proved that.

Maybe Shuichi was right.

\[ Hey \ love, \]
\[ I \ am \ a \ constant \ satellite \]
\[ of \ your \ blazing \ sun \]

You wished he was here. Sincerely and with all your heart, you wanted to see him again. You had endless questions you wanted to ask him.

What was his plan all along? Did he ever intend to tell you about his demon nature had Yugen not tried to lure you into the forest? Who was he? How did he end up in the Living World as a human? Did he really love you?

Only after hearing his responses would you be able to answer your own questions.

Would you have rejected him had he told you about his demon nature earlier in your relationship? Could you love a demon? After all that happened, could you forgive him and let him back into your heart?

\[ My \ love, \]
You rolled onto your back, letting the tears fall away. For a moment, you forgot the predicament you were in. You forgot about this strange place, this bed that wasn’t yours. You forgot about your meeting with the khan tomorrow, the one who had you brought here in the first place.

You only remembered Shuichi. You loved him. You still did.

You could only hope that he still loved you, too. And even if he did, how was he to know where to find you? You couldn’t rely on him -- you had to make your own way back to the Living World. Somehow.

Assuming you could, after you practically told Shuichi to leave you, would he still wish to be with you? Would he forgive you for rejecting him in that heated instant? It must have hurt him deeply, perhaps as much as he hurt you. How awful it must have been for him to be spurned for his heritage -- that wasn’t why you did it, but it must have felt that way to him.

You had let your emotions get the best of you that night, and this was the result of it. Regardless of how your relationship would be resolved, you owed him an apology. You should have stayed with him, returned to the cottage, and heard him out.

Maybe then, none of this would have happened.

\[ I obey your law of gravity \\
This is the fate you've carved on me... \]

You could only love him. From the first time you set foot in his office, you were entranced by him, his beautiful complexion, his smooth graces. You admired his wit, his intelligence, his affable sense of humor. He was always compassionate with you, patient and understanding, even through your faults.

You weren’t sure if you would ever see him again, nor were you sure if you would ever engage in a relationship with him, if you did.

But you couldn’t deny your feelings for him, the way he drew your soul closer to his.

You loved him. And, regardless of how events played out, you always would.

Chapter End Notes

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“My lady? My lady? It’s time to get up.”

You stirred, opening your eyes to the light pouring through the windows. A gentle fire was already burning in the hearth, and Qara was there, pouring you a cup of tea. In the daylight, the room was well-lit. You had neither the sight, nor the energy, to admire the decor last night, but it was beautiful -- the walls were covered in elegant tapestries, otherwise painted white, and each window was framed in a deep shade of blue, fitted with tiles that shined like lapis lazuli. Your wing was upstairs, situated near the roof, and you could see the rafters in place, strategically set to hold the weight of the ceiling while adding an aesthetic flair.

Your bed was layered in cloth, soft to the skin, designs sewn in the patterns of flowers in threads of gold. You weren't familiar with the art of sewing, but you could only guess this was expensive. You were surprised at how well you slept last night. After about an hour of deliberation and thoughts of Shuichi, you had fallen asleep, undisturbed until now.

As you sat up, Qara handed you the tea in a delicate porcelain cup. “Thank you,” you said, smelling the fragrance. “Qara?”

“Yes, my lady?”

“Do you know what’s happening today? I was told I’d meet with the khan this morning.”

“Yes, my lady. Lord Oktai will come fetch you when the khan is ready to see you.”

You studied her carefully. She had short brown hair and adorable freckles, her eyes round -- you thought they would be full of life, if she weren’t so dedicated to her tasks. She worked quickly, barely ever standing still. She performed maintenance on the fireplace, laid your clothes out for you, and brought you a hot breakfast with fruit on the side.

While you certainly didn’t want Qara to feel unneeded, you felt awkward. You never had anyone
wait on you hand and foot before. It seemed unnecessary, fostering a sense of dependence from which no one benefitted. Telling her to leave you alone, however, was not the solution. Besides, as unfortunate of a thought as it was, you were probably kinder to her than some other masters would be.

She even helped you get dressed after you slipped out of the bed, showing you how to step into the attire appropriate for someone living in Xanadu. They liked layers and sashes, soft folds of silk upon silk. The base of the dress flowed to the floor -- when you walked, the cloth was cool to the touch of your legs, making you feel as though you were traversing among the clouds. A sash was tied along your waist, not tight enough to be uncomfortable, but it was snug, fit to the curve of your body and knotted in the back. From there, another cord of twisted thread, laced with beads, was fastened, allowed to dangle along your front, the very ends flowing with elegant tassels and charms. The sleeves of the dress glided over your shoulders and down nearly to the ground, lighter than air. They were composed of several layers, each one a little shorter than the one before it, creating a beautiful tiered effect that reminded you of how the ocean tides kissed the shores -- first, a cloth patterned with flowers, then a sheer overlay, and finally the thinnest of white silk. A slit was cut into the sleeves so your arms were free, even as the cloth glided beside you. Over your shoulders again, Qara lay a shawl to keep the base of your neck warm, letting it flow between your torso and your arms.

Next came the accessories: a necklace, earrings, and a comb-like hair piece that Qara slid into your bun. Finally, the makeup, which Qara applied with an expertly steady hand. It all matched your dress, far too opulent for your liking, but you thought it best to not refuse the hospitality, at least until you knew better.

“Thank you, Qara,” you said. “I never would have been able to do this on my own.”

She folded her hands together and bowed at you. “My pleasure, my lady.”

Just in time. Someone knocked at the bedroom door. “Good morning,” Oktai said. “Are you ready, _____?”

“Yes,” you said, gathering your courage. You would need it.

Qara opened the door, letting Oktai step inside. His eyes widened when he saw you, and he smiled. “You look lovely, my lady.” He offered you his arm. “Come with me. We’re going to see Yulkhan.”

He led you through the palace. It was bustling today, servants running about, each of them busy with their daily tasks. The walls stretched high, covered in carved wooden panels that let in light. Paintings and tapestries hung upon them, stories told within the art that you would one day ask Oktai to explain to you. The wooden floors were wiped clean beneath your feet so smoothly you thought you might slip and fall in your slippers.

“How did you sleep?” he asked.

“Like a rock,” you said. “When I finally fell asleep, I didn’t wake until morning.”

“Good. You had a long journey. I’m glad your sleep was restful. You certainly look bright-eyed and fit to see the khan.” He glanced at you, his azure eyes glimmering in thought. “You certainly make that dress look especially beautiful. Yulkhan picked it out for you.”

“R-really?” How awkward.
“Yes. He has a good eye, doesn’t he? It’s a dress fit for royalty.”

You nodded, quieting.

“Here we are,” Oktai said, leading you to a grand set of doors. They were not unlike the gates outside, but these were even more regal. They were painted in gold, carvings of guardians etched out in swirls of clouds and flowers among them. He waved his staff, and the doors opened, revealing a dark room, only guided by candlelight and a single window high above the throne. “Yulkhan, my lord, I’ve brought our guest,” he called.

“Come in, come in,” you heard Yul say, his voice deep and rich, and if you heard right, even welcoming.

“Go on,” Oktai encouraged. “He wants to meet with you. Just before the first step to the throne, remember to kneel. It is a sign of respect.”

Feeling a little intimidated, you paused, took a breath, and began your journey into the throneroom. It was eerie, the room especially cool in temperature.

Yul sat on his throne, an intricately carved chair, draped in silks and padded with cushions.

Your eyes trained the ground, and even though you wanted to be brave, you knew the impact this meeting could have on your future. For now, you had to remain polite, respectful, gathering information so you could make the right decisions for yourself going forward.

When you made it to the throne, you did as Oktai instructed.

“Welcome,” Yul said, his voice an artful rumble. He was cast in shadow, and you were unable to see his face. “As you were.” He motioned for you to stand. “Do you know why you’re here, _____?”

You shook your head. “No, Yulkhan. I’ve asked, but no one has told me.”

“You seek answers,” he said. “I expected so. Please, sit down, and I will do my utmost to provide them to you.”

“You want to ask Yul to clarify, but you were too shaken to even speak.

“You seek answers,” he said. “I expected so. Please, sit down, and I will do my utmost to provide them to you.”

“Who are you really?” you whispered, finding your voice.

“I am your ancestral father. It has been well over a thousand years since the inception of your line. I have finally found you, my child. Your ancestral mother, my daughter, was stolen from me at birth, and now, at long last, we are reunited.”

“How did you find me?”

“I have talented retainers. You’ve already met Oktai, my most trusted advisor. Honyu is a skilled chemical engineer. I had him manipulate specially bred insects to search for traces of my demon energy in the Living World. They had been searching for over a month. I don't think you were so well-hidden. It's far more likely that you found love.”

The expression on your face must have been telling.
“How do I know? Oh, Daughter, you will soon discover I have eyes and ears and a vault of intelligence at my fingertips.” He chuckled. “But on this matter, believe it or not, I had no idea. The Living World is challenging to explore from afar. I can only assume my insects found you after you had your first intimate night with a lover.”

You looked away, you face hot with embarrassment. “There's no way you could know that.”

“Not for sure, but I can make educated assumptions. You see, women of demon heritage do not fully come of age until they mate, releasing any potential of demonic energy. Since my insects were engineered to find your inherited demon energy, I was not able to locate you until that night.”

He seemed to sense your discomfort. “It is nothing to feel ashamed of,” he assured. “It is most natural, a biological calling, the method by which life is brought into the world. Who is the lucky man?”

“I don't think that's any of your business,” you said, perhaps a bit more forcefully than you intended, your throat clenching in pain. You couldn't help it. Any time you thought of Shuichi, you wanted to cry.

Yul must have heard it, but he did not reprimand your disrespectful tone. “I see. He broke your heart. Such is the nature of a relationship between a man and a woman. I am sorry.” He stood, stepping toward you. He was tall, at least six and a half feet in height, his long hair pulled back in a low-set ponytail. His eyes glowed in the dim light, a steely silver, almost like the sheen of the moon. “Come with me,” he said, offering you his clawed hand.

You didn't particularly want to take it, but you also didn't wish to insult him. You placed your hand in his, realizing just how small it was compared to his. He could easily crush you.

Still, his grasp was gentle and warm. “Let me show you something.”

He led you through the large double doors, walking past Oktai, who bowed his head in respect as he passed. “Yulkhan, I have some business to attend to. Do you need anything else of me?” Oktai asked.

“Go on,” Yul said. “You have done well. I will summon you should I require anything else.”

“Yes, sire.” Oktai nodded at you reassuringly and left immediately.

Yul did not press ahead, despite his long strides. He walked beside you, staying at your pace.

The halls were long and vast, and he took you through them until he pushed open the doors to a balcony, holding the curtains above your head as he gestured for you to step outside. It was a large space, part of it sheltered by the towering roof, while the other was under the light of the Demon World sun. Greenery grew out here, nurtured in potted features.

“You have done well. I will summon you should I require anything else.”

“The Living World is challenging to explore from afar. I can only assume my insects found you after you had your first intimate night with a lover.”

You stepped toward the balcony railing, a sea of green enveloping your vision, continuing as far as you could see. A pool of water, mildly blue, perhaps neutralized by the light of the red skies, stretched into the distance. It was breathtaking.

“This land was once a desert. It was bleak and cold, a wasteland where demons came to die. I brought life to it with the most ingenious of engineers and scientists. First, we carved a canal from the main river in the Makai, flooding the wasteland. Then, we introduced seeds, growing the shrubbery and grass. This brought birds and insects, in turn attracting small predators. We began to cultivate portions of the land for our own usage, growing crops and raising livestock.
“We are able to sustain the population of Xanadu here, while the rest of the world hungers. We reap our rewards carefully, never drawing too much from the land. I have my constituents put a heavy focus on innovation and science, so we are able to produce more food every year. My people never want for anything. They have food and water aplenty, and not just the staples of rice and bean curd -- they have a variety of fruits from the orchard, vegetables from the garden, meat and eggs from the farms, and fish from the springs. This is Xanadu, my paradise.”

Although you were still suspicous, your cynicism waned for the moment. If what Yul said was true, this really was a feat of modern technology. Even back in the living world, while large cities were capable of being locally sustainable, few, if any, actually were. This, of course, hurt the environment in numerous ways, resulting in a large carbon footprint, exacerbating pollution and global warming.

Now, Xanadu was nothing like any city you’d ever seen, but you wondered if Yul’s engineers and scientists were knowledgeable enough to expand on the research of humans. This place was so clean, the air fresh, and the skies clear.

“What do you think of Xanadu, Daughter?”

You glanced at him in the sunlight for the first time, surprised at how normal he looked. He seemed mostly human to the naked eye, tall with broad shoulders. His face was pointed, a slender nose and high cheekbones. Long hair, dark and smooth, came to his waist, secured by a ribbon. His skin was tanned from many hours spent under the sun, arms toned. Fine, sleeveless robes, perfectly ironed and fitted, donned his body, a sword sheathed at his hips. He wore heavy boots, traveling swiftly and silently, despite their size.

“It’s nothing like I’ve ever seen,” you said, “not even in the Living World.”

“It is what I want. A peaceful world, rid of hunger and war. A place where we respect the land, pursue the arts, and fulfill each destiny to the fullest.”

“And how do you plan on achieving such a utopia?”

“I see what your meaning is, _____,” he said, using your name for the first time. “In order for dreams to be realized, sacrifices must be made. There are many leaders among the demon tribes. Up until the most recent unification tournament, they each had their laws and codes -- or lack thereof, a chaotic system of government, where a woman could be slaughtered for stealing to provide for her children. Men could set fire to a village of civilians and be praised for such a heinous act. Kings sought out the most violent of tortures, methods of entertainment as they massacred their enemies. I take no pleasure in the suffering of others. It is fruitless.

“I want order. I want civilizations to evolve, to seek revelation. We demons have been misunderstood, hiding in the darkness, for far too long, even the ruler of Spirit World, King Yama, condemning us to a fate in a dimension separate from the Living World. The lesser demons are heartless and wild, mindless and carnal. We can change that by unifying the Demon World. In older days, that required amassing an empire. I defeated those who opposed me and protected those who would ally with and serve me. Those under my rule were given freedoms to worship and live in peace so long as they honored my edicts.”

“So you took life and saved life,” you said, “And you only preserved life if those people would bend to your will. I’m not sure how that’s so noble.”

“That was less than ideal, I admit. As I said, I loathe bloodshed if it can be avoided, but Demon World was far more untamed in those times. Demons listen to violence, and sometimes, that is the
language we must speak.”

“Maybe they need to be taught a different language.”

“Do you think the demon Batu would have listened to any voice other than threat of harm when he tried to force himself on you?”

You fell silent. Yul was right. You tried appealing to Batu’s humanity, begging, telling him to stop -- you’d even struck him. The only tactic you hadn’t tried was logic, but you doubted he would even listen to that.

“Oktai told me what happened. I am glad he made it in time to stop Batu. Batu acted with an evil heart, and so he was punished accordingly.”

You didn’t exactly feel badly for Batu, but you saw the dangers of Yul’s logic. Who would be the one to deliver justice? Who would be the one to decide what was right and wrong? Who could determine the truths from the lies?

“Now with the fourth unification tournament,” Yul continued, “I may create the world I seek without meaningless violence. You will assist me, Daughter.”

“How? I’m not a fighter.”

“You will learn during your stay here. I will teach you.”

You raised a suspicious eyebrow, unsure of what he was hinting at. “I think you might be in for some disappointment.”

“I doubt it.” Yul seemed so sure of himself. “You don’t know the kind of power you have. It was passed down through the generations. My power. You will see it soon. For now, rest in paradise, my daughter. You will need your full strength.”

Chapter End Notes

lol, I spent way too long writing about that darn dress. XDDD;; IT JUST SEEMED SO PRETTY IN MY MIND. LOL.

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of October to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
They were here. They arrived just on the border of Yul’s territory, having stepped through one of Arban’s portals. The land was lush and rich, the surrounding forests full of life. Even as a wind blew through the treetops, it did not smell of the sulfur that most of Demon World seemed tainted with.

“Xanadu,” Arban said as he hid among the trees. “The palace is up ahead, through the surrounding city. _____ will be held there.”

“It’s bound to be well-guarded,” Hiei said. “Even Enki refuses to send his armies here for fear of devastating military losses.”

Kurama stared ahead, assessing the land for any advantage.

“So what is the plan?” Arban asked. “I can disguise myself and slip into the palace to find her. What will you do?”

Hiei paused, removing his headband to reveal the Jagan. It opened slowly, a faint blue pulsing from its eerie depths. It took him only several minutes to find his target, his mind sweeping through the capital. “She’s in the western-most wing, on the highest floor. The palace is crawling with soldiers. Many of them are not of consequence, but there are a few stronger demons among them.”

“It seems the best strategy is to create a diversion, while Arban finds her,” Kurama said.

“Any strategy will do,” Hiei said. “I haven’t had a good fight in a long time. I think my sword misses the taste of flesh.”

“Yul is strong,” Arban said, a low warning in his voice. “His power rivals that of the previous three kings, perhaps even greater. He did not partake in the last struggle for domination because he is still biding his time for a sure victory. If either of you fight him, you will lose. I guarantee it. If you care for your life, stealth is your best option.”

“Then scout ahead,” Kurama said. “Learn her schedule. See if you might lure her outside the palace and into a less guarded location.”

Arban nodded, shifting into a lesser demon, a simple servant in plain clothes. He journeyed into the city, sandals clipping his heels with each step.
They waited, resting at the edge of the forest, the sound of birds chirping. This place was so pure that it unnerved the two demons, considering the power that lay within the city. What a curious contrast.

“Hiei.” Kurama glanced at him from the side as he leaned against the trunk of a tree. “How is she?”

“You’ve been dying to ask me that question since I first glimpsed her. I wondered how long you’d wait.”

“Well?”

“She’s fine, Kurama. As far as I can tell, she’s unharmed. They’re treating her well.”

“Arban was right.” He felt relieved that his assessment was accurate -- this meant that as long as the circumstance held constant, she was safe. They had to play their cards carefully and not tip the scale in Yul’s favor.

Hiei sat on the ground, one knee folded, the other leg straight. “So who is this girl?”

“I met her through work.”

“I didn’t think you’d settle for a simple human.”

“I didn’t either.” Kurama fondled a rose, surveying each perfect petal as he thought. “As irony would have it, she’s not so simple, after all.”

Hiei didn’t respond.

Kurama strategized, thinking through each option with careful precision. It was likely there was going to be some sort of confrontation. He doubted Arban’s claims of stealth would be fully successful as ______ was sure to be guarded from every angle.

Although it was not ideal, Kurama was not opposed to fighting. It seemed the Hiei even craved the thrill of battle again. Kurama would certainly draw his weapon, if necessary, and he trusted his skills to defeat the vast majority of warriors within Xanadu. Whether or not Yul was involved was the deciding factor -- he wished to keep the demon king out of battle at all costs. If Yul really was as strong as any of the three kings, that would make him, in measurable terms, an upper S class demon. That would be a dangerous fight, one with no certain outcome, and with ______’s fate in the balance, Kurama was not willing to take that chance.

Of course, there were alternatives.

As merciless and determined as he was, Yul was not inclined to fighting without purpose. He was intelligent, a mastermind on the battlefield, striking only when it served him. He was never needlessly violent; he was not sadistic as many demon lords were. Yet, he was known for calculated displays of power that drove fear into the hearts of demons who could potentially oppose him. Yul would set examples of those who betrayed him, defied him, brutally and swiftly.

Kurama could appeal to his rationality. He could strike a deal. If he remembered correctly, Yul liked contracts. He was one to appreciate their mutually beneficial nature, investing in great resources and efforts to master the notorious blood pact rituals.

In centuries past, Yoko Kurama scoured Xanadu, thieving riches and rare artifacts from the demon elite. He planned his expeditions carefully, never overstepping his boundaries, withdrawing before
he delved too deeply, too greedily. He guided his most capable men into the palace, through the
fortresses of Yul’s territory, and into well-guarded vaults teeming with traps. They escaped with
priceless treasures more often than not, earning the ire of their victims. Yoko Kurama rarely kept
these valuables, their true worth in the successes and prestige of stealing them.

There were a few rare artifacts he kept hidden away, however, reserving them in case he would one
day find them useful. Of course, these treasures originally belonged to Yul, and the demon khan
would no doubt wish to have them returned. Perhaps Kurama could use them as leverage - - he
remembered their location.

But, if push came to shove, Kurama would fight for _____’s freedom. He didn’t want to have to
resort to using Yoko, if at all possible, but against a demon as powerful as Yul, he had no choice. It
was the only way to ensure even a chance at victory.

For personal reasons, Kurama preferred not to employ Yoko. Since he had started his involvement
with Spirit World, he had reverted back to his demon form on only a few occasions. During the
Dark Tournament, he needed Yoko Kurama’s power to even survive against Karasu, and the Fruit
of the Previous Life gave him that opportunity. When Yusuke was savagely executed by Sensui,
Kurama was so incensed at the loss that he unlocked the vast pools of his demon energy and
transformed into Yoko. From that point forward, he was able to manipulate his physical form at
will, though in moments of duress, the demon inside would take over, even without Kurama’s
express permission. This was what happened during the first unification tournament. Kurama had
to forcibly repress Yoko when he fought Shigure.

He wanted the choice. He wanted to always be in control. He needed to balance the pure, lethal
power at his fingertips with the human compassion he now valued.

With Yoko, in all his organized chaos, a quiet thunder over the lands, the demon heart was
impossible to tame. He was the same person with a wildly different perspective, a tendency toward
discord, and blatant disregard for the well being of others. Whenever Kurama utilized Yoko’s
strength, he felt a shift toward his demon nature at the cost of the progress he made toward
humanity.

It was a risk. But, as he promised her, she was worth it.

“I was expecting you.”

Kurama and Hiei were both caught off guard as a figure approached them.

“Sorry. Didn't mean to sneak up on you,” the man said with a friendly grin. “I do so much
reconnaissance for Yulkhan I’ve gotten used to disguising my energy on a day-to-day basis. Force
of habit, really.”

“Who are you?” Hiei demanded. “Better start talking or you won't be able to after I’m through with
you.”

“I am Oktai, one of Yulkhan’s most trusted advisors and retainers. If you were from here, I’d
expect you to know that. Indeed, I should be asking for your identities.”

“Yul sent you to meet us, I assume?” Kurama said.

“No, actually. I came of my own accord. I have sources that tell me who you are and what you're
doing here. I thought I'd verify your identities before I take you to the king.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” Kurama asked, though he already knew.
Oktai took a step back, channeling his energy, a rare hybrid between spirit and demon, into his staff. It glowed bright, a thick heat emanating from the stone at the top. “If you are who my sources say you are, you'll have no problem fighting me.”

A burst of intense power came from the staff, jetting toward the two demons in an eruptive force. Kurama and Hiei dodged in time, but the rest of the forest was not quite so fortunate. The attack incinerated a path through the trees, leaving nothing but smoldering stumps in its wake.

“Oh,” Oktai sighed. “That was probably a bit much. I’ll have to find someone to fix that later. The poor trees.” He then gave his opponents a boyish smile. “Actually, you wouldn’t have any trouble bringing those trees back to life, would you? Perhaps you'd be kind enough to do so after our fight.”

The neutral expression on Kurama’s face did not change. He was engaged in battle now, and letting emotions take him by surprise was the last thing he needed. Instead, the rose in his hand grew long and thin, its thorns increasingly sharp.

Hiei was already on his way, closing the distance with incredible speed. He raised his sword on Oktai, bringing it down in a slash.

Oktai lifted his staff, a faint blue glow materializing into a barrier. The blade shattered as it made contact, shards of metal flying through the air. “My apologies. That looks like a quality sword. I’ll have our armorer replace that.”

Next, Kurama’s rose whip came at him, gliding in from the side. Oktai dodged, rolling on the ground to avoid the attack with ease.

“You're going to have to do better than that,” he said, the stone of his staff glowing again.

The whip in Kurama’s hand splintered, the organic material drying up and crumbling to dust. That was fine. Kurama had many more weapons at his disposal.

Without his sword, Hiei decided to revert to martial combat, summoning the powers of his Jagan into a flame that engulfed his fist. He dashed toward his opponent, throwing a series of punches, each one smashing into the barrier as Oktai stood behind it, calmly watching.

“You can’t break it,” Oktai said. “No one’s ever done it before.”

“We don’t need to,” Kurama said. The ground beneath Oktai burst, a leafy plant coming forth, knocking him off balance. The barrier weakened for a moment as his concentration was diverted.

Hiei rushed forward, his first fist breaking the barrier, the second making solid contact with the side of Oktai’s face. The hit sent Oktai flying backward; he hit the ground with a thud, pushed through the ground for several yards, clumps of dirt and grass flying.

“A barrier is only as strong as its caster,” Kurama continued. “Compromise the caster, and the barrier diminishes.”

“Clever,” Oktai said, standing up and wiping the blood away from the corner of his mouth. “I was hoping you’d figure it out. Well, at this juncture, you have to decide whether or not you actually want to kill me. I can tell you’re a little conflicted. Do you want to eliminate me and continue with whatever arrangement you have? Or would you prefer that I take you to my master now?”

“Kill him,” Hiei said. “His arrogance will be his death. He claims to know who we are and still he dares to strike?”
It had been on Kurama’s mind. As much as he loathed to trust this new stranger, how many talented others were under Yul’s service? He had a feeling Oktai was not using his full capability in this battle. If he was able to find both he and Hiei, despite their discretions, confident enough to confront them without the support of allies, he must have been strong. Yul would not employ an advisor who suffered strategically.

Then, Kurama noticed it.

Already, Hiei had rushed toward Oktai, fists ablaze again.

“What?!” Kurama said.

“Why?” he demanded, but he did, heels digging into the ground.

“Look closely.”

Hiei stared at Oktai’s museful expression, a sour disposition on his face. In the pale light that filtered through the canopy of the forest, he saw a glimmer. It all became apparent. Wires were strung from tree to tree, branch to branch. They were thin, fine, tightly woven like that of a spider’s web, and at Hiei’s speed and momentum, they would have shred him through the bone before he even realized it.

“There are many different kinds of barriers,” Oktai said, staff still in hand. “I was hoping you’d notice, Kurama. I wasn’t around the last time you looted in Xanadu. That was a few decades ago, but Yulkhan speaks highly of your cunning and strength. He denounces your thievery, of course, but he admires your tenacity.”

“What is it you want?” Kurama said.

“It’s not about what I want. It’s about what you want. You wouldn’t come here all the way from the Living World for nothing, would you?” Oktai tapped his staff on the ground, and the wires disappeared, vanishing as subtly as they came. “I know you tried to protect Lady _____ from the mercenaries we sent. I know you killed General Gan. I know Arban the Deceiver is with you somewhere. My sources are only the most reliable. You’re here for her. Perhaps you can come to an arrangement with my master in which you’re both happy.”

“Why would Yul do that?” Hiei said. “Don’t insult us. If he intends on using her as a weapon, he wouldn’t release her.”

“You say that like it’s the only option,” Oktai said. “Yulkhan is a reasonable man. Why not come and see what my lord has to offer?”

“It sounds like a trap.”

Oktai smiled, his eyes crinkling in amusement. “Believe what you like.”

Kurama watched him, wondering how this young man was so easygoing. Yul was known to appreciate different perspectives, his council of advisors among the most diversified in Demon World. Having such an optimistic personality must have been an interesting contrast to the cynical views of most seasoned tacticians.

“I’ll go,” Kurama said. He had reviewed the cards in his hand, and he could make a play on them. The only variables were what Yul wanted and what he was willing to give up.

“What?” Hiei didn’t seem enraged -- merely surprised. “We have the upper hand out here, Kurama.
You go inside that palace, and you lose your advantage.”

“You have to partake to win,” Kurama said, the look on his face darkening. “Take me to him, Oktai.”
Chapter Notes

I really like this chapter! It's longer than most of them, as I said they would probably be in the third arc, and it gets a little dark.

I took a few liberties with Kurama's past. Although I watched the anime religiously several times, I've never read the manga. I scoured the internet to find inconsistencies with my theories and couldn't find anything, so unless someone finds information that says otherwise, I think my interpretations stand. :')

I'm bringing up a lot of loose ends that I'm hoping to tie off. You'll can yell at me later if this all blows up in my face because I'm giving myself a lot of work. ^_^;;; And remember how I said this would only be 50 chapters? Well, lol. BUT. I promise I have an actual end in sight. This isn't like Inuyasha where the show continues for forever just because it can. I really know how I want this to end. It's just... getting there. XD;;;

Thank you to FranMakara, perfect-to-stay, CrossYourTeez, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, FannibalToast, LadyAmazon, and TK09! for your comments! I love hearing your thoughts and theories. ;) Even if I won't confirm or deny, I get giddy reading them. XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Very good,” Oktai said, looking pleased. “Will you be joining us, Hiei?”

“I don’t think so.” Hiei turned away. “Have fun negotiating with a tyrant, Kurama,” he said before disappearing into the forest.

“What a sprightly fellow,” Oktai said.

Kurama expected as much. He was not disappointed, knowing fully that his friend would not be far away. Hiei was only hedging the bet. It was a smart choice.

“That’s too bad,” Oktai continued. “He’ll be missing out on Xanadu’s legendary hospitality. At least, you’ll be able to enjoy it, Kurama.” He noticed his steady gaze. “Oh, I see. You care for Lady _____ and won’t rest until you know she’s safe. I understand. You don’t have to take my word for it, but I assure you she’s doing well.”

“She better be.”

“Ah, enough with the threats!” Oktai sighed. “I may have a great sense of humor, and while Yulkhan appreciates honesty, he doesn’t take well to those who try to intimidate him. If you want any chance at this working out in your favor, I’d consider tempering your words.”

Kurama ignored him. He followed Oktai as he led him through the city. Some of it was familiar. He remembered the map of the streets, the older buildings, and even some of the civilians even as they were decades older. Even he had to admit that Xanadu was a beautiful place, but in order to live here, the people were subject to Yul’s laws. While he fostered an environment in which people
were educated and welcome to voice their opinions, he also quashed rebellions relentlessly. He would kill not only the soldiers but their families as well. It was a warning, a message to all those who may wish to fight for their freedoms.

“You must be arguing,” Oktai said as they walked, “you and Lady _____.

Kurama looked at him from the corner of his eye. “That is none of your concern.”

“I’m sorry. I only thought I’d mention it because Lady _____ is missing you. I can feel it when I talk with her.”

His curiosity got the best of him. “What has she said?”

“Oh, nothing about you specifically. There’s just something mournful about the way she skims over any conversations about life. I’m assuming it has to do with you.”

Kurama’s heart ached, knowing she deserved better. She had to struggle through her captivity, fearing for her very life, and even now, she was grieving -- not for her loss of freedom, but over him. There was no point in brooding over it now that it was done, but he could not help but wish he could go back and change what led to this.

“You have regrets as well.”

“This man is aggravatingly perceptive,” Kurama thought. He realized the best way to silence Oktai was to not feed his interest, so he remained quiet for the remainder of the journey.

Qara followed you everywhere, like a dutiful puppy with sad eyes. She reminded you of the dogs you worked with at the shelter. They would attempt to go everywhere with you, always looking for praise or a treat. Qara didn’t seem as eager to please, but she was as cognizant as ever. When you were cold, she had an extra shawl. When you were thirsty, she handed you a cup of tea.

It was almost unnerving how well she anticipated your needs. You didn’t even need to mention or ask. “Qara, how is it that you’re so good at what you do?” you said as you sat by the fire, sipping on the tea she prepared.

“What do you mean, my lady?” she said, her voice quiet.

“You’ve been doing this for a long time, haven’t you?”

She was stoking the fire, feeding the flames with thick logs of wood. “Yes, my lady.”

“But you’re so young. Where do you come from?”

Qara stood, her eyes on the ground, hands folded in front of her. “I was born here,” she said. “Yulkhan took me from the ranch and brought me here to work. They trained me.”

“The ranch? What is that?”

“You don’t know, my lady?”

“Well, I am a little new here. What don’t I know?”

Qara looked reluctant to say.

Someone knocked on the door, and Qara rushed to open it. A servant appeared, a large vase of
flowers in his arms. “The daily arrangement for the lady,” he said, tipping his head inside. It looked heavy; he probably wanted to set it down.

The girl nodded, opening the door wider to let him in.

He walked toward the back of the den, placing it upon a shelf-like table.

The last time you received flowers was not long ago. In fact, the last time you saw Shuichi, there were flowers involved, when he made them grow from the seeds he placed in your hand that night in the forest. In the whirl of events and potent emotions you experienced, you had nearly forgotten about that.

You bit your lip, forcing the tears come to a stop before they fell.

“My lady,” the servant said, as he presented you with a single flower from the vase. “Welcome to Xanadu.”

You looked at him, carefully accepting the token. He was plain, a middle-aged man, hair combed back in careful streaks. There was something about him that made you feel warm, as though you were being watched -- and not in a violative sort of way, but in a way that made you feel you were safe.

He didn’t stay long enough for you to ask any questions, however. He left as soon as you made eye contact with him.

The experience was so perplexing that you were struck in a contemplative awe.

“Welcome, Kurama. It has been decades since I’ve seen you. I must admit -- you look quite different as a human. It’s hard to believe that the legendary Yoko Kurama is in that fragile body of yours.”

Kurama didn’t respond, eyeing Yul with leery caution.

“I know why you’re here. You care for my daughter, and you seek to take her away from my paradise.”

“She’s human. She doesn’t belong here.”

“Oh? You know humans are welcome in Xanadu.”

“As slaves and a source of food.”

“Ah, you think me so primitive,” Yul said, leaning forward in his throne so his elbows rested on his knees. “I have many human retainers who have earned their freedoms. In this paradise, an individual is judged on his worth, his abilities, his contributions to society. If a woman is fit to be a surgeon, then let her be a surgeon. If a human is fit to be a warlord, then let him be a warlord. I do not discriminate.”

Kurama moved past that argument. He was not here to save the poor souls who were enslaved here -- he only had one goal. “You have a reason for abducting _____? Why?”

Yul’s lips curved into a smile. “You have no idea the power that courses through her veins. Aren’t you the least bit curious?”

“Not at her expense, no.”
“So you claim to love her?”

There was no sense in denying that vulnerability. In coming here, Kurama already exposed himself.

“Love is a complicated emotion,” Yul continued. “I recognize it, and who am I to deny two star-crossed lovers? Humans and demons can produce the most powerful offspring, after all, and if it weren’t for you, Kurama, I never would have found ____ so quickly. Thank you for that.”

Kurama’s fists tightened, nails digging into his palms. “Enough. What is your point?”

“Let’s put your devotion to the test.”

With a wave of Yul’s hand, a door opened. Three captives were brought in, their hands bound in front of them, thick ropes around their necks. They were naked and barefoot, led by a servant single-file into the throne room.

Kurama’s eyes widened immediately. He recognized her smell, the pace of her steps, the way she carried herself. Long before she -- all three of her -- stepped into the light cast from the single window above the throne, he knew something was amiss.

“One of these women is yours,” Yul said. “The other two are imposters. Tell me who the real one is, and I will kill the other two. You may inspect them as you wish or ask them questions. We’ll see just how well you know her. You have sixty seconds.”

Yul was served by many skilled shapeshifters as he had once conquered a tribe of demons with this particular talent. Arban was among them. It would be near impossible to search these women, their bodies, for the real _____. or tell by their scents. They were all perfect carbon copies, and the scent of the juji plant oil, his original identifier, had long worn off. He could resort to asking them questions, though he would have to take care in his phrasing -- they would have _____’s memories and personality, after all.

Kurama looked at them, noting the fear in their eyes, the way they trembled from the cold and sheer terror. His heart clenched painfully for her, whichever one she was. She must have been humiliated and frightened, and this enraged him.

But then: “Kurama, please save me!” “Don’t let him kill me, Kurama!” “I don’t want to die! Kurama, please!”

Their voices were the same, their inflections perfectly hers. For a moment, even Kurama was fooled, his heart nearly skipping a beat. Yet, he was able to discern the illusions from reality, their very cries giving them away. “Kill them all. I have no reservations,” he said darkly.

Yul raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Are you sure?”

“They are all imposters.”

The demon khan chuckled. “How did you know?”

“She doesn’t know my real name,” Kurama said. “I never told her. And I don’t appreciate you testing me, so you can cease this irrelevant farce. Furthermore, you wouldn’t kill your own descendant daughter after investing so much in bringing her here.”

“You’re right,” Yul said. “For what it’s worth, Kurama, I never thought I’d succeed in deceiving you -- I was simply impressed by how quickly you figured it out. Your wits are about you, and
“Your woman is safe.” He waved his hand, and each of the three shapeshifters returned to other physical forms, exiting the throne room.

Kurama did not show it, but he was immensely relieved. Even though he knew they were imposters, seeing her likeness in that mortifying position made him uncomfortable. It wasn’t her body, but it was violative all the same.

“I am, however, surprised,” Yul said. “You’ve not told her about your history, your ancestry, your legacy as one of the most influential demons in the world. Tell me: is that how you broke her heart?”

“If she wanted you to know, she would tell you.”

The khan ignored his defiance. He had more important matters to discuss, after all. “You came all this way to rescue her. I assure you she needs no rescuing. She is not the classic damsel in distress humans enjoy so much -- she is strong, and she will learn to be stronger under my watchful eye and tutelage. Unless you think it wise to wage war on all of Xanadu, you won’t get her back. All the same, surely you accepted my invitation because you think you have something to offer me.”

“Then I deflect the inquiry back at you,” Kurama said. “You summoned me here when you could have killed me. I must have something you want.”

“Yes.” Yul’s eyes closed. “Twenty-five years ago, you were mortally wounded when you invaded the Spirit World in an attempt to steal the infamous Destiny Wand from King Yama’s vaults. You must wonder how months of planning went awry.”

Kurama’s eyes narrowed. “I must.”

“I alerted the Special Defense Force, King Yama’s elite Hunters, to your operation, not only because I wanted to be rid of your larceny in Xanadu, but also because I needed the body you left behind when you astrally projected yourself into the Spirit World.”

“My body?” He was shocked.

“The dark magic that maintains the integrity of bloodpacts is derived from powerful demonic energy. It can only be sustained by sacrificing the bodies of powerful demons. Yours was no exception, a perfect addition to fuel that magic.”

Kurama glared at Yul, the mystery of his fall from hard-earned prestige and power now clear to him. He had always thought he made some sort of calculation in error, going as far as to rationalize every potential misstep, wondering whether or not pride clouded his judgment. Now, he knew -- he had underestimated Yul, his shrewd play.

“Still, we never found your body. Your bones are out there, unused, untapped. Only you know where they are. They may not be as potent as they were decades past, but I still have use for them. The bloodpact magic hungers. Bring me the bones of your deceased demon body.”

“And if I do this?”

“I’m not finished yet, Kurama.” Yul grinned. “I will not allow my daughter to leave Xanadu, but you must wish to see her. You love her. I need her. The fourth Demon World unification tournament will take place in three months. She stays and trains with me in anticipation of this tournament. You may remain here with her during this time, carrying on with whatever relationship you wish to have, but I want something in return.”
“It sounds like even my remains are not enough for you.”

“I want your dexterity, your perception, your tenacity. I want you to fight for me in the upcoming tournament as well. Should you win, you will abdicate your rule to me.”

“Is that all?”

“I also want you to join my council of advisors while you are here. We may have been bitter enemies in years past, but I think your perspective is an important one. I will utilize your experience and advice in the new world I wish to create. You must serve me until I release you from my service.”

These terms were unbalanced, absolutely outrageous. Kurama seethed silently, knowing he could do nothing. Finding his remains was easy enough -- as repulsive as it was, turning over his bones to his enemy to fuel an ancient magic, it was fine. He didn’t need that body; it was long abandoned at any rate. Fighting on behalf of Yul was also acceptable. Kurama didn’t care for the Demon World throne. He likely would have fought for the thrill of it anyway, even though he had no intention of winning the tournament.

But forcing Kurama to serve on his council for a potentially infinite period of time was too much. This was not unlike the months he spent serving Yomi. However, Yomi was, at least in some ways, predictable and highly valued Kurama’s advice, going as far to blackmail him to protect his investment. Kurama did not know what serving Yul would be like, and with _____ right under his nose, Yul would have leverage.

Still, Kurama did not have many options. If Yul was not willing to release _____, then negotiations were at a dead end; he dictated the terms. It made sense that Yul would demand his loyalty if he were to allow Kurama to stay in Xanadu with her -- otherwise, there could be catastrophe. The khan would not forgo that part of the arrangement, and Kurama did not blame him for his caution.

As repugnant as it was to accept the proposal, he had no choice. He would have to get to _____ as soon as he could, and hope she would cooperate with Arban and Hiei in leaving this hollow paradise. Kurama would eventually follow. And if that plan didn’t work, at the very least, he could be there for her during these months. He didn’t know if she would forgive him for his transgressions, but he could offer his support, knowledge, and experience. He could protect her.

More than anything, he missed her. He wanted her safely in his arms, and this was his only chance. If he didn’t act now, winning her back would be near impossible, especially under Yul’s influence. He knew this was a weakness, his inability to sever these emotions, but he couldn’t help it. He loved her, and he would do anything to have the opportunity to right his wrongs.

“I accept,” Kurama said, “though I would like to add one more condition: _____ remains safe and unharmed.”

“I swear no harm will come to her by my hand, under my direction, or on my behalf,” Yul said. “I, too, have one more stipulation. I want you to serve me, fight for me, but I don’t need this fragile man who stands before me who values sentiment and humanity. I want Yoko Kurama, as you were over twenty-five years ago.”

This was the tipping point, but Kurama had success in the past controlling the demon within. He would just have to do it again. He had no choice.

“I don’t care how you present yourself to _____,” Yul continued. “If she prefers the red hair, the human body that so resembles her own, that is your business. Whatever guides you into her good
graces and bed is fine by me.”

Kurama’s eyes were cold, steely, and his eyebrows furrowed. “Very well,” he said. “I accept your terms. All of them. I would like to see her now, if we’re done here.”

“I am pleased, Kurama. You will see her soon. But I don’t trust you -- not yet.” Yul stood, stepping down from his throne, and motioning for his guest to follow. “I know your allegiance lies with my daughter and not with me. Your word means nothing to me -- you would betray me in a heartbeat if you saw the opportunity, just like you did to Yomi. I wouldn’t fault you. And you don’t trust my word either, do you? I insist on a bloodpact. That way, we may both be held accountable for our actions and our mutually beneficial contract.”

“Agreed,” Kurama said. The magic of the bloodpact, dark as it was, would ensure _____’s safety. It complicated the situation for Kurama, greatly so, but he was not concerned about that at the moment. He would worry about the consequences later. His priority was rescuing his beloved from this dreadful place.

She came first. She would always come first.

Chapter End Notes

tldr; Kurama's in a lot of shit now. :'D

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have until Thursday this week to participate!

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Hello, Kurama

Chapter Notes

OKAY. WE CAN HAVE SOME HAPPINESS IN OUR LIVES AGAIN.

Funny story: I usually spent Tuesdays after work writing because my husband raids with his World of Warcraft group, but today I went to the eye doctor. I wasn't there for long, but I had my eyes dilated, and I couldn't write for FOREVER because of it. So I sat there angrily thinking about what to write instead. lol.

I don't think I've ever actually cried when reading my own writing before, but this chapter did make me tear up a bit. <3 I hope you enjoy it!

<3 Thank you to those who left comments this last chapter: LadyAmazon, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, SailorCupcake, and CrossYourTeez. As always, I really appreciate the time and thought you put into them!

“My lady, someone is here to see you.” Qara bowed her head, standing by the door.

“All right,” you said, slipping out of your bed. “I’m coming.” You thought you would get some sleep to try and process everything you learned today about Xanadu and Yul and the world he wanted to create. But it seemed fate wanted you to stay awake a little longer.

Fortunately, you were still in the dress Qara helped you into this morning. You had thought about changing into something more comfortable, but you were glad you hadn’t -- at least, you would look acceptable for your visitor.

You stepped into the den, Qara opening the door for you. She gave you a small nod before exiting, closing it behind her.

You saw him, and your breath caught in your throat.

He was tall, majestic, silver hair flowing like silk. Two ears perched upon his head, like those of a fox, pointed and alert. He was clad in white robes, a full silver tail swept behind him. He stood still in the spacious room, silently observing you.

You had never seen him before in your life, and yet, you had never been so sure about the gaze in his gold eyes.

“Shuichi?” you said, without hesitation. He looked so different, but it felt like him.

He looked surprised, and in a shift that left a supernatural tingle in your spine, his body changed. He became shorter, his lanky body keeping its lean form, the color of his hair deepening into a vibrant red. His eyes melded from a piercing gold to an intense green.

There was Shuichi, just as you remembered him. You felt the emotion coursing through your veins.

“How did you know?” he asked, his gentle baritone a welcome sound to your ears.
You had to restrain yourself from running into his arms. “It’s the way you look at me. I’d never forget that look. Not in a thousand years.”

He paused, only briefly musing over your response. “_____,” he said, “are you hurt?”

“No. I’m all right.”

“But I see your captors haven’t been kind to you either.” He must have been referring to the bruises left by your bindings around your wrists and neck.

You suddenly felt self-conscious, wishing you had hidden them better. “I'm fine. Really.”

“I'm sorry,” Shuichi said, remorse in his eyes. “I should have protected you.”

“I'm not upset about that,” you said, remembering that night. You weren’t expecting him to protect you against five captors -- that would have been an impossible prospect. “I don't think there was anything you could have done.”

“As much as I appreciate the sentiment, you're wrong.” He looked away for a moment, almost as if he could hide his shame. “I should have told you the truth sooner. You were ill-prepared. I set you up for failure when the truth, the very realization that there are demons out there, could have saved you.”

“I doubt it.” His guilt was heart-wrenching, especially since you knew he had nothing to do with your capture. They didn’t want anything from him -- they wanted you. “From what I’ve discovered, these demons are persistent. I'm just a little… surprised that you came for me at all.”

“Why?” He stood still, his gaze upon yours. “I will always come for you. You know that or, at least, you should.”

You didn't mean to imply that he didn't care. You gave him a small, sad smile. “Aside from the obvious challenge of locating me, I wasn't sure you'd want to. Not after I dismissed you like I did...”

“_____, I blame myself. Forgive me. You must hate me for this.”

“Hate you?” His words made your heart bleed. Did he really think you so cold? “Shuichi, I could never hate you. I was hurt and confused, and I wanted answers. I still want answers.”

“If I can supply them, I will,” he said. “I promise you honesty. I owe you at least that.”

You had been wanting to ask him questions. You had dozens of them, initial questions, follow-up questions. But now that you stood in front of him, Shuichi promising to be truthful with you, you almost felt as though those questions no longer mattered. You just wanted to embrace him, bury your face in his chest, have him stroke your hair and tell you that everything was all right.

But you stood strong, knowing the only way you could accept your relationship was by understanding his whole truth. “When were you going to tell me?” you asked, figuring you had to start somewhere.

“I wanted to for a long time, ever since we started dating. You deserve the truth, but I was weak and fearful of your reaction. I didn't want to lose you.” He said this with deep regret in his eyes. “You have to understand, _____ -- the situation was a double-edged sword. I thought if I told you too soon, before you really trusted me, I would frighten you off. And if I told you too late at an inappropriate time… well, we both know what transpired there. I was trying to find the perfect
medium, but I should have known there are no perfect situations in relationships. Sometimes love requires a bit of risk, and in my reluctance to take that chance with you, despite my assurances that you're worth any amount of risk, I failed you. I should have trusted you, ____."

“You should have,” you agreed, the tears stinging at you eyes. “But I have to know -- are you really a demon? How is it that you're in the Living World? How is that you have a human mother?”

“The body you just saw me in, the fox demon, is my original form. I've lived for centuries, over a thousand years. I spent my time thieving for rare artifacts and riches. Twenty-five years ago, I made an error in calculation and had to escape the Spirit World. I was badly injured and hid myself in a developing human fetus, thus fusing our souls together as one. This human is Shuichi Minamino, as you know him.”

“But…” You were trying to wrap your head around it, this insane theory. “If you fused your souls together, then that means you're the same person.”

“It's complicated. We are the same, and yet, we're strikingly different. It's a rare juxtaposition. I can assure you, ____, I may live my life as Shuichi Minamino, but the demon has been present in all our interactions. I am human in body, and both human and demon in soul.”

It was hard to believe, but even so, you weren't repelled by the thought. If the man you loved was a demon, then he was a demon. Race didn't matter to you. As long as the personality you knew was the true reflection of who he was, that was all you needed to know. Shuichi confirmed this.

“I understand this is difficult to believe. It's a lot to take in, and I regret having to tell you under these circumstances.” He shifted, finally taking a look around the room, surveying his options. “We need to get you out of here.”

“Is that why you came?”

“Of course.”

“Can you even do that?”

Shuichi gave you a weak smile. “I can't go with you, but I've made arrangements. Your Yugen is here, hidden among the palace servants somewhere. He will help you escape.”

As curious as you were about Yugen, you had an even more pressing question. “You're not coming?”

“I've made a deal with Yul that requires me to stay for the moment. In fact, I shouldn't even be helping you, but what he doesn't know won't hurt him. At least, not until you're safely away from here.”

“But that puts you in danger.” He didn’t say it outright, but you could read between the lines.

“I can manage myself.”

“I'm not leaving without you,” you said, surprised by your own resolve.

“This isn't the time to be noble, ____. You're in danger here and unequipped to handle the challenges ahead. I want you to be safe. This is your one chance to escape Yul, and I'll be damned if I don't help you take it.”

Part of you felt beloved that he would risk it all for your freedom; the other part loathed how you
couldn't help yourself, in turn putting Shuichi in this situation. You were emotional, and your lack of ability to think rationally got you kidnapped. You should have stayed with him, under his watchful eye. Even now, he was fixing your mistakes.

“I'm sorry,” you whispered, diverting your gaze.

“_____?” He seemed genuinely surprised to hear your apology. “What for?”

The tears were coming. You could no longer suppress them. “I know you blame yourself, but I share some fault, too. I shouldn't have dismissed you like that. I shouldn't have run away. It's not fair to you. You've come all the way out here, knowing the dangers you'd be putting yourself in, all to save me when I'm the reason this happened in the first place. Why, Shuichi? Why?”

“You don't know?” He was quiet for a moment. Shuichi looked as though he wanted to reach out to you, comfort you, but he stood rooted where he was, and he straightened himself. “You deserve happiness, catharsis, after all this, after what I put you through. Many seek catharsis through forgiveness. I do not ask you to forgive me for my sake but for yours. I hurt you. Do not let my trespass bring you grief for years to come. You, of all people, are deserving of happiness. You won't find that here.”

“This is ludicrous,” you said, wiping your tears away with the back of your hand. “You're being dense. How am I supposed to be happy without you?”

He watched you, his eyes glistening with its evergreen, almost like emeralds unearthed from a secret reserve far beneath the earth. “_____…” he said, your name falling from his lips in a hushed tone.

“I love you, Shuichi,” you said between breaths. “I still do. I wasn't sure at first, but it's not something I can change. You're a part of my life now, permanently affixed, like a sun that I'm destined to revolve around. I can't forget you, so I can only forgive. I only hope you can forgive me, too. Please.”

Relief washed over him. You could see it in his posture, and he stepped toward you, reaching out with his hand. “Come here,” he said softly, inviting you into his arms. Even now, he gave you a choice, asking, rather than touching you of his own accord.

You let yourself close the gap, grasping his hand, letting him pull you to him. You smelled the distinct perfume of roses, felt the warmth of his touch. You embraced him, tucking your head beneath his chin. This was your home, here in his arms, and you cried into his chest, sobbing as the catharsis finally came. A tide of emotion washed over you, a great purge of respite.

“Hush, my love. Everything will be all right.” Shuichi held you close, letting you have your emotional release.

Minutes went by, and you took your first calm breath after thoroughly drenching his shirt with your tears.

“_____?” he said, calling you softly.

You sniffed, pulling away to look at him. How you missed his voice, the way he said your name.

He touched your face, gently wiping away the last of the tears. His fingers were warm. “I never want to be the reason for your tears again. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe and happy, even in the upcoming days, no matter the challenges that lie ahead. I love you, _____.

Never forget that; never think otherwise.”
“So you forgive me?” you said, feeling like a child who required affirmation.

He kissed your forehead. “There’s nothing to forgive. Your love is enough for me. I’m blessed that you’ve forgiven me, that you're willing to give me another chance. I will make it up to you, _____."

“Will you promise me one thing?”

“Hm?”

“No more secrets, Shuichi. I'm placing my trust in you again, just as I had before. I don't think I can cope with more lies, especially not with these stakes. I need to know that you'll be honest with me, no matter what happens, even if you think it's best that I'm not involved.”

There was silence. His eyes were the most telling, fierce emotions swirling beneath the surface. You expected him to think on it. You knew he wouldn't lie to you, if he could help it, but asking him for no secrets at all, even if he thought it best for you to not know, must have been far more difficult. In the short time you were here, you realized there was much to learn about this complex world, its politics, its ruthless order. Shuichi had tried to protect you from it. It wasn’t right for him to deceive you, but you understood why he chose not to tell you.

“I will promise you this on one condition,” he said. “Now that you are aware of my demon nature, I want you to know something before you commit to me: I have enemies. Many of them. They may wish to harm you or use you as leverage. If ever we are in such a situation, you will heed me and do exactly as I say.”

You nodded slowly, thinking that his request was fair. Of course, you were unaware of the extent of malicious intent his enemies harbored. This was a world you were just beginning to explore, a world you had yet to fully grasp. But if accepting his condition would bring you closer, allow you to fully understand Shuichi, you thought it was well worth the risks.

“I'm going to need more than a head nod, _____. I'll do everything I can to keep you safe, but I must insist on your cooperation.”

“You have it,” you said. “I promise.”

“Then I promise you full transparency, as well. If you have questions, you only need to ask.”

You tilted your head to the side, giving him a small smile. “I feel like I have so many of them. I've never dated a demon before.”

“Neither have I.”

“Oh, you know about that.”

“Mm. Is that why you're not frightened?”

“I don't know, if I'm being honest. I don't like the idea of being a hypocrite, but I'd like to think I accept you for who you are, not just because I have demon heritage, too.”

“It's all right if you don't have all the answers,” Shuichi said gently. “All things considered, selfishly, I'm pleased you're giving me and our relationship another chance. Though I'm not sure I'd want to be a sun for you to revolve around. I think I'd much prefer it if we were on equal footing.”

“You don't like my metaphor? What do you suggest?”
“Maybe a symbiotic relationship. Some animals rely on members of another species to flourish, a mutually agreeable contract for both parties.”

“We're not exactly different species, so I'm not sure we even qualify.”

“Despite your demon heritage, considering the dilution across generations -- about 30 on average over a thousand years -- you're effectively human. My very essence is demon.”

“Well, that's fine, but it's not romantic.”

“I didn't realize romance was a part of your criteria.”

You chuckled, enjoying the divergence of your conversation. It was nice being able to banter and laugh with him again. “Will you stay with me tonight?” you asked, squeezing his hand.

“Nothing would make me happier.” He pulled away for a moment, looking at you. “I understand I'm in no position to be making requests, but I do have something to ask of you.”

“Hm?”

“I want you to know my real name.”

“Is it Kurama?”

He gave you an inquisitive look. “Did someone tell you?”

“Well, if you recall, Yusuke had that slip-up a while ago when you and Keiko were at the florist. I’ve had a lot of time to think about it, and I figured Kurama must be of significance. Otherwise, I have no idea how 'melodrama Kurama' came about.”

He sighed, exhaling in an amused laugh. “Yes, well, I might have given Yusuke a hard time about that.”

“Do you really prefer Kurama?” you asked. It felt strange that you were learning your lover's real name just now.

“Yes. My human mother named me Shuichi, but Kurama is my true name. I would be elated and honored if you would call me that.”

“Kurama, then. I'm happy to know it now.” You leaned into him, wrapping your arms around his neck. “Hello, Kurama,” you said, meeting his gaze.

“Hello, _____,” he said, his eyes softening at your advance. He pulled you close, hands at your waist, and kissed you, a welcome gesture after all this time apart.
Happy slight belated Halloween! I bought king-sized candy bars for my trick-or-treaters this year, and I calculated that about 6% of the little shits took two when I told them to only take one. >:(( I'm salty about that tonight. lol. THIS IS WHY WE CAN'T HAVE NICE THINGS.

Speaking of nice things, after over ten chapters of angst, frustration, fear, and guilt, I get to write fluff again. <3

This chapter skips around a bit. I just wanted to give the RC time to digest and let ya'll know what's going on with all the other characters before they just start randomly showing up later on. :'D Enjoy!

Thank you to Mei Mei, LadyAmazon, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, perfect-to-stay, FannibalToast, CrossYourTeez, and SailorCupcake for your comments! I enjoy your speculative thoughts. ;)

FYI: We're in a new month for the An Expression of Thanks monthly raffle. Yes, I made it monthly. :D Please enter, if you'd like!

Ever since Koenma was informed of _____ 's kidnapping, he had been in a foul mood. He even refused to eat his dinner, freshly prepared at Jorge’s beckoning.

“Sir, you have to eat something!”

“No, ogre, I don’t. I don’t actually need sustenance, being of the Spirit World.”

“But, sir! That doesn’t change the fact that you love food. And I ordered dumplings for you, too!”

“Eat them yourself, then.” Koenma slipped out of his chair. “A human has been kidnapped by demons. This is a serious crime that needs to be addressed.”

Jorge shoved a dumpling in his mouth. “Why don’t you just send Yusuke and Kuwabara? The team will be reunited and surely they’ll be able to get _____ back safely.”

“That’s unlikely,” Koenma groaned, pacing back and forth. He had the most awful headache. “Yul is a powerful demon, stronger than even the three kings who struggled for dominance years ago. He nearly succeeded in unifying the Demon World at one point. Even my father’s afraid of his wrath.”

“But they have to at least try! Botan said she’d give them an update -- they may even go without you telling them to.”

“I actually expect them to, but I doubt they’ll make it far. Yusuke and Kuwabara are strong, but Yul’s smart. You don’t get to live thousands of years by being a fool.”

“Then it’s a good thing Kurama’s going after her, isn’t it, sir?”
“Don’t you get it, ogre? The smartest member of our team is probably going to do something incredibly stupid. He loves her. If he’s willing to do anything to save her, Yul already has the upper hand. I wish I knew what that looked like, but Spirit World doesn’t have any influence the deepest reaches of Demon World where Xanadu is.”

“We’re just going to have to rely on Botan to report back, then,” Jorge said, gobbling more dumplings as he dipped them in soy sauce.

Koenma glared at him from the corner of his eye. “I can’t believe you actually have an appetite at a time like this. A human’s life is on the line! NOW GET ME A BOBA SHAKE, YOU BLUE BUFFOON!”

“Kurama?” You liked it, the way it rolled off your tongue.

“Yes, my love?”

You were looking in the mirror, removing each pin from your hair as you released it from its bun. Qara offered to help, but you dismissed her for the night, wanting privacy with your boyfriend. She wasn’t far, though, as her room was in your quarters -- if you raised your voice, she could still hear you.

“I hope it’s not too burdensome for me to say I want to know everything.”

He smiled at you through the mirror, seated on the edge of the bed. “No,” he said. “I promised I’d be honest, didn’t I?”

“I know. And the value of that promise isn’t lost on me. There’s probably a lot of personal stuff in your life that you don’t want to share.”

“I no longer have anything to hide, ______. If we want a future together, I need to reconcile my past.”

“I won’t ask for every last detail,” you said, wiping off the makeup. “You’re still allowed a haven in your thoughts and memories.”

Kurama stood, walking toward you. He wrapped his arms around your waist from behind, resting his chin on your shoulder. “You’re curious. I can tell. What do you wish to know?”

It was comforting being held by him again, and you turned to kiss him on the cheek. “Actually, I worry about you. I don’t know a lot about Yul, but I can’t imagine him letting you see me without you having to pay a steep price.”

“It was worth it.”

You saw his beautiful green eyes in the mirror, his long eyelashes fluttering slowly. He wasn’t lying, but his gaze made you sigh. “What did he want from you?”

“My service,” he said. “I’m a demon of a few talents.”

“I have a feeling you’re being modest.”

He laughed dryly, and you could feel the vibrations in his throat. “Yul and I had our differences in years past. I learned today that he was the one who had me killed in the Spirit World. He’s far more insidious than I gave him credit for.”
You gave him a sad smile. “You shouldn't have done that, then, knowing how dangerous he is.”

His hand found yours, and he lifted it to his lips in a kiss. “I have you now, and you are protected. He promised your safety in exchange.”

“You did all that for me?” You wanted to scold him for being so, for a lack of better word, stupid, but you couldn't. Not after his sacrifice. He already knew how unfair the deal was, and still, he accepted the terms. All for you.

Kurama looked away for a moment, staring at your hand. “I was glad to.”

“You put yourself in a precarious situation,” you said. “I understand why. I just… wish you hadn’t.”

He sighed, managing a smile. “I love you,” he said. “I wasn’t going to leave here without you, one way or another. We’ll get through this, _____.” He kissed your hand again.

You dropped the subject. It was all in the past now, and there wasn't anything you could change. It was time to move forward, to support him as he supported you. You picked up the brush, running the bristles through your hair. “I assume different demons can do different things? Is your talent in plant manipulation?”

“Yes.” He reached behind his head, removing something in one swift motion. He placed a small seed on the vanity, and it began to grow. First, it sprouted, just a small green seedling, pushing its way through the shell. Then, it climbed, ascending upward, tiny leaves taking form as it grew and grew.

“How?” you asked.

“I feed it with my energy. It will do as I tell it to. Why don’t you pick it up?”

You did as he instructed, holding it between two fingers and placing it in your other hand. It continued to grow, this time wrapping around your thumb, slithering to your wrist and up your arm, twisting this way and that, delicate vines feeling cool to the touch. When it reached your shoulder, it brushed against your face, a budded flower finally blooming. It was a beautiful shade of yellow, greeting you as it opened, revealing its silken petals.

“Kurama, that lady on the corner that sells flowers -- you never buy flowers from her, do you?”

He chuckled. “No.”

The plant began to retreat back to the vanity, curling along the side of the mirror. “So that’s why your bouquets are always so perfect.” You grinned shyly. “I think I love them even more now, knowing how you grow them. There’s a piece of you in every flower you give me.”

“You could say that.”

You turned around, leaning your head against his chest. “I missed you,” you said, a wave of emotion taking you by surprise. “Part of me thought I’d never see you again.”

Kurama embraced you, holding you close. “I, too, was worried when you were taken.”

“I can’t believe you found me. How?”

“I had help. I will let your Yugen tell you his story, but he was there. He fought for you, too. He
“and Yul have a history, apparently.”

“This is getting more interesting by the moment.”

“And my friend, Hiei, was able to confirm your location.”

“Will I get to meet him?”

“I’m sure. He’s here somewhere.”

Oktai was on a mission, sandals clipping with each step as he walked through the city, scanning the area with his energy. He felt a figurative blip on his radar. “There you are,” he said as he approached the local bazaar. “I thought you’d be out there. Show yourself, Hiei. There’s no point in hiding.”

“What do you want?” Hiei dropped to the ground from the above building. He was surprised Oktai was able to figure out where he was when he disguised his demon energy with the Jagan.

“I’ve brought you a sword, as promised, since yours unfortunately shattered,” Oktai said, giving him a polite smile. “It’s one of our finest. In fact, I daresay it’s better than that katana you were using. This one won’t shatter as easily as it was forged in the fires of a dragon’s breath.”

Hiei took the sword suspiciously. It was sheathed in a custom-made scabbard, plated with elegantly carved designs of dragons and blossoms. He removed it, admiring the smooth blade as it gleamed in the light of the moon. His Jagan searched it, unable to find any evidence of tampering. It really was a high quality sword, light in weight, and sharp in construction. “Are you sure you want to give this to me? I might use it to kill you.”

“While I enjoy a good spar, I think you’ll find me more useful alive.” He laughed, his clear voice a ring in the quiet of the night. “Why don’t you enjoy Xanadu’s legendary hospitality? Kurama has been reunited with his lady, and he’ll be staying for a while.”

“So I saw. I don’t need your delayed report.”

“You’re also welcome to leave, if you feel your work here is done, but you’ll probably be better off staying for at least a little while.”

“And why do you say that?”

“Because surely you’re going to be entering in this year’s Demon World unification tournament. Many of the strongest demons participating will be from Xanadu. You can scope out your competition and even train with us. Skilled warriors are always welcome here.”

Hiei turned around, new weapon in hand. “I did what I came here to do. Go bother someone else.” He then left, racing into the cool evening.

Oktai looked after him, brushing his blond hair from his eyes. “Interesting, that one. He’ll be back.”

Botan had done exactly as Kurama asked. Although she was a blabbermouth and occasionally forgetful, she excelled at following instructions. She went directly to the Spirit World to inform Koenma about _____’s kidnapping, then returned to Living World to take care of the cottage. (She was selfishly a little excited about being able to ride Kurama’s motorcycle down the mountain --
all Koenma gave her was a lousy oar.)

She texted Yusuke and Kuwabara to meet her at Kurama’s apartment, where she gave them the update.

“Kurama told me his cell phone might work as soon as he has some downtime to patch it and make the right adjustments,” Botan said.

“Well, how the hell does he do that?” Kuwabara asked. “I doubt Demon World has cell reception.”

“Now, now, Kuwabara, demons aren’t all as primitive as you think. Apparently, Kurama’s done this before with inferior technology, so I have faith in him.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Yusuke said. “Call him and make sure everything’s okay. Otherwise, I'm going to start punching.”

Botan nodded, pulling out her phone and dialing Kurama’s number. She put it on speakerphone.

“Hello. This is Shuichi Minamino. I'm sorry I’m unable to take your call. Please leave a message, and I will be sure to reach out. Have a wonderful day.” Beeeeeep.

“Well, damn it, Kurama,” Kuwabara said. “If you need help rescuing _____, you should probably pick up your phone!”

“It sounds like he hasn't had the time to apply the necessary adjustments yet. We can try back later,” Botan said.

“I don’t really like sitting here and doing nothing,” Yusuke said, a particularly agitated look on his face. “If I’m not saving someone, I have a ramen cart to run. It’s not going to service itself.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t feel right,” Kuwabara agreed. “There has to be something we can do.”

Botan pursed her lips. “Well, Koenma thinks he knows where they are. We can just go find them, but it'll be dangerous going in blind.”

“Oh, spare me the lecture,” Yusuke said. “Where are those Special Defense Freaks? They opened the portal for us last time.”

“Koenma has arranged for them to meet us at Genkai’s estate in a few hours.”

“Let's get going. Maybe we'll even be back in time for breakfast. _____ can foot the bill for all the trouble.”

“What a horrible thing to say,” Botan sighed. “She’s probably traumatized, and you want her to buy you breakfast?”

“Hey, don’t say it like that!” Yusuke suddenly looked a little sheepish. “I’m good at kicking ass, and she’s good at money, so I figure we’re both just using our strengths!”

Even Kuwabara pouted. “I always wonder what Keiko sees in you.” His snide comment earned him a fist in the face.

Kurama told you about his experiences, starting with the most recent ones first -- he spoke about his time in the Living World, how he was born as Shuichi Minamino. He resented Shiori at first, an absolute terror to her in his earlier years.
“Your mother’s a saint,” you commented, lying on your side in bed.

“I agree,” he said, right next to you. “I have no excuses, but it was a difficult time for us both. I was thousands of years old, suppressed in the body of a child, subject to the biological tides of emotional tantrums. You must understand the frustrations. She, however, was only trying to be a nurturing mother; her patience exceeded mine by far.”

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around this dynamic. Shuichi and Yoko are the same… but different. Clearly, it’s not just one or the other, though. You’re both here.”

Kurama tilted his head to the side, an amused expression on his face. “Our souls are fused, remember? It’s a delicate balance of identities.”

“So if Yul wants you to be Yoko Kurama, what does that mean?”

“Admittedly, I don’t know. I never deserted my identity as Yoko, but I never let him fully take control, either. I don’t intend to.”

“Why not? Is he that bad?”

He looked away from you, and you could see something shift in his demeanor. “_____, when I was a fox demon, I was very different. I was cold and merciless, selfishly calculating, thinking of only what I wanted, what I had to gain, often at the expense of others. I would rather not go back to that.”

You leaned your head against his shoulder, touching his chest. “You’ve changed, though. You saw what humanity was, and you learned from it. You learned from people like your mother.”

“You’re right,” he said with a sigh. “I’m… content living life as Shuichi Minamino. Since I met you, I dare to say I’ve been happy.” His gaze found yours, and he grasped your hand, his fingers intertwining with yours. “I may need to use Yoko in the coming months, but I won’t look back. I’ll use his strength, but not his purpose.”

“I have faith.” You kissed him on the cheek before sliding out of bed. “I’m exhausted. Can we just cuddle for a bit and fall asleep?”

“I’d like that.”

Your back to him, you found a nightgown in the wardrobe, beginning to undo your fancy dress. After a few moments no success, you realized something. “Kurama?”

“Hm?”

“Are you watching me?”

“Am I not allowed?”

“If you are, you’d probably notice that I’m having trouble undoing this impossible knot in the back. A little help?”

“I think I’d rather watch you struggle.”

Damn. You missed the way he teased you.

Nevertheless, he stood, pacing over to you. “Let’s see about this impossible knot.” With a deft tug of his fingers, the sash was undone. “There,” he said.
“I loosened it for you,” you quipped, turning around to look at him.

With his hands on each end of the sash, he pulled you toward him with a gentle tug. There was that flirtatious gaze you loved so much, the glimmer of green in his eyes. It had been far too long since you had seen it. Your lips met in a passionate kiss, and he began to undress you, first sliding your shawl off, tossing both it and the sash on the vanity. He then unbuttoned the back of the dress, fingers deftly working as each button came effortlessly undone. In one smooth motion, he guided the dress off your shoulders, letting it fall to the ground in an unceremonious decline. This left you in your bra and underwear.

You broke the kiss, arms around his neck. “For the record, I didn’t need your help with the rest of it,” you whispered against his lips.

He reached for the nightgown and offered it to you. “You must be cold,” he said. “Let me warm you.” He swept you into his arms, carrying you to bed.
I was totally going to post this last night, but after a long D&D session, I came home and just crashed on the couch. By the time I woke up, it was 1:00 a.m. and figured I might as well go to bed. lol.

Thank you to perfect-to-stay, LadyAmazon, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, SailorCupcake, Mei Mei, SinfullyOriginalMelody, and TK091! As always, I really appreciate you taking your time to give me feedback. ^_^ If there's anything in particular you'd rather I do or not do, feel free to let me know! :)

Plot, plot, plot is starting to happen~!

Please enjoy!

You woke up in bed, the sheets a tangle at your feet beneath the duvet, though you were tucked well, warm and shielded from the chilly air. The fire in the corner was burning steadily, crackling as it consumed the wood.

Kurama was nowhere to be seen. You slipped out of bed, toes meeting the cold floor.

“My lady, you’re awake.” Qara had evidently been in the connected washroom, folding clothes. She rushed over to you, laying out your outfit for the day. This one was simpler than the dress from yesterday, much to your relief. “Master Oktai will be fetching you shortly.”

“What for?” you asked.

“I don’t know. I’m just told to follow orders.”

You smiled at her. “That’s okay. I just thought I’d ask.”

She was already gesturing for you to take a seat at the vanity, where she began combing through your hair. She worked quickly, efficiently, her small hands deft and careful. Even though she moved at an expeditious pace, she did not tug at your hair or smear your makeup, which led you to believe she had been doing this for a long time. You wondered about her history, where she came from. You’d have to ask her later, when you had time.

“Do you know where Kurama went?”

Qara paused for only a second as she began to feed the fires. “He’s out in the den, working on something.”

You nodded in thanks, glad for the slippers beneath your feet -- they were made of warm cloth, toasty from being sat by the fire overnight. You stepped into the den. As Qara said, Kurama sat in an armchair, leaning over a contraption on the coffee table.

“Good morning,” you said as you sat down next to him.
He looked up at you, a gentle smile on his face. “Good morning, _____. How did you sleep?”

“I slept well. How about you?” You leaned against his shoulder, studying the device on the table. It was his smartphone, though it had been spliced open, several parts and pieces organized around it. “What are you doing?”

“We need to contact our friends,” Kurama said, returning his attention to the parts on the table. “I’m making a few adjustments to our cellular technology so we may make and receive calls.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you’re doing that.” While impressed, you had absolutely no interest in how this worked. You were glad he was so versatile in his talents.

He reached across your body, touching the side of your face with his hand. “I would think that Yul will want to begin your training today.”

“Well, that’s probably why Oktai’s coming to fetch me,” you said. Qara had arrived to serve tea and breakfast, placing the meal on the coffee table. She came and went silently. “I’m a little nervous about it. Will you come with me?”

“Of course. If Yul permits it.”

“I don’t see why he wouldn’t. I’m going to tell you everything anyway.”

“Be cautious, _____.” Kurama said, a serious expression on his face. “He may not hurt you, but take care not to anger him. Yul is not a forgiving demon in the years I’ve known him. Don’t give him a reason to want you removed.”

“I’ll be careful,” you promised. At this point, being reckless would only undermine Kurama’s sacrifice. The danger was not lost on you.

As if on cue, a knock sounded at the door. Qara scrambled to open it, bowing as Oktai entered, staff in hand, robes billowing behind him.

“Ah, good morning!” he said, a bright smile in his eyes. “I hope you are both well-rested and ready for a productive day. Lady _____, if you are ready, Yulkhan is awaiting you. Kurama, you are welcome to come along this morning. Afterward, my lord will have his first assignment for you.”

Kurama nodded. “Very well,” he said, standing up and offering you his hand. “Lead the way.”

Oktai led you underground, beneath the palace, where it was cold and damp. There was a series of tunnels, designed like a winding maze. You held tightly to Kurama’s hand as you navigated the gloomy passage, feeling yourself chilled to the bone, not just because of the temperature but also due to the ambiance. Torches guided the way, the flames dancing, projecting shadows along the narrow walls.

You were grateful that Kurama was here. You did not know how you would brave the unknown without him.

Of course, Oktai was as cheerful as ever, telling you stories of the underground and its uses. At one point in history, Xanadu was overtaken, and the denizens of the palace had to flee the besieged city. A passage -- he would not tell you which one -- led outside of the city and into a neighboring territory. Apparently, this contingency was what ultimately saved Yul’s empire. It was much smaller now than before, but he was slowly rebuilding his strength as he reclaimed his lands and amassed followers.
You walked through a particularly large archway, the roof lifting higher than in the tunnels. This room was wide, spacious, and at the center was an alter, where Yul stood. His posture was straight, head held high. You could barely read his expression in the dim, the only source of light a display of candles. “Welcome, Daughter,” he greeted. “Welcome, Kurama.”

You bowed your head as instructed by Oktai, releasing your boyfriend’s hand. “Good morning,” you replied quietly. “This is quite the meeting place. You’ll have to tell us why we’re here.”

“In due time. To begin, you must understand -- I’m old. Older than you could possibly fathom,” he said, likely amused by your naiveté. “I’ve been alive for literally thousands of years. I am older than King Yama himself. Why do you think the totality of Demon World fears me?” He glanced at Kurama from the corner of his eye. “I have had thousands of years to build my empire and hone my strength.

“I have been relatively inactive for the last one thousand years. My empire was threatened, and to protect the secret of my power, I severed it from my own body.” Yul beckoned you to approach him. “What do you know about spirit beasts?”

You didn’t respond, but Kurama spoke in your stead, “They are extensions of the human soul, feeding off of spirit energy. They find a human with whom they bond, growing in kind, a reflection of their companion’s very heart and nature.”

“That is correct. We demons do not utilize spirit energy. As such, demons have no ability to nurture a spirit beast. It is impossible. However, I will share a little-known fact -- I am not a full-blooded demon.”

Of course, you had no idea the implication of his words. You did not know how common or rare human and demon relationships were.

“I have some trace human blood in me from an ancestral parent long since passed, a bit of spirit energy I’ve compiled over time. My greatest weapon over a thousand years ago, the one that so many feared, was my spirit beast.”

You saw Kurama. He stood, unmoving, his expression apathetic. But you knew his mind was racing, thoughts stirring.

“He was an ambitious monster,” Yul continued. “He recognized my desire to build a different world. He reflected my strength and passion, assisting me in my journey by crushing those who stood in my way. I found success for centuries, expanding my vast empire from one corner of Demon World to the other. Of course, there are always those who disagree with progress and revolt. A neighboring empire wished to overthrow me and came well-equipped to ruin my beast.

“You should know that if you die, your spirit beast dies with you. If your spirit beast is destroyed before you are, you may never acquire another one. However, in dire circumstances, you can sever your bond. This forces the spirit beast to return to its egg, hibernating until it bonds with another being with enough spirit energy to feed upon. Doing so will deplete your own reserve of spirit energy for years, as the severing ritual requires considerable amounts of energy.”

“That’s what you did, I’m guessing,” you said.

“Yes, to protect my spirit beast. This is him.” He gestured toward the altar.

You saw a golden egg perched atop a pedestal as you stepped closer. It would fit in the palms of both your hands if you picked it up.
“It was your ancestral mother’s. It’s now yours.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was the closest being with a decent amount of spirit energy when I severed our bond. The beast chose her. She birthed a child, and the spirit beast followed her daughter. Until it is ready to hatch, a spirit beast may choose to be passed to the next generation, assuring that its master is the youngest, healthiest, and strongest. It has made that decision for well over a thousand years, across 32 generations. Only recently has it moved within its egg. It is almost ready to hatch.”

You stared at the egg. “That’s why you came looking for me.”

“Correct,” he said with a dip of his head. “Go on. It’s yours.”

You reached out, grazing the shell with your fingertips. It was warm to the touch, and you felt rejuvenated, the unease of being underground melting away. You picked up the egg with both hands, gently cradling it close to your chest. You had this great urge to protect it, to nurture it.

“It will remain with you until it hatches,” Yul said. “Take care of it. It is an extension of your own soul, Daughter. It will fight for you, be loyal to you.”

Although you had many questions, you simply nodded. If all you had to do was carry this egg around, you had no complaints.

“Kurama,” Yul said, turning to your boyfriend. “I think it’s time you fulfilled the first part of our bargain. Take my daughter with you.”

Kurama stiffened. “You were unwilling to let her leave Xanadu the last time we talked,” he said.

“I had a change of heart. If she is to participate in this upcoming tournament, I think it wise for her to see Demon World for herself, beyond the borders of Xanadu.”

“She can’t defend herself.”

“Is it not your duty to protect her?” The look in Yul’s eyes was incisive, pointed. “Bring me Yoko’s bones, Kurama. Take what time you need. Oktai will assist you in making travel arrangements.”

“You didn’t tell me about this first part of your bargain,” you said. You weren’t upset with Kurama -- he told you so much last night already. This was probably a minor detail in the scheme of things.

“It should be a quick and easy task,” he said. He explained to you why Yul wanted Yoko’s remains and how the demon khan had been unable to obtain them thus far. “Only I know their location.”

You followed after Kurama. Qara had helped you change into clothes more worthy of travel, pants and a tunic, providing a small pack for you to securely carry the egg. “Why do you think Yul was so insistent that I come along?”

“I propose two reasons. First, Yul wants the spirit beast to hatch sooner. Perhaps a dangerous encounter will accelerate its growth. And second, he wants to expose you to events that may intimidate you, strengthen your resolution, hoping that it will influence your spirit beast’s nature.”

“He sure is manipulative,” you said, reaching for his hand. “Do you really think we’ll bump into anyone unfriendly?”
“It’s possible, but I know the way well. Ideally, we’ll be able to avoid them.”

Oktai approached you from what you presumed to be the stables, leading one of the umagi behind him by the reins. “You only want one?” he asked. “I’ve brought you one of the sturdier beasts we have. He can carry the both of you.”

“That will be fine,” Kurama said, taking the umagi from him.

“Be careful,” Oktai said. “I’m sure you know of the dangers, Kurama, but things have changed since you were here twenty-five years ago. Take care of our lady. Otherwise, Yulkhan may have your head.”

“I’m well aware.” He was not amused.

“I’m happy to come with you, by the way, if you think you need assistance,” Oktai offered.

Kurama looked at him. “If Yul wanted that, I assume he would have told you.”

“Ah, touché! You’d be right. Sometimes I presume to know what my lord wants.” He brushed his blond bangs from his eyes. “You’ll just have to protect her all on your own, then. I wish you safe travels. If you need me, scream my name.” Oktai then left you, winking at you as you went.

Kurama gently pushed you forward by the waist, helping you onto the umagi. He ensured the fit on the saddle was appropriate. Effortlessly, he glided up behind you and guided the creature forward, easing it into a graceful trot. He pressed it further, and the umagi began to run, its hooves clopping against the cobblestones of the city.

You felt the wind in your face, the warmth of his body behind you, holding you close so you wouldn’t fall. “You’ve done this before?”

“Ride an umagi? It’s the favored mode of transportation here. With the surrounding mountains and steep inclines, they are far more equipped to navigate this land than other beasts of burden and are more agile than machines.”

“I think I prefer your motorcycle,” you said, thinking about how sore your butt was going to be tomorrow. “So where did you last leave your demon body?”

“It’s in a cave in the mountains, not far from here.” he said. “It’s actually within walking distance, but I’d rather not give away the location to Yul.”

“Why is that?”

“I’ve kept rare artifacts hidden in there as well. I will tell you about them once we arrive. Meanwhile, we’ll have to take this umagi on a merry chase.”

You craned your head to look at him with a puzzled expression on your face.

“This umagi has a tracking device on it beneath the saddle strap, no doubt a way for them to locate us, if necessary. We’ll run this poor fellow several miles to give the impression that my body is elsewhere. I’ve left a message for your Yugen to meet us.”

Chapter End Notes
I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of November to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Chapter 50.

I can't believe I thought I'd be stopping here. *throws old outline out the window* There's so much more to tell!

This a long chapter. The reader character finally gets to meet Arban. There's also a bit of introspection and some deeper conversation with Kurama and a bit in Kurama's head. :'D

Thank you to Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, FannibalToast, CrossYourTeez, Hana (Scarlet Hana), LadyAmazon, and FranMakara for the comments! <3

Kurama was right. Whatever goat-like characteristics the umagi had, spring-like legs and cloven hooves, allowed it to move through the mountains with ease. It seemed right at home in this region, its coat repelling moisture, eyes sharp in the dim of the forest.

Although it had run out of the city in a graceful canter, it had to slow down to navigate through the lush vegetation.

“You said earlier you wanted to contact our friends,” you said. “Are they demons, too?”

“The only fighters among them are Yusuke and Kuwabara. Yusuke’s story is not unlike yours, actually. He has demon heritage in him, though his Mazoku blood grants him enormous power. I don’t think your small demon heritage will allow you that sort of strength. He does have a spirit beast, though.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You may meet him.”

“What about the others?”

“Kuwabara is human, quite possibly the strongest on earth. Yukina is a full-blooded demon, though her expertise is in healing; she has no fighting ability. Keiko and Shizuru are both human. Botan is neither human, nor demon. She is of the Spirit World, a grim reaper, actually. She guides souls to the Spirit World, where they await the next phase of their lives.”

“She’s anything but grim,” you said, deciding to poke some fun at him. “Though I suppose that’s why you told me she’s a tour guide for the capital. Huh. This is all starting to make sense, all of your lies.”

Kurama winced. “Sorry,” he said, resting his chin on your shoulder as he leaned into you. “I had to make it believable.”

“I’m just teasing, Kurama.” You touched the hand around your waist. “I know you couldn’t tell me at the time. We weren’t even dating when I first met Botan.”

“That said, Botan is highly involved with our group of friends. Knowing her, if Yusuke and
Kuwabara come, she will be with them.”

“That’s right. You were working on your smartphone this morning.”

“It’s done. I finished it while you were changing. I’ve already texted them the details of our situation.”

“You’re always one step ahead of me.”

“It becomes second nature when you live for thousands of years.”

You thought about his words, the implication of being that old. “I must seem like a child to you,” you said.

“No, actually,” Kurama said. “I think it goes without saying, but I have no romantic interest in children. I see you as a woman, and despite the many years I’ve been conscious, my human body is very much that of a young adult. I’ve lived Shuichi Minamino’s life from day one, and as I commit to you, I see us as equals.”

“That’s sweet of you to say.”

“But?”

“It’s hard for me to even fathom your perspective, Kurama. I don’t know what it’s like to live beyond a century. I can imagine what it’s like to age and to even die, to live a normal human lifespan, but to have all that knowledge and wisdom at my fingertips -- I can’t even begin to imagine what that feels like. You and all these old demons here -- you’re almost like… gods among men.”

“Admittedly, this is one of the minor reasons why I was nervous about sharing my history with you,” he said. “It must be bewildering for humans to accept the existence of demons, our longevity, our sheer power. We are not gods, neither divine nor omnipotent, but we are certainly different. We live and die in ways you would never experience.”

You stared at the umagi’s ears aimlessly. “How does someone like Kuwabara interpret all of this?”

“I don’t think Kuwabara or Yusuke, even before he learned of his demon blood, are as philosophically minded as you. They were certainly disturbed by the realization at first, but they’ve come to accept our existence, Yusuke especially.”

“Then what about Keiko or Shizuru? They seem less involved.”

“I’ve never discussed it with them. They know some things, and they’ve certainly seen wild feats of demonic power, but they’ve never set foot in Demon World. I think it’s better that way.”

You were quiet for a moment, gathering your thoughts.

“_____?” Kurama’s arm tightened around your waist.

“Hm?”

“I don’t want you to ever feel inferior to a demon, and certainly not to me. The lives of humans may be shorter, seemingly less consequential, but that doesn’t mean they are secondary. You’ve only met the ascended demons, the minority of the demon species. Most demons are far weaker and more primal in nature, always hungering, searching for their next meal. The average human is
more intelligent by far. The reason why there are two mortal realms at all is because Spirit World wishes to protect humans.”

You nodded slowly. “I understand.”

“I love you, _____,” he said. “I fully intend to live my life as a human with you. Your being human only endears you to me.”

“Human feebleness and all?”

“Humans aren’t feeble. Perhaps they are no match for demons when it comes to physical strength and power, but their sheer will and resourcefulness are unmatched. I have never known love and compassion as I have in the Living World.”

“Do you think we'll make it back to the Living World? Honestly?”

“I certainly hope so,” Kurama said. “It's what I'm working towards.”

“Please let me know what I can do. This isn't a world I'm familiar with, but I can learn. After I get this spirit beast to hatch, maybe I can even help. Right now, I feel so useless.”

“You feel guilty.”

You sighed, leaning back into him. He was always so perceptive.

“Don’t.” Kurama tucked your hair behind your ear and kissed the side of your face. “I've told you before, haven’t I? You are worth any amount of risk. I promise you we’ll find a way out.”

The umagi leaped up the side of a particularly steep cliff. Kurama held onto you to prevent you from falling. It found its footing and continued up the mountainside, finally circling into an open and rocky face. The grass was sparse, and trees grew on only one side, their arms a strong canopy against the red sun.

A stag stood in the middle, waiting for you, antlers gracefully arching up toward the sky. He looked at you, his dark eyes reminiscent of someone you knew.

Kurama dismounted, helping you down. He didn’t say a word, but he gestured for you to approach.

You did as he suggested, the few blades of grass glistening with dew beneath your feet. You locked eyes with the stag, stepping closer. Although you knew who this was, you didn’t at all -- that was what this moment feel unreal.

He must have sensed your dilemma. He closed the gap between you, pacing on his delicate legs until he was within arm’s reach.

There was that unmistakable life in his eyes, a sentience that you now understood to be far more than that of a normal animal. Your lips parted in query, you tried to find your voice. “Yugen?” you whispered, your softer than you intended it to be.

In that second, he changed, his very flesh shifting in a flash that was far too quick for your untrained eyes to follow. There was your Akita mix, golden fur warmed by the sun, large paws set firmly against the ground. His tailed wagged slowly back and forth, welcoming you to greet him. His eyes were as you remembered them, dark and gleaming with intelligence.

“How is this even possible?”
“It is my unique talent,” he spoke.

You would have flinched backward, if not for the calm in his voice. It was deep, soothing, the tone of a man who was destined to tell stories. Still, you were wary.

“_____, be not afraid. I have been at your side since you were born.”

“But I didn’t find Yugen until a few years back.”

“I have not always been Yugen, but I’ve always been yours.” He shifted, appearing as the homeless man you met nearly a month ago, the one whom you had given money and instructions to the nearest shelter. “Until recent events, I’ve watched you every day of your life.” Again, he changed, this time into a small boy you once befriended at the local park. “I’ve followed you from home to home.” Then, he became your old family labrador; a stray kitten among the litter you once found; an old woman who told fortunes across your school; the cyclist who always passed you in the mornings; the raven with which you shared your lunch scraps; the injured pomeranian you brought to the shelter; the girl who sold oranges on the corner; and finally, the kind, middle-aged servant who brought you flowers just yesterday. He cycled through these forms with ease, each one taking shape for just a few moments.

You recognized each and every one of them, memories of each interaction surfacing. Some of them were of recurring events, while others were more singular in nature.

“I have also been your mother’s,” he said, and he shifted into miniature poodle your mom had as a child, pink bow and all -- you would only know him by the photos she had in her old albums. “And your grandmother’s, and your ancestors’ long since passed.” He then returned to being an Akita, the form with whom you were most familiar. “I have protected you for twenty-four years. I was there, disguised as a nurse, the very day you were born.”

“Then you know everything about me,” you said. You thought you should have been more disturbed by this realization, but somehow, knowing his efforts to hide himself, to blend in with people and animals in your everyday life, you didn’t feel alarmed at all. In fact, part of you felt cared for, flattered that someone was willing to dedicate his life so wholly to yours. “I don’t understand. Why would you do that?”

“For thirty-two generations, you and your ancestors were in danger, are in danger. I didn’t know which one of you would be chosen, which one of you Yul would come after.”

“So you watched over all of them,” Kurama said. “I see. If there ever is a definition of devotion, a thousand years of silent service would be it.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” you said, sinking down to the ground next to him. “Why? Why is my safety, the safety of my ancestors, so important to you?”

“I could not allow Yul to use a child as his weapon. I stole your ancestor away when she was a mere infant, the first generation, taking refuge in the Living World, hiding as long as we could.”

You sensed a story he wasn’t ready to tell yet, and you didn’t press him. This truth was enough for you right now. “I don’t know what to say,” you started. “A thousand thank yous wouldn’t be enough.”

“Your thanks is misguided. I failed you.”

“But how can I say anything else? Without your help, I might not even be here. My ancestors may never have survived at all.”
“Then you can thank me by leaving. I can get you back to the Living World right now.”

You stared at him, wide-eyed. Then, you looked at Kurama. The expression on his face was neutral. “This is why you brought me here? To send me back, while you stay in Demon World?”

“_____, this could be your only chance,” your boyfriend said, quietly.

“You swore loyalty to Yul, Kurama. By helping me escape, you’re putting yourself in danger.”

“No more than I was willing to accept.”

“Don’t try to logic yourself out of this. I’m not leaving without you. I already told you that.”

The Akita sighed. “Your concern for him is touching, but Kurama can handle himself. You are the one in danger.”

“And exactly how safe am I going to be if I go with you? Yul found me once, and he can probably find me again. He told me he tracked what little demon energy I have to the Living World -- what would prevent him from doing it a second time? I’m not going to run when it’s clearly not a solution.”

“Don’t be foolish. You have your opportunity now. We can seek aid from Spirit World. Clearly, Kurama has connections. We can find a way to disguise your energy. We can go into hiding. You have options in the Living World. You have nothing here.”

Your gaze fell to Kurama, admiring the way the sunlight touched his skin. “I have him,” you said with a small smile. You saw the emotion swirling beneath the surface in his eyes, and he closed them.

And she thought he was perceptive. She didn't give herself enough credit. Kurama felt her reading him, and as detached as he wanted to be in this situation, she was able to see through it all. She understood him.

Despite what Arban might have thought, Kurama did not bring her here to be whisked back to the Living World. He brought her here to give her the choice. She could run, if she wanted to -- he certainly wouldn't blame her. She could also stay with him, if she'd rather brave the dangers ahead.

Neither route was ideal. Both required risk and sacrifice.

She wasn't wrong when she doubted the extent to which Arban could keep her safe. Even Kurama had his reservations. Although she might be able to hide and deceive him for some time, Yul would find her eventually. His ambition was great, the resources available to him vast.

Still, he wanted her out of harm’s way.

The only sure way to keep her safe was to eliminate Yul. Permanently. Kurama was still uncertain how he’d accomplish that. He had a few ideas, but being under the influence of the bloodpact complicated matters. He served Yul now, no doubt a purposeful ploy by which Yul could neutralize him as an enemy.

Kurama opened his eyes. He looked at her, the hopeful expression, the devotion she freely offered. Truthfully, what was the impact of having her here? Yul could no longer harm her; he swore he wouldn't. If he did, Kurama would be released from his conditional servitude, and Yul could not afford that.
Although there was always the threat of other demons hurting her, she was well-protected within the walls of Xanadu. No one would dare harm the khan’s daughter. It was missions like this that jeopardized her safety. And, ideally, once her spirit beast hatched and evolved, these threats would be minimized. Kurama remembered how powerful Puu was after reaching maturity.

No, it was the mind games. It was the emotional strain, the test of mental stamina, the psychological torment she would have to endure.

But Yul couldn't afford that either. If _____ broke down, she could be useless to him in the upcoming tournament.

Was his strategy really that simple?

It was certainly effective. He would use her and the spirit beast to win the tournament, and then have her abdicate the throne to him.

Kurama was the hostage. Sort of. He had no doubt Yul didn't need him to force compliance from her. He could threaten her family, her friends. He could promise her freedom in exchange. He could subject her to the worst tortures. Kurama was just collateral damage, self-inflicted by his own desire to be by her side.

He nearly laughed. If she claimed he was her sun, then she was his goddess. He effectively sold his soul into slavery for her.

But he looked into her eyes, and it was all worth it -- every promise to be fulfilled, every ounce of pain he might experience, every moment they would share, even in captivity. He would not push her away, not unless it was in her best interest to leave.

Right now, he wasn't sure. If she fled, Yul would find her. If she fled, Kurama would have to remain here, assuredly under stricter instruction. He was, of course, concerned for her well being, both physical and emotional, but would he be able to take control of the situation in the short time she was gone? If not, having her flee was a poor substitute for a plan.

He was shackled without alternatives, without options. He would have to see how things evolved.

There was no sense in earning Yul’s ire. Not until they had better leverage, and not until they could eliminate him. With his friends on the way, perhaps their luck would change.

“You'll always have me,” Kurama said, his eyes softening. “Are you sure you want to stay?”

“What? You're both insane.” The fur on the Akita’s back bristled. “Of course she'll want to stay with you, Kurama, but I'd at least expect you to be the voice of reason.”

“It's no life always being on the run, being hunted.” Kurama touched your shoulder. “At least, here, you know where your enemies are, and you can watch them.”

“I'm staying,” you said, placing your hand over his. “I'm not leaving you. As long as you're here, I’ll be here, too.” You watched the look of displeasure on the Akita’s face. “I’m sorry. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but I can’t leave him. And he’s right -- I don’t want to be on the run. I’d rather fight. I’ll have to learn how to do it, and I will.”

“Then I shall remain here with both you fools.”

“You don't have to,” you said. “You've already done so much for me. I couldn't ask you to stay.”
“My duty is not yet done. Until Yul finally releases his hold on you, I am bound to you.”

Again, you sensed there was more to his devotion than a simple responsibility. You would let events unfold in their own time. “That’s fine. But will you tell me your name? I’m sure it’s not actually Yugen.”

“Yugen is better than Raspberry Gumdrops Twinkletoes.”

You couldn't help but laugh. “That’s right! I named one of the stray kittens that. I was what? Six?”

“Five. It was the evening of your first day of kindergarten. You had come home, upset you hadn't made any new friends.”

“So you turned into a kitten to make me feel better.”

“Figured I'd put my talents to good use.”

“I remember it even now. Obviously, I didn’t realize it was a kindness at the time. I thought I was just destined to find those kittens. Thank you.”

“Arban.”

“Arban?”

He grinned at you, his black, canine lips curling back in a sly expression. “That is my real name.”
A Small Smile

Chapter Notes

I intended this chapter to have more action, but somehow it evolved into a conversation. :D I mentioned this in a response to a comment, but I think there are so many facets to dating Kurama that we just never think about, so these conversations are important, even shocking, to have. I mean, if you’re with Kurama, you're dating a murderer. Have you thought of that? Because I never internalized that until I started writing this chapter.

Also, updates are probably going to slow down now. I'm getting to a point where I have to start consolidating the plot lines in my head, and it's getting hard. lol. And it's especially hard because I want to write fluff again. :D

But whatever! I'll write plot, too. I just love me some good fluff! :D Enjoy!

Thank you to: CrossYourTeez, Perfect-to-stay, oscar_milde, FannibalToast, FranMakara, SailorCupcake, Queenasunasama, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, and LadyAmazon for the comments! As always, I appreciate you taking your time to share your thoughts with me immensely! Don't forget to enter in the raffle, if you feel so inclined! Details in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Take this,” Kurama said to Arban.

“What is it?”

“It’s a tracking device. I found it beneath the saddle strap. I checked for others, and there are none.”

“You want me to act as the decoy?”

“I’d rather Yul not discover my collection of artifacts. There may be something among them that can help us.”

Arban nodded. “Very well. _____ should come with me, then.”

“Why?” you asked. You weren’t opposed, only curious about his reasoning.

“So you don't know where the artifacts are,” Kurama said. “In the event Yul wants that information, he has no reason to come after you for it.” He looked at Arban. “It’s not a bad idea, but with a decoy, I don’t think it’s necessary. You’ll be able to cover more ground that way, and if someone sees us, at least she’s with me as instructed.”

“Fine,” Arban said. “Where do I go?”

“Find a cave, an unsuspecting grotto, and stay there for some time. We’ll meet you on the outskirts of the city for the tracking device.”
Arban changed into a stag, the tracking device hidden beneath his tongue, and he took off without another word, his hooves silently touching the ground with each leap.

“Take care,” you said, knowing he couldn’t hear you. You had just discovered your silent guardian, the one who had been by your side all these years, and he was already gone.

“We’ll see him again,” Kurama assured.

You nodded. “I know. This is all so unbelievable. It’s hard to imagine that in just a month, my life has changed so drastically.”

He touched your back, gently pulling you toward him. “Do you regret it?”

“No,” you said, embracing him. You breathed him in, leaning into his chest. The smell of roses was subtle, but it brought you a sense of calm. “I regret nothing. If anything, I’m just really glad I have the chance to know you better.”

He smiled, tipping your chin up for a quick kiss. “Let’s go. We shouldn’t linger here for too long.”

You set off on the umagi again, and it bounded down the side of the mountain. It was a bumpy ride, but you held on tight. Kurama seemed to balance effortlessly on the umagi, even able to compensate for your poor riding skills by ensuring you never fell off.

“Something just occurred to me,” you said as the umagi trotted through the forest.

“What?”

“You told me that you practice martial arts that first morning we went jogging. I guess a lot of that experience comes from your past.”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me about it?”

“What do you wish to know?”

“You’ve been alive for thousands of years. What do you want to tell me?”

“I was a bandit. I passed my time breaking codes and solving puzzles that would lead to ancient treasures and artifacts. In time, I became so successful that I had gathered a group of men who followed my lead. In exchange for their services, I would grant them a share of the treasure. It was dangerous, breaking into fortresses and vaults, but I enjoyed the challenge.”

“You are always one for challenges.”

“Wooing you was my most recent one.” He nuzzled his face into your neck as he said this.

You couldn’t help but blush. It was almost romantic, in an adventurous kind of way, how he compared you to the treasures he once looted. “I am wooed,” you said.

He chuckled. “My finest accomplishment.”

“Stop it,” you said, giving him a playful shove with your shoulder. “Tell me about these artifacts. I’m interested.”

“Several are kept hidden away, where my demon body is now.”
“But where? You’ve eluded Yul for so long.”

“You’ll see. It’s a place where no one else has set foot, aside from me. You’ll be the first I’ve invited inside.”

You rode for over an hour, the umagi navigating the thick forests of the mountains, never slipping, never second guessing its careful foothold. It was fascinating how Kurama knew exactly where he was going. It had been over twenty-five years since he had been in this area, and he still remembered. His stunning memory must have served him well.

Eventually, you came to a pool, the steady flow of the shallow waterfall its most prominent feature. It streamed from multiple, short tiers, creating a cascading effect. Although the canopy of the trees shielded away most of the light, you still saw the red tinge of the sun reflect upon the surface of the water.

Kurama dismounted, tying the reins of the umagi to a tree branch, before assisting you with your descent.

“If you wanted a hiding place, somewhere to shelter your most worthwhile valuables, where would you go?” he asked.

“Well, before a few days ago, I’d suggest a safety deposit box,” you said with a shrug. “You probably have better ideas. By the looks of it, somewhere beautiful.”

He gave you a knowing glance, reaching for your hand. “Come with me.” He led you around the pool, climbing over the maze of tree roots — they must have been ancient as they were thick and deeply embedded in the rich earth. No doubt, these trees were the reason why the pool, which eventually fed into a river, had not engulfed the whole of the forest in the thousands of years the water had run through the land.

Kurama was patient, letting you test your footing, occasionally multiple times, before leaping across each magnificent tree root. He held onto you where the roots were particularly steep, guiding you along. You came to the side of the waterfall, where he gently pushed you beneath the chilly flow of water, a playful spray of water grazing your skin and lightly drenching your hair and clothes. He followed after you.

You were behind the waterfall, standing in a narrow passageway, the red tinge of Demon World’s sun now gone. Instead, your vision was tinted in blue and purple, the very stone glowing in patches of fluorescent light.

“It’s the moss,” Kurama explained. “They display a phenomenon not unlike what we saw in Inoji.” He turned to the vines that covered the wall behind you, and as soon as he touched them, they began to recede toward the edges of the stone.

They were tightly knit together, untangling themselves in the most efficient way — it was almost as if they were sentient and intelligent. They revealed a cavern behind the waterfall, and as soon as Kurama stepped into it, subtle lights began to flicker on.

“Lamp weeds,” he said, offering you his hand again. “They’ll light the way for us.”

You stepped in after him, allowing him to lead you underground, the path steep beneath your feet. You could hear the water seeping from the ceiling in small drops, sometimes trickling along the stone walls, forming traces of minerals as they streaked down. Stalactite and stalagmite formations made this cave even more haunting, indicating just how timeworn this place was. “How did you
“When you live for thousands of years, you have a lot of time to spare.”

“Well, when you live for twenty-four, I suppose you’re easily impressed.”

He chuckled softly, turning his head to look at you. “Are you? After this is over, there is so much more I can show you.”

“I’d like that,” you said. It was hard to imagine current events being done with, but that was what you had to work toward.

Kurama continued along, his hand warm, despite the coolness you felt as you descended deeper underground. “We’re almost there. How are you holding up?”

“I’m all right. A little cold, but that’s okay.”

He wrapped his arm around your shoulders, stealing away some of the chill. “Just a little while longer, my love.”

“It’s really not that bad. I’m fine.”

“If I remember correctly, I have something that can keep you warm stowed here.”

Now you were curious. What use did Kurama have for fancy clothing?

“It’s an artifact,” he said, reading your mind. “I thought I might have a use for it in the future, which is why I decided to hold onto it. Who knew it would be employed to keep my girlfriend warm?”

“Exactly how valuable is this artifact?”

“Valuable enough to kill over.”

You still weren’t used to how easily demons ended life. Although you hadn’t had much experience with battle, you remembered how ruthlessly Oktai killed Batu — he did so without batting an eyelash, and even Jochi, Batu’s companion, didn’t seem bothered by his death. It was a different world out here, barbaric by your standards. But who were you to judge how others lived their lives?

“Kurama, can I ask you a personal question? Maybe a difficult one?”

“Of course, _____ . I have nothing to hide.”

“I’m assuming you’ve taken life before.”

“Mm.”

“Just… how many people have you killed?”

“Will my answer change anything?”

You gave his question honest thought. “I don’t think so. It’s not that I condone the act of killing others, but I don’t feel I have enough perspective or understanding to judge you.”

“Let me rephrase: Is it possible that my response might make you uncomfortable?”
It was hard to say. Any sane woman would feel distressed and frightened if she discovered her boyfriend had taken the lives of others. She would probably leave him, go to the police with that discovery. She wouldn’t trust him, certainly not with her own life.

But that was in the context of humans in the Living World. Demons had a very different view of life and death. Was killing unlawful? Unethical? And if not, did demons abide by an honor code?

Then again, were they all that different than most humans? Historically, in the grand scheme of things, humans were not kind to each other, either. They warred with one another, pillaged homes and cities, enslaved those who could not fight against them; they enjoyed conquest and glory, preferring riches and comfort over the lives of others.

“_____,” Kurama said, calling out to you softly. He stopped, turning to face you, hands on your shoulders. “I need you to know something. Despite my tumultuous past, I would never hurt you.”

“I didn’t have any doubt of that,” you assured him with a small smile. “I was just thinking.”

“What about?”

“Your question. I don’t know if I have an answer for it.”

“That’s all right if you don’t.” Kurama pulled you toward him, holding you close. “I’ve never taken human life before, if that makes a difference to you. In recent years, I’ve only killed in self-defense and to protect those I care for. In the past, admittedly, I have not been so benign. I can’t count how many lives I’ve taken, _____ . There are too many.”

You heard the regret in his voice, and as you rested your head against his shoulder, you gave him a gentle squeeze. “I’m sorry,” you said. “I don’t mean to make you feel bad or unroot any unpleasant memories. I was honestly curious.”

“You deserve to know. I don’t mind answering your questions.”

“So you’ve got a reputation here, then?” you joked, hoping to lighten the mood.

“I don’t think many demons would pick a fight with me, if they knew my identity.”

“It’s interesting, thinking of you fighting.”

“Why is that?”

“You’re so gentle, Kurama, so soft-spoken and wise. At least, that’s what I’ve seen of you. I just can’t imagine you scrapping with someone. And, apparently you’re good at it.”

“I might be,” he said, seeming amused at your observations. “I fight when I have something to protect. Right now, I have you.” He touched your face, his fingers grazing your skin in a tender caress. “While I’m pleased, flattered even, that you’ve chosen to stay with me, I also worry.”

“Would you prefer that I run?” you asked. You weren’t going to leave him, but you were interested in hearing his perspective.

“I want you to make your own decisions,” Kurama said. “At this juncture, I don’t know what the best route is. There are too many variables. Yul has too much leverage. There are too many unknowns. I can only work with what I have, and I have to trust you to make the right decisions for yourself. I know what remorse is — I don’t want you to experience it in the same way I have, and I certainly won’t force an outcome on you. Just know that no matter where you go or what you
choose to do, you have my support.”

You appreciated him giving you the freedom to choose. This was something unique about Kurama, compared to other men you had dated in the past. He never imposed his opinions on you. He only gave guidance when necessary, and he empowered you to make your own decisions.

“You know I don’t know any better than you do,” you said, “and I won’t pretend to. All I know is if I leave you now, I’m going to regret it. Even if it all works out, I’ll regret leaving you when you need me the most. I can’t do that. This wasn’t even your problem, and you made it your problem.”

His devotion, his sacrifice, was not lost on you — his depth of love was staggering.

“Let’s not dwell on that. You didn’t ask for this.” Kurama kissed your forehead, holding you for a few more moments before taking your hand again. “I’d do anything for you, _____; you know that. Come along, now. As I said, we’re almost there.”

When you finally reached your destination, you saw a ring of lamp weeds light up, not just along the ground but vertically as well. You breathed in, your jaw dropping in awe.

If you had to describe this place, it was not unlike Ariel’s grotto from the Disney film. It circled upward in a relatively round cavern, each layer of stone serving as a shelf. As Kurama had said, artifacts of all types, some of them seemingly normal items, lined these shelves. They gleamed in the faint light of the weeds, indicating just how magic they were — they did not even collect dust since the last time he was here.

In the corner, resting against the wall, you saw a lanky skeleton. It shocked you, and an eerie sensation filled the pit of your stomach.

“It’s all right,” Kurama said, touching your back. “It’s just… me, my demon body.”

You nodded in acknowledgement. You knew it was, but the sight of a skeleton was disturbing all the same. It looked very much human, slouched against the wall, skull turned toward the shoulder as though he were resting before he died.

Kurama paced over to a shelf on the far side, reaching up to remove something. He unfolded a cloak made of a silvery cloth, its sheen fading in and out of the light. “Take this,” he said, wrapping it around your shoulders and securing the clasp in the front.

You felt instantly warmed. “What is it?”

“It’s an artifact that hides demon energy,” he said. “You already know that it’s possible to search for others by energy print. This cloak takes you off the figurative radar. In theory, you could use it to shield your faint traces of demon energy from Yul’s engineered insects, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he can find you by your spirit energy now as well. Its uses are limited in your circumstance, but it can effectively ward away the cold.”

“You think of everything.” You hugged the cloak to your body, admiring its silky feel on your skin. “Thank you.”

“Feel free to look around, but take care not to touch anything,” Kurama said. “These items have unique functions. Unless you understand what they do, it would be wise not to activate them. I’ll take care of the bones.”

“I can help…” you started.

He gave you a small smile. “That won’t be necessary. I can manage.”
Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of November to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Unnerved

Chapter Notes

I was originally a little daunted by the prospect of diving into Yoko Kurama’s psyche and the delicate dynamic between him and the present-day Kurama, but after this chapter, I think I know where I’m going with this. Now I’m just excited. X3

This chapter was a bit of a struggle because I wasn’t 100% sure what was going to happen in it at first. In my super-duper rough outline, I literally wrote "shit happens." So I hereby present to you the shit!

And of course, thank you to those who left me comments! I appreciate you taking time out of your day with all my heart! <3 x3 This shit’s for you: Yeah_I’m_Crazy_So_What, LadyAmazon, SailorCupcake, CrossYourTeez, FannibalToast, FranMakara, and perfect-to-stay!

Also, my life is now complete with Disney+. I’m watching The Great Mouse Detective as we speak.

Kurama tucked the remains of his demon body, bone by bone, into a bag, one of the artifacts he pulled from the shelf. It was a relatively small rucksack, but it seemed its magical property was the ability to hold much more than physics determined was possible.

You watched him through this whole process, noting how somber he was. It must have been personal, having to pick up your own remains for the purpose of a ritual fueled by dark magic. You touched him, letting your fingers run along his back and onto his shoulder. “Are you sure you don’t want help?” you asked.

He didn’t lift his head, though he did catch your hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Thank you,” he said, “but I’d rather do this on my own.”

“Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.” You wanted him to know you would support him, but you also wanted to give him space to mourn, to decipher what all this meant. You would be here if he needed you. To pass the time, you turned to the many artifacts, wondering what purpose they served.

He continued, eventually drawing the string on the bag, sealing the remains away. He breathed in, letting out a short sigh. “It’s done.”

“Oh, Kurama,” you said, resting your head against his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I have no need for them. If these bones can serve me by securing our future together, then their purpose is justified.”

You nodded, deciding it was best to change the subject. “You must have at least two dozen artifacts here. Quite a bit more than a few.”

“Compared to the vast expanse of treasures I’ve collected over the years, this is but a small
“Will you tell me about them?”

Kurama smiled at you, tilting his head to the side. “Curious, are you? What caught your eye?”

“Everything,” you said. “These items either look fascinating or not at all, which makes them just as fascinating.”

“Well, why don’t I select a few I think are especially interesting?” Kurama said, reaching for a mirror. It was circular, framed in copper metal, decorated with drops of turquoise jewels. “This is the Forlorn Hope. It has a twin — or rather had a twin — locked up in the vaults of Spirit World. When I was a human teenager, I partnered with Hiei and another demon, and stole the one from Spirit World along with two other artifacts. I used it to save my mother’s life when she fell ill.”

“How does it work?”

“It’s an Artifact of Darkness. It will grant any wish in exchange for the user’s life.”

“Then how are you alive?”

He chuckled. “Yusuke decided to be a hero, and, impressed with his willingness to sacrifice his life for mine, the mirror spared my mother without taking any life.”

“So that’s why you’re such good friends.”

“I owe him everything.”

“So why are there two mirrors, then?”

“One was made in secret when the original Artifacts of Darkness were forged, using the same magic to duplicate the mirror. It’s a powerful artifact, and I’m glad I’ve had it hidden away. It could cause much destruction in the wrong hands. The other Forlorn Hope, the one in Spirit World, was damaged after it was stolen.”

“You aren’t thinking of using it, are you?” you said, realizing how this item could be useful. “I won’t let you.”

“I don’t plan on it.” He looked at you, a tender gaze in his eyes. He set the mirror back on the shelf and grasped your hands, running his lightly fingers over your skin. “I won’t leave you,” he said. “I know how much it would pain you. I’d much rather the both of us leave here alive.”

“Good. That’s what I want, too.” You gave him a small smile, enjoying the warmth of his hands.

“Maybe you have something else here that could help?”

Kurama selected an hourglass, the curve of its frame elegantly etched in gold. The sand inside was purple, like miniature amethysts that settled in the bottom. “This is the Mirage Hourglass,” he explained. “It allows the user to speak to someone who has passed beyond this realm, someone who has died. The summoned spirit has to be able and willing to respond to the call, of course, but the user will have the five minutes allotted by the hourglass to speak. After that time is up, they cannot summon that spirit again for at least one cycle of the moon.”

“Do you think there’s someone who might be able to give us information about Yul?”

“Perhaps,” he said. “We’d have to be careful using this in the palace. I don’t know what wards or
protections Yul has in place.” Kurama seemed pensive as he looked through the other items. “But, then again, I have this item” — he brought down an ordinary-looking dagger — “which should help with shielding any sort of magic from prying eyes. It’s called the Slightful Dagger, and it functions a bit like the cloak you’re wearing when thrust into the ground, except it works specifically to prevent the detection of ancient magic, which includes most artifacts.”

You spent another half hour here with Kurama perusing through his collection. He explained to you what most everything was, their purpose, and how they may be useful. You weren’t sure if you’d remember it all. He ended up selecting a few items, gently sliding the artifacts into his rucksack. To your relief, he kept the Forlorn Hope here.

“Let’s go,” he said, offering you his hand. “We can meet up with Arban before it gets dark.”

The moment you stepped outside, passing through the mist of the waterfall, Kurama stopped. “_____, behind me.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Now.”

You had never heard him lower his voice like this before, and you obeyed without protest.

Kurama scanned the area with sharp eyes. “Show yourself,” he said. “I know you’re there. I can smell your stench.”

In a flash, something darted out of the water, aimed straight at you — at least, you would have known that if your reflexes were any good. Kurama, however, saw it easily. Due to your positioning next to the stone of the waterfall, he was unable to push you out of the way. Instead, he stepped in front of you, shielding you from the blow.

A sticky appendage came forward, wrapping around Kurama’s arm, seeking to pull him under the water. He resisted as long as he could, able to draw a rose from beneath his hair. With a flick of his wrist, it turned into a whip, a long and thorny weapon that sliced through what grabbed him with ease.

You heard a cry erupt from the water, a large creature bursting forth from the pool. It reminded you of a three-faced giant toad, ugly warts riddling its slimy body. The face in the middle was particularly menacing, sharp canines snapping as it bellowed in pain. Its six eyes were mere slits in each face, glowing in the red light of the Demon World sun.

“Hide,” Kurama said, sparing you only the briefest of glances. “Stay low to the ground and find cover.”

You remembered the promise you made to him the night you were reunited. You wouldn’t question him in moments of danger; you would only cooperate. Given the circumstances, you thought it wise, and you ducked behind the stone of the waterfall, crouching behind some shrubbery. Of course, you couldn’t help but peer through the leaves.

“I am the keeper of this pool,” the creature spoke, its deep voice echoing throughout the forest. “You are bold to venture into my domain.”

“You weren’t always here,” Kurama said darkly. “This place is no more yours than the sky belongs to the raven. It is unclaimed land, wilderness that needs not be tamed.”
“And yet, you seek to use it for your own gain.” From the pool came bubbles, and from the bubbles rose other toad-like demons. These were smaller, but still hideous, their eyes bulging with grotesque amusement. “Eat this trespasser, my children. Then find his companion, and eat her, too.”

Their tongues came at him. Kurama dodged the first few, cutting through some of them with his whip, with which he could attack at multiple points. But he could not avoid the sheer number of toads that attempted to pull him underwater. The tongues wrapped around his ankles, his thighs, his arms, and they yanked him into the pool with a splash.

You gasped, your hands covering your mouth to suppress a cry. You did not know what to do. You felt sick to your stomach at the mere sight of seeing him so overwhelmed. He didn’t stand a chance against so many of them.

The toads did not stop there, however, doing as their leader commanded. They hopped out of the water, seeking you out with each disgusting squish of their hind legs.

You crawled backward, your back hitting the stone. When the toads heard your rustling, they came directly at you, and you rolled to the side, their tongues making contact with the side of the waterfall in dull thuds.

Fortunately for you, it seemed that after launching their tongues, it took at least a few seconds for them to retract their appendages back into their mouths, giving you enough time to make a quick escape.

You ran, slipping along the gnarled roots of the trees as you went. It wasn’t that you wanted to abandon Kurama — the thought broke your heart — but you didn’t feel as though you had much choice. You ran as fast as you could, trying to remember the path back down to the umagi. Perhaps you could find help.

From where you were, you looked past a particularly memorable tree, its branches overlooking the pool. You saw the umagi, now a pile of bones, the smell of raw flesh filling your senses. You had to try not to vomit.

Then you remembered. You gathered what little breath you had left and screamed: “OKTAI!”

Arban was resting in the forest, having found a small cave where he could linger for the time being. He lifted his head, prominent antlers reaching toward the canopy as he stood. He felt a disturbance in the air.

There was a clap, almost like a small explosion, as though a mountain had fallen. A demon appeared, his energy strangely human. He resembled a human with pointed ears, graceful blond hair falling in wispy layers around his face.

Arban hid out in the open, acting as a dumb beast would, grazing on the shrubbery. While he recognized the newcomer as Yul’s right hand, he would remain oblivious. His disguise as a woodland creature was impenetrable as long as he kept up the charade.

Oktai stared at the stag for a moment. “Strange,” he said, eyes narrowing. “I followed the device here. Could it have malfunctioned?” He muttered something under his breath, and the staff began to glow.

Realizing that Oktai was recasting his location spell, Arban clamped his jaws down on the tracking device, destroying it as he chewed thoroughly.
He swallowed the pieces so his adversary would never find them.

The toads seemed a little bothered by your scream, but they shook off the sound, coming after you again. One of their tongues grasped your ankle, yanking you to the ground.

You cried out, unsure of how you would fight — though fight, you would — but you felt a pulse in the air that interrupted your thoughts. You couldn’t explain it. This must have been what energy felt like. There was an uncanny tingle that ran down your spine, making you shudder in anticipation of what eerie event would be taking place.

A crack of lightning zapped through the air, followed by the call of thunder. The wind picked up, warm and seething with power. From the pool burst Yoko Kurama, a spray of split carcasses forced onto the shores along with water, bloodying the grass that surrounded it. He dove after you in one great leap, the whip in his hand moving faster than your human eyes could follow. He sliced through each of the toads, and they had not even the chance to writhe in pain as he silenced them.

His feet touched the ground, landing in front of you. “Are you hurt?” he asked, his voice deeper than that of the human Shuichi.

You shook your head, looking up at him in awe. You couldn’t find your words.

He was beautiful, silver hair flowing down to his waist, pointed ears atop his head; he had golden eyes that were devoid of the warmth Kurama held for you. His arms and what you could see of his chest were toned, and his tail glided behind him, flicking in annoyance. “The demons in this area have become stronger in recent years. No doubt, Yul has chased away the weaker ones.” He stepped toward you, much taller than his human form, offering his hand.

You took it, and as soon as he pulled you onto your feet, he swept you up, one arm beneath your legs, the other supporting your lower back. He wasn’t even wet, the force of his flare of energy enough to propel the water off his skin and clothes.

“Kurama?” you started, “are you okay?” You held onto his firm shoulders, unsure of the cold gaze in his eyes. Although you recognized them, you couldn’t read them.

“I’m fine,” he said, looking at the bones of the umagi. The rucksack was still slung over his shoulders. “We should return to Xanadu. There’s no use remaining here.”

Without waiting for your response, he took off, strong legs driving across the land in graceful leaps. He ran through the forest even faster than the umagi did, carrying you effortlessly along with him.

Arban was already waiting at the edge of the mountains. “Yoko Kurama,” he said. “You needed to summon him. Then, I assume, a strong adversary must have crossed your path.” He studied you, noticing a few scratches; he could not have noticed the bruised ankle beneath your slacks. You were fine otherwise, he concluded, satisfied with your condition.

Yoko Kurama set you down, letting your feet touch the ground. “We were accosted by vermin, those who thought they owned the forest. We were greatly outnumbered.”

“It has been twenty-five years since you’ve been gone. I’m not surprised things have changed. The legendary bandit was no longer here to strike terror in the hearts of demons. They have no reason to respect the forest, even if you sowed the seeds.” He paused before continuing. “There was an occurrence.”
“What happened?” you asked.

“Oktai came searching for you,” Arban said. “The tracking device led him to me, so I had to destroy it.”

“Oh.” You didn’t know what to say. You were originally disappointed that Oktai had not come to your rescue, like his said he would. It seemed you were mistaken — at least he tried.

“She called for him,” Yoko Kurama said. “She was in danger before I surfaced.”

“I see,” Arban said, his gaze narrowing on Kurama. “Perhaps you’ve learned your lesson, then.”

The pointed accusation was enough to rouse the fox demon. His tail twitched irritably, eyes locking with Arban’s.

“Kurama,” you said, feeling the tension in the air. You wanted it to stop — if the two men whom you trusted most began a bitter argument, you weren’t sure how you would rally together to defeat Yul. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called for Oktai. It was… reflexive, and I was scared. I didn’t know what else to do.”

He looked to you briefly, and in another pulse of supernatural energy, he shifted, returning to the human form you knew so well. “It’s all right, _____,” he said, his voice gentle, the vivid evergreen returning to his eyes. “I don’t blame you. If you hadn’t cried out, I may have been too late.”

You bit your lip, unsure of how to respond. It was a relief to have your Kurama here again. Yoko was far less approachable. Something about him unnerved you, something you didn’t quite understand.

Kurama touched you, his warm hand settling against the small of your back. “Let’s go. It has been a long day. You deserve a rest from it all.”

He guided you back to the city, Arban following, taking the form of the middle-aged servant again.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. :) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of November to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Yoko Kurama

Chapter Notes

Just some introspection for both the RC and Kurama. They get to decompress about the events from today, ready to tackle the world again tomorrow! And some cute stuff, too. <3

Thank you to Mei_Mei, Lady Amazon, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, and FannibalToast for the comments! <3 I enjoy reading them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you all right?” Kurama asked as soon as you had returned to your quarters, the door shut, kissing your temple as he enveloped you in his arms.

You nodded. “I’ll be fine,” you said, touching his arm around your shoulder. It was a brief gesture.

“I was worried.” He studied you closely. “Am worried.”

“It’s nothing.”

He kissed your head again. “Are you sure? You seem a little shaken.”

You nuzzled your face into his chest. “I’ll be fine,” you said again. “I think I just want to take a bath and snuggle into bed with you.”

“Very well,” he said. “You must be exhausted.”

Qara heated the water for your bath, and as you sank into the soapy water, you began washing away the stress. You were feeling uncertain about the events of today, your first real meeting with Yoko Kurama in particular.

Perhaps you should have been more disturbed by your run-in with carnivorous toad demons, but you were truthfully worried about your boyfriend.

Admittedly, it was fascinating to watch him fight. You didn't get to study his technique, as you were not in a safe position to do so, but you were glad you were no longer completely in the dark about his abilities. "That whip is insane," you thought, wondering what else he could do with plants. You certainly never wished to make him angry; his enemies probably regretted it.

You sighed as you wet your hair, lathering it with shampoo. Your thoughts ran rampant.

Yoko was cold, devoid of the tenderness you were accustomed to. Perhaps you were particularly sensitive to this, as Kurama was loving and affectionate with you. He was so gentle, thoughtful, always keeping you at the forefront of his mind. The way he looked at you, the warmth in his eyes, made your heart sing.

It was intriguing how his two personalities could be so different — “No,” you thought, “there are three personalities total.” There was Shuichi Minamino as an identity, the human, the man you thought you fell in love with. Then, there was Kurama, the demon whose soul was fused with that
of a human. You were really in love with him all along, realizing there was more behind the facade he kept as Shuichi. And finally, there was the extreme personality — Yoko Kurama.

You could manage the first two identities. Yoko, you weren’t so sure about. He was the loose cannon among the three, the ruthless and merciless bandit who followed no law, no order. Even though he rescued you from those toads, you wondered if the demon inside truly cared for your survival or if it was out of a sense of duty to his more human counterparts. He certainly didn’t seem concerned.

Yul wanted Kurama to be Yoko, to serve him as Yoko. You did not understand how the transformation worked, but there was clearly a reason why Kurama did not wish to use him. If he could fully control his demon identity, he wouldn’t have such reservations.

“Right?” It was pathetic how little you understood this side of your loved one.

Today, he was put in a situation where he had to draw on the demon’s power to save you because you couldn’t defend yourself. Perhaps he would not have needed Yoko if you had not been there. You finally understood why Yul sent you along with him on this mission. He may have wanted you to nurture this spirit beast, to fight for him in the upcoming tournament, but he was also manipulating Kurama.

How else was he to force Kurama to use Yoko?

You leaned back into the water, sinking below the steamy surface to calm your beating heart. You felt sick.

Kurama watched her enter the washroom, Qara shutting the door behind her as she left.

“She says it’s nothing,” he thought, “but it’s everything. Everything is wrong.” More than anything, he felt the sting of hurt when she wouldn’t share her thoughts with him. She had shrugged off his concerns because she was overwhelmed, unsure about the events of today.

He didn’t blame her. This was too much for her, this exposure all at once.

Could he have better prepared her for this?

Probably. As much as he promised her he’d be honest, he still felt weary discussing his past. It was something he wished to leave behind, and he only shared his history with her because she deserved to know. If she was to be with him, to embrace Kurama, she had to know every facet of him. Shuichi and Yoko were as much a part of him as was his flesh and bone.

But his reluctance to utilize Yoko nearly cost _____ her life. He should never have even let those vermin go after her. He should never have let the enemy separate them. While he could have eventually overcome the toads as just Kurama, it would have taken time. It was not his method to simply eliminate his adversaries — and if the battle necessitated that, Yoko was far better prepared than Kurama was. Human bodies were fragile; demons were harder, able to assume more risk and take more damage.

It was not until he heard her cry for help that he internalized it. He had thought the toads would focus on him, as their leader’s clear instructions were to eat him first. He didn’t think they would move in on her while he was still alive. But there were too many of them surrounding him underwater, attempting to drown him, that he could not keep track of them all.

Although he was willing to gamble with his life, sometimes for the mere sake of curiosity, he could
not do the same with hers. She would not survive it.

His artifacts were carefully guarded, hidden away behind the waterfall, preserved by his wall of vines and other plants.

But she was his most precious treasure. Was she not worth the same caution and circumspect, if not more?

She was so desperate that she called for Oktai. Kurama was not angry with her but with himself. He had so neglected to protect her that she turned to another man for help. Frustration smoldered beneath his calm exterior, the reality of the situation forcing him to reevaluate his strategy.

He felt foolish for thinking his own strength would be enough. He would have to welcome Yoko Kurama back into the fold, wholly accept his influence, if he wished to protect her.

He was concerned about just one thing: How would Yoko Kurama impact her?

You wrapped yourself in a towel, stepping out of the washroom, letting all the steam come forth. When you exited, you saw Kurama sitting on the edge of the bed. He watched you with his calm, green eyes.

“Are you going to bathe, too?” you asked, looking away as you walked toward the mirror to brush your hair. “I’m sure it’ll feel nice after today.”

“I will,” he said, following after you. “_____, I’m worried.”

“What about?”

“I think you know.”

You saw him through the mirror, standing behind you.

“You know I’m happy to give you all the answers I have, and I know you’re wondering about what happened. Please, _____, I can handle your questions. Not your silence.”

His words made you sigh, your heart throbbing painfully. You could tell he was troubled by your lack of engagement. “I’m not trying to ignore or avoid you,” you said, turning around to meet him. “I just need some time to process everything. A lot happened.”

“I understand.” There was sincere concern in his gaze.

You touched his face, and he held your hand close, savoring the caress. “Kurama, I don’t want you to worry. I know you do; I know you will. You have to teach me to defend myself. I don’t want to be helpless, and I don’t want to be the one who compromises you.”

“You’re not.”

“Don’t,” you said, your voice firm. “You don’t have to lie to me. I thought we said there wouldn’t be any more secrets. I know I hold you back on the battlefield; I make you vulnerable.”

He looked surprised and glanced away, an adorably sheepish expression on his face. “You’re the first person to ever call me out like this. You know me too well.”

“Just well enough.” You tilted your head to the side and let out a small, dry laugh. “It’s all for me, isn’t it? Being Yoko isn’t easy on you, but you’re willing to do it for me. I don’t have words for
that, Kurama, and I don’t want you to lose yourself for my sake.”

“I haven’t,” he said, “and I won’t. I appreciate the concern, but I have better control of my demon self than you think.”

“I don’t know if I believe you. Yoko is so different than you.”

“Different, yes, but I assure you — he is me.”

“All right,” you said, drying your hair with a towel. “I have questions now. Why don’t you go take a bath, and we talk afterwards?”

He chuckled. “You don’t like the smell of toad slick and grime?”

“You don’t smell that bad, but I think I still prefer the roses.”

“The perfume of roses over toads? I never would have thought.” Kurama gave you a sly glance before disappearing into the washroom, clean clothes Qara laid out for him tucked under his arm.

You continued brushing your hair, wishing you had access to a blow dryer. If it weren't for the fire in the corner, you'd be freezing.

The golden egg of your spirit beast sat on the vanity, nested atop the small pack Qara had given you to carry it around. You looked at it, wondering what kind of creature would hatch from such a small egg. What would it look like? What kind of powers would it have? Was it worth all this trouble?

You touched it, running your fingers along the smooth shell. If this little thing was absorbing your spirit energy, you wondered how you had influenced it lately. Today, you felt a whole host of negative emotions, from fear to confusion to sadness. Just what were you doing to this poor spirit beast?

As you continued to think over the next ten minutes, Kurama returned, shutting the washroom door behind him. He was clean, lightly wet from the bath. As he approached you, you admired how handsome he was. His eyes reminded you of the mountains, the ancient forests you had traversed just today, the rich undergrowth so full of vitality and allure. His hair was damp, smoothed along his neck and back, not the wayward appearance you were used to, though you liked it all the same. He was dressed in comfortable sleepwear, pants and a long-sleeved, button-down shirt.

More than anything, it was the way he looked at you that made your heart swell and sent shivers up your spine. “_______…” he whispered, his voice lowering to a tender pitch. He took your hand into his, gracing it with gentle kisses.

“You don’t smell like swamp anymore?” you asked, stepping closer to him, your hands on his chest.

“Come smell for yourself.” He tipped your chin up, watching your expression as he leaned in for a kiss.

You closed your eyes, allowing Kurama to pull you to him. His hands were on your shoulders, tracing the curve of your body to your back and down to your waist, fingers following your spine. When he reached the small of your back, you let out a small moan against his lips.

“I love you,” he said.
You tuck your arms around him, breathing in his scent. “I love you, too,” you said, your head resting against his chest. It was unbelievable how he could make you feel a million emotions all at once, the passion coursing through your veins in the most intimate way.

Kurama invited you into bed, letting you snuggle against him beneath the covers. He kissed your forehead, his lips resting against your skin for a few moments as you lay your head on his shoulder. “Now tell me what questions you have, my love.”

You nodded, thinking of the best way to phrase your most prominent inquiry. “You said that Yoko is you. I don’t understand how it’s possible when his mannerisms, even the way he talks, is so different than what I’m used to with you.”

“It’s not meant to be easily comprehensible. When I fused my soul with the child who would become Shuichi, I performed something of a merger. I am both Yoko Kurama and Shuichi Minamino. Whatever personality I present is irrelevant. The soul is the same.”

“So you have multiple personalities?”

“Not quite. Those who suffer from dissociative personality disorder generally experience terrible trauma — it’s a coping mechanism to help them detach from a situation that is too painful to assimilate with their conscious self. I have no such affliction. My condition is the result of the union of souls, where there are several identities present.”

“Then there are more than two. I thought there might be three.”

“You’re right. Despite my experience as a human, I am not wholly Shuichi. Nor am I as savage as Yoko was. Kurama, perhaps the core of my soul, surfaced to balance my existence between the two extremes.”

“I can believe that. I’m just unsure how much control you really do have over Yoko when you transform.”

Kurama fell silent for a moment. “It’s not that I can’t control myself as Yoko Kurama. Today I was in full control, ______. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“Then, at the risk of sounding childish, you didn’t feel the same to me. I always feel so safe and loved when you’re around, and when Yoko was here… well, I didn’t.”

He sighed softly, studying you with gentle eyes. “_____, I love you with every fiber of my being, as I’ve never loved anyone before. I promise you that. And thus, every component, every piece of my soul loves you as well. Even Yoko Kurama loves you. When I take his form, I may behave differently. It may help to think of each identity as me looking through tinted glasses of varying color. These lenses do not define my sight, but my mindset, my method of thinking.

“When I must be Shuichi, I see the world through a very human perspective. I live each day, waking up, going to work, doing my research, writing financial publications. I pay the bills, I shop for groceries, I spend time with friends. I live for my mother, for my stepfather, for Kokoda.

“When I must be Yoko, the glasses are tinted with another perspective. I see through the lens of a demon, guarded by instinct and ruthlessness. I am less concerned for the personal feelings of others, more focused on ambition, whatever goal is most prevalent. I have to be — this is how Demon World functions, ruled by the iron fist of power.

“And when I am Kurama, as you see me now, I understand both interpretations. I appreciate both perspectives and realize each have their strengths and opportunities. Right now, in Demon World
and given the circumstances, Yoko’s strength may very well be a necessity. Please understand that.”

You watched him as he spoke, nothing but sincerity in his voice. You believed him, this explanation. It was difficult to suppose that such a duality even existed, but that was what you loved about him — the many complex layers that made up your Kurama.

You nodded. “I think I understand,” you said. “I guess I shouldn’t take things personally when Yoko is involved.”

Kurama chuckled. “You shouldn’t. There is little room for affection in the Demon World. Those who succumb to love and compassion may not live long. The dynamics here are cutthroat. When I take Yoko’s form, I have a very specific intention, and it’s probably not because you want to cuddle.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why do you ask?”

You felt a little foolish about what was going to come out of your mouth. “Because your fox ears look so soft.”

He laughed, an expression of genuine amusement. It was as though some of the tension dissipated, and he shifted in bed, catching your neck in a flirtatious kiss. “If you really wish to pet them, I’m sure someday that can be arranged.”

“Maybe,” you said, the heat rising to your cheeks. “It seems a little immature, doesn’t it?”

“No, just honest,” he said. “Now I have a question for you.”

“Hm?”

His fingers curled beneath the fold of the towel wrapped around you. “Do you really plan on sleeping in this?” he asked. “Because, if not, I’m happy to remove it for you.”

Chapter End Notes

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MWAHAHAHA. Kurama and our RC have been having a hard time, so I thought I’d actually let them enjoy each other for a change. This wasn't in my outline, but it just kind of happened and I put my stamp of approval on it.

My dear readers, Kurama thinks you're beautiful, and you are! <3 Please enjoy!
NSFW, but it is Saturday night.

Thank you to: LadyAmazon, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, TK091, FranMakara, FannibalToast, SailorCupcake, and CrossYourTeez for the comments! This chapter is for you guys! <3

It wasn’t your fault — you’d been seduced by those beautiful green eyes, his soft words of encouragement, the teasing of both your body and emotions.

Kurama kissed you deeply, his hands wandering the length of your body, sliding down your torso in an affectionate caress. He shifted you onto your back without breaking the kiss, situating himself next to you while laying on his side, brushing your hair from your face.

Your hands were in his damp hair, straightening each tangled strand with your fingers as you massaged his scalp, pulling him closer with each press of your lips. Every time you were apart from him, no matter how briefly, you missed him. You missed his warmth, the way he kissed you, his tender disposition. It was as though you couldn’t be close enough when you were together.

He left a trail of kisses from your neck down to your chest, his tongue at work, lips nipping at your delicate skin. Meanwhile, his hands tugged at the towel wrapped around you, untucking it and pulling it aside, revealing your breasts and stomach.

The sudden exposure to the air made you gasp, your fingers tightening along the back of his head, winding even more into his hair. “Kurama, stop it. You’re such a tease.”

“You think I’m a tease now?” he whispered with a sultry chuckle. He cupped your exposed breast, this thumb massaging it from the outside before working its way toward your nipple in deliberate, circular strokes. When he finally reached the sensitive nipple, hardened from his ministrations, he gave it a firm pinch between his thumb and the side of his index finger.

The moan that followed was involuntary, and you shuddered, your muscles clenching in response.

Kurama did not relent, tantalizing you with each intentional, adroit touch of his fingers. His other hand brushed the length of your torso, down your chest and stomach, and it rested on your inner thigh under the covers.

He watched your reactions carefully, studying them as he experimented with your body to see what you enjoyed most. He ran his hand down your thigh, gently pulling at your knee and granting him access to your most private region. He returned to you warmth, dipping his fingers between the
folds and, with a touch as light as a feather, he found your clit.

It was hard to relax and enjoy his intimate care because he knew exactly how to charm you, how to draw out your desirous breaths, how to make you want more. You looked at him, wondering how he kept such a calm exterior — you knew he was relishing this, teasing you, drawing out your small cries of lust.

Your hands unraveled from his hair, and you ran them down his shoulders, tracing the collar of his shirt. You began to undo it, starting at the top, slipping each button from its slit. You admired his smooth skin, his toned chest as more and more of him became available to your eyes. Eventually, with a few delays (thanks to his precise strokes down below), you were able to slide the article of clothing off his shoulders.

Kurama removed his hand from between your legs to completely remove the shirt, leaning up to kiss you again. The moment your lips met, he pushed you back into the pillows, straddling you as he settled himself on both sides of your hips. This kiss was passionate, heated, his tongue finding a path into your mouth, tucking into the deepest corners, enticing you to respond in kind.

Your nipped at his bottom lip, your teeth gentle, as you returned his intense kiss. You touched his shoulders, your nails trailing lightly along his back as you drew him closer to you.

He grunted softly into your mouth, tipping your chin up to deepen the kiss. His other hand fondled your breast, caressing it as he did before, thumb running over your nipple to coax an amorous moan from you — it was as if he wanted to taste the vocal culmination of your longing.

You pulled away for a breath, looking into his eyes. “Kurama…” you said, calling his name.

He gave you a teasing smile, the desire for intimacy reflected in the mild expression on his face. “Hm?” he hummed as he kissed you again, this time on your neck right below your ear. His lips were warm, sucking lovingly on your skin.

“I need you,” you whispered, accepting his kisses as he pinched your nipple in reply. You gave a sharp cry, his ministrations kindling your passion, your appetite for him. You wanted nothing more than Kurama to touch you, fill you, titillate your senses in every way possible.

Without any further convincing, he settled himself between your legs, pressing into your clit with the erection in his pants. It was perfectly poised, and with a forward nudge of his hips, the sensation rose inside you, like an ocean tide lapping smoothly at the coastline. But the storm would not resolve, and the currents became more aroused with each urge, each pulse, each heartbeat. He moved against you, the friction enough to evoke a gasp from your throat, and you spread your legs even wider for him. He was relentless, grinding his hips in an impeccable rhythm, administering a flawless amount of pressure — in such a short time since you had been intimate, he already knew your body, understood its limitations and temperament.

After bringing you closer and closer to release, each movement drawing forth another eager wave, he ceased, pulling away. He removed his pants and undergarment together, taking his time as he revealed his erection to you.

You watched, swallowing as you reached for him, your fingers sliding against his manhood, the sensitive nerves that brought his hips closer as he thrust into your hand. You applied more pressure with each stroke, easing a lustful grunt from his lips.

Kurama gently pushed you back into the pillows, positioning himself above your entrance. He caressed your face, his hand warm against your skin, tilting your jawline so your eyes met. “Tell
me what you want,” he said, his voice low and sensuous, even daunting.

In your weeks of dating, this was the first time you had heard him make a self-serving demand. It was… well, it was sexy. The request inherently held no appeal, but it was in the way he said it, the implication of his requirement — for a lack of better phrasing, your desire, your need for him, turned him on.

You leaned up to kiss him, your hands tangled in his hair again. “I want you,” you murmured against his lips. “Please, Kurama.”

He seemed satisfied with your plea, giving you a seductive glance. “Since you asked so nicely,” he said, pushing forward with his hips, “I’m happy to oblige.” He continued until his whole length was inside, stretching you, filling you, and he kissed you with desirous fervor, holding this position for a few tantalizing moments. He began his pace as you adjusted, thrusting into you with abundant passion.

You wrapped your legs around his waist, leveraging him with each thrust, meeting his hips with your own. The covers were long gone by now, having slipped away during Kurama’s earlier grinding. Your body was completely exposed to him, his hands wandering, exploring each curve, each crevice. His touch was intoxicating, your senses nearly overwhelmed with each doting brush, each grasp of his hand.

You had to break away from the sensual kiss for air, only to have Kurama claim your lips again after a breath.

His fingers made their way between your legs, expertly stroking your sensitive clit, applying pressure without losing the perfect pace he had set. It was too much — between the kiss, the well-angled and steady thrusts, the clitoral stimulation, you moaned desperately into his mouth, begging for some sort of release as the sensations amplified.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” Kurama teased.

You whimpered pathetically as he pulled back for a second, fingers leaving your clit, manhood withdrawing from your warmth. He traced the curve of your hips, your bottom, and then your thighs as he hitched your legs over his firm shoulders, elevating your lower half into a new position.

“You’re soaked,” he said in steamy accusation, giving you a devious glance as he ran his thumb across your slick entrance and then your clit. With an effortless shift, he plunged back inside, pushing forward to fill you once again. “Now, my love” — he leaned forward, tilting your hips upward and slipping in deeper as he did so — “I want to hear your cries. Show me how much you’re enjoying this.”

You looked at him with watery eyes, the anticipation enough to make your heart skip a beat. Kurama began to thrust again, each precise movement impeccably aimed to pleasure you, unyielding as his throbbing erection drove inside you over and over again.

Your hands grasped at the sheets, fingers tightening around the fine cloth. “Kurama,” you cried, feeling each penetration delve deeper and deeper. Your breaths quickened, your unrestrained mewls seeming to encourage his thrusts — it was so intimate, so provocative, such a visceral experience you would only wish to share with him. “Kurama..!” you cried again, his name forced from your lips, as you touched his face.
He shuddered at your call, his thumb brushing against your clit with an explicit intention in mind, applying deliberate pressure in smooth strokes.

With a thread of his deep thrusts, you found your release, moans of overwhelming ecstasy coming from your throat. You spasmed around him, your insides clenching and pulsing in involuntary convulsions that left you with the most powerful orgasm you’d ever experienced.

Kurama carried you through this climax, continuing his pace until you were fully depleted, the final palpitation dissipating into calm pleasure. He came afterwards, spilling inside of you, giving an uncharacteristic cry as his orgasm lasted for several seconds. He caught himself falling forward, rolling to the side as not to crush you.

You were both covered in a light layer of sweat, breathing heavily. You looked at him, noting the tender gaze in his eyes as he lay on his side, head nested atop a pillow. “Hi,” you said, curling up beside him.

“Hello, _____,” he replied, kissing you on the forehead.

“I think I need another bath.”

He gave you one of his demure looks. “Well, you did make a mess.”

“I made a mess?” You made a face of mock-indignation, hinting at the wet between your legs.

He laughed. “I won’t say I didn’t,” he said, a hand on your arm moving down in an affectionate caress. “You're beautiful, my love.” He brought your hand to his lips, kissing your knuckles.

Your eyes met his, and you found yourself lost in his gaze. “I love you,” you said, amazed by how true those words were.

“I love you, _____. Let’s get cleaned up, and we get some rest.”

As she drifted off to sleep, Kurama kissed her neck, letting his lips brush against the warmth of her skin. He breathed her in, the scent of her pheromones lingering on his senses, a tantalizing reminder of their adventure in bed.

He was in a state of euphoria, having just expressed his love to her in the most intimate fashion — and she returned his love. When she first cried out for him, spoke his name, his real name, he thought he might lose it. Kurama couldn’t help but smile — he would remember the sound of her voice forever, the glazed expression in her eyes, as he brought her over the edge.

He gently pulled her close, taking great care not to disturb her, his face buried in her hair. She aroused him even when she didn’t mean to, his male biology subject to even the most subtle movements and glances. His keen sense of smell certainly impacted his level of stimulation, as he could tell when she was impassioned, when she was turned on. It was exciting, flattering even, knowing how she could feel a sense of longing just by looking at him.

Kurama never thought in a million years that he would find a love like this, be so emotionally caught off-guard, left at the mercy of a human woman. When she smiled, he reveled in her joy; when she cried, his heart crumbled for her.

He loved her, needed her, would do anything for her. Their passionate love-making brought him to another world, a happy place — and it wasn’t a false sense of hope, either. It was a future within his grasp, something he could work toward. As complex and dangerous as their situation was,
Kurama felt dauntless tonight. Her cries for him, the plea in her voice, his name on her lips were all he needed to feel refreshed and ready for the day tomorrow, the challenges that would lie ahead. One way or another, he would secure their future together.

He had thought long and hard about it. She was right — she needed to be able to defend herself. She had no martial arts background, but he could still teach her the basics so she wouldn’t be completely helpless out in the open. Until her spirit beast hatched and matured, she would need something. He would do all he could for her, but there would come a time when coming to her rescue wasn’t feasible.

And he would much rather train her than let Yul or Oktai do the job.

Kurama would not let her alone with Yul, if he could help it, for obvious reasons. Oktai simply annoyed him, though he didn’t trust the half-demon either. Still, he didn’t think Oktai would intentionally hurt her.

And if either of them ever did, they would regret it. Dearly.

As she slept, his mind wandered. Kurama kissed her head, resting with her in his arms. He had a lot to think about it, but for now, he tried to live in the moment. He savored her warmth, delighted in her scent, and took pleasure in the sheer simplicity of having her at his side.

Chapter End Notes

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You awoke in Kurama’s arms, your back snuggled against him. It was comfortably warm beneath the covers. You felt his breath on your skin, the steady inhale and exhale. You had never woken up before him, and you remained still, not wanting to disturb him.

He must have been emotionally spent, exhausted from the events of yesterday to be sleeping so soundly.

Today, he would have to present his bones to Yul. No doubt, that would be a sensitive meeting for him. You did not fully understand why Yul wanted his remains, but you had a sick feeling about it.

You looked at the spirit egg nested on the vanity. It seemed larger than it was yesterday, growing noticeably so overnight. You would have to take a closer look to monitor for any other changes once you could climb out of bed.

As if he read your mind, you felt a squeeze around your middle. “Good morning, my love,” Kurama whispered. “How long have you been awake?”

“Oh, just a few minutes,” you said.

“Mm.” He kissed your neck. “_____, I thought about what you said last night.”

“I said a lot of things last night.”

Kurama tugged you close, shifting you so you were lying on your back. He sat up and leaned over you, a mischievous look in his eyes. “Actually, you made a lot of sounds last night. I’m unsure they were all intelligible.”

The heat rose to your cheeks, and you diverted your gaze. “If I recall, a certain someone was encouraging me to make these unintelligible sounds.”

“I might have enjoyed it.”
You leaned up to kiss him, gently savoring the touch of his lips on yours. “I might have, too,” you said.

“I’m glad.” He gave you a small smile. “Among the more comprehensible things you said last night, you mentioned wanting to learn how to defend yourself.”

“I did.”

“I agree with you. I think we should start today, time permitting. I have a few ideas.”

“Really?”

“Yes. What do you think?”

“Oh, that sounds great, Kurama. I’m just a bit surprised — I didn’t think you would agree.”

He shut his eyes momentarily. “I don’t think we have much of a choice, _____. I’m sure Yul intends for you to receive some martial training, and I’d rather I train you than him or any of his retainers.”

“I think I prefer that, too.” You remembered your spirit beast. “Oh!”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I just wanted to check on the egg.” You sat up and slipped out of bed, walking to the vanity. When you touched the egg, even with just the tip of your fingers, you felt a pulse of energy from it. “I wonder if it’s about to hatch.”

“So quickly?” Kurama followed after you. “I assumed it would take at least a few days, if not weeks.”

When you picked it up, it was a little heavier, a little rounder than it was yesterday. “I guess I have no point of reference.”

He studied it. “I have little experience with spirit beasts as well, I’m afraid, but I think it will grow a little while longer. When Yusuke’s spirit beast hatched, Puu was at least eight inches tall. If these spirit beasts are anything alike, which is an ambiguous assumption itself, then the egg still requires time.”

“Well, your potentially relevant information is better than my non-information.”

“One can only hope.” Kurama started off toward the washroom. “I’m going to see Yul this morning. Stay here.”

“You don’t want me to come with you?” you asked, feeling a little deflated. As much as Yul frightened you, you certainly didn’t want to be left behind. And, of course, you were concerned about Kurama.

He sighed softly, turning around to look at you. “I’d rather you not. I’ll only be giving him my old remains. The ritual that follows is an ominous one, and I don’t know if he will be requesting that I partake.”

You walked up to him. “I just don’t want you to feel alone.”

“How could I possibly feel alone? I distinctly remember you lusting after me last night.”
“Kurama!” you gasped, flushing. “Really? Of all the things to say, you choose that?”

He was chuckling, quite gleefully, covering his mouth with a hand in a poor effort to suppress himself. “You’re right. I shouldn’t be making jokes at your expense. I’m sorry.”

“You are not.” You pouted.

His laughter subsided, and he blinked in a mirthful expression. “Please don’t be angry with me,” he said as he embraced you, holding you close. “I enjoy teasing you, is all. I’m fortunate you’re so gracious about it.”

“You’re fortunate I haven’t banished you to the couch yet.”

He lifted your hand to his lips. “Then I beg your forgiveness. I will make it up to you, I promise.”

“Teach me how to fight, and we’ll call it even.”

“You are brave,” he said. “You’re out of your element, facing dangers you don’t even understand, and instead of running, you choose to fight.”

“Is there a question in there?”

Kurama shook his head. “I respect your choices, your determination. That’s all.”

You clenched your hand into a fist. “I expect you to not go easy on me, all right? I know fighting probably comes with varying levels of pain, and you don’t want to see me hurt. But that’s all the more reason to be tough on me.”

He took a step back, arms at his side. “Punch me,” he said.

“What?”

“Go on. As hard as you can.”

You had seen how quickly he moved, how he wielded a weapon. From what you heard, Kurama was a formidable opponent. You should not have been hesitant to deal him a blow, knowing what he could do, but punching him still felt wrong.

“Quickly, _____ . You won’t have time in the ring to entertain second thoughts.”

Fine. You threw your fist toward his chest, thinking it might hit. But, faster than you could see, he caught your fist in his hand. You had not budged him. In fact, your shoulder hurt.

“You’ll want to keep your thumb folded beneath your knuckles” — he demonstrated by tucking your thumb beneath the curl of your fingers — “otherwise you’ll break it.”

“I’m guessing I don’t hit hard enough to do any damage… neither to you, nor to me.”

“No,” Kurama said, a kind look on his face. “Not yet. We can work on that. You’re a fast learner.”

“I’ll try. You’d better get going, then,” you said. “Might as well get this meeting with Yul out of the way.” You would respect his wishes, as you promised. If he’d rather not have you come along, you’d stay here.

“Thank you, my love,” he said, kissing you on the cheek.
Kurama had left to meet Yul already, and Qara helped you change for the day ahead. You specifically asked her for clothes you would be able to train in, and she brought you a tunic, pants that came to your calves, and a sash to tie around your waist.

A knock at the door sounded, and Qara walked over to open it.

“Good morning! Is our lady in today?”

You recognized Oktai’s voice, swallowing steadily as you remembered the events of yesterday. You could not give anything away — otherwise, Kurama and Arban could be in trouble.

“I’m here,” you said, stepping from the bedroom and into the den.

“Ah,” Oktai said, stepping toward you. “You slept well last night, I take it?”

“I slept very well,” you thought. After that passionate session with Kurama, you were physically and emotionally depleted, pleasant dreams finding you quickly. “I did, thank you,” you said.

“How was your adventure yesterday? I take it you located the bones?”

“We did, though I’m sorry to say the umagi didn’t make it out alive. You seemed proud of that one.”

He waved his hand at you as if to brush off your concerns. “I’m glad you’re safe and unscathed, _____ . The umagi is of little consequence. We breed them here, so they are plentiful and well-trained.”

“Well, I’m sorry anyway. It’s sad to lose a life.”

“Mm.” Oktai nodded. “You haven’t seen much of Demon World, then. It’s an untamed place, dangers abound. Demons run amok here, unchecked, preying upon the defenseless.” He saw your ankle. “That’s quite a bruise. What happened yesterday?”

“We happened to come across some demons, and they weren’t too friendly.”

“What did they look like?”

Uh-oh. You had to think quickly. If you described the toad demons, you may give away the location of Kurama’s artifacts. Instead, you grimaced. “They were terrifying,” you said. “I feel sick just thinking of them again. You know, I called for you? You didn’t come.”

Oktai exhaled in a short sigh. “I think after your umagi was killed, the tracking device on it was damaged.”

“You were tracking us?”

“Only to find you if you got into some trouble, I assure you,” Oktai said, a sheepish expression on his face.

“Well, that’s not very kind,” you said, looking at him from the corner of your eye. “You didn’t even tell us. It’s like you’re spying on us or something.”

“You weren’t even supposed to find out, and I’d use it only in emergencies. I only wanted to be there if you needed me.” His blue eyes looked especially boyish, like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “But I see you don’t need me — Kurama is quite capable of keeping you safe.”
“Did you have any doubts?”

Oktai shifted, gesturing for you to sit down. “Yulkhan certainly didn’t. He would not have sent you with Kurama otherwise.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Kurama has his work cut out for him,” he continued. “Yulkhan wants to bring out the demon side of him. The reason why he’s never placed in the tournament historically is because he is reluctant to use Yoko Kurama’s power.”

“Why is that?” you asked.

“Shouldn’t you be asking him?” Oktai said. “He’s the one with all the answers, and he’d sooner tell you than me. I’m sure his reasoning is a personal one. If he is anything, he is a perplexing man.

“You’re right about that.” Kurama might have been complex, but your feelings for him weren’t. You had never been more sure of anything. The many layers that made up his identities, his ability to innovate and strategize, made him who he was — and you loved all of him.

“Well, I hope you’re hungry. I asked Qara to prepare us some breakfast.”

You looked at him, wondering what he was up to. “I could eat,” you said, though you originally had plans to wait for Kurama to return.

Oktai grinned as Qara brought out a tray with a few breakfast selections. Your acceptance of his invitation seemed to make him happy. While you certainly did not appreciate him sending you off with a tracking device, he seemed sincere enough about his motivations. You were usually so good at reading people, discovering their intentions. Oktai was difficult — your intuition seemed to waver whenever you studied him, the innocent plea in his blue eyes. You didn’t know whether it was because he was only half human, but your ability to gauge his reaction was muted.

“Why is it that you always smile?” you decided to ask.

“Mm?”

“I mean, you always seem so chipper, so happy. I don’t know how you do it.”

Oktai shrugged, selecting some sort of pastry from the coffee table. “I live my life,” he said, “from day to day. You take each challenge as it comes.”

“What’s your biggest challenge?”

“My, you are nosy today!” He grinned at you, the skin around his eyes crinkling in amusement. “There’s a banquet tonight I think you’d be interested in.”

“Changing the topic. Smooth.”

“I’m serious, _____. Yulkhan is hosting a banquet tonight in anticipation of the tournament in three months. He’s bringing warriors in from all over Demon World to gauge their strength and invite them to train here.”

“Do you think they’ll actually come?”
Oktai chuckled. “Of course they’ll come. The hospitality of Xanadu is legendary. Besides” — he spread a fruit jam over his pastry — “they’ll all be curious to see Yulkhan’s power. This will be the first time he’ll have fought publically in over a thousand years.”

“I see.”

“You’re certainly invited. I’m sure Yulkhan will be very pleased to have you there.”

“I suppose I should go, shouldn’t I? If he expects me to fight, I should probably be scoping out the competition, too. Though, admittedly, I won’t even know what to look for. If anything, I think I’ll find everyone intimidating.”

“I understand it’s all new for you. I can show you a few basic techniques, if you’d like.”

“Actually, Kurama offered to teach me,” you said.

“Ah, right. That would make sense.”

You noted the coy gaze he gave you before looking away. Perhaps you would have said something, but someone came rapping at the door.

Qara rushed to open it.

“Master Oktai!” a demon said, kneeling before him. “We have several strong energies on our radar. They’re headed right this way. They could be here for the banquet tonight, but it is rather early for an arrival.”

“How exciting!” Oktai said, standing up. “I shall go greet them. Would you like to join me, ____?”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of November to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
You guys have no idea how much I've been longing to write this next chapter, but I was so busy this weekend. :'D I had an all-day Friendsgiving/D&D session on Saturday, which meant that I was food-prepping and making my character on Friday night. Today, I was doing chores and napping it all off. There was a lot of wine involved, okay.

Thank you to those who commented: Mei_Mei, LadyAmazon, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, FannibalToast, CrossYourTeez, Queenasunasama, and FranMakara! <3 I love you guys!

Btw, my November raffle ends on Saturday, and you're all eligible to enter, so please feel free to do so if you haven't already! It is linked in the end notes. Enjoy!

Kurama stepped into the throne room. He had not requested an audience with Yul, per se, but he knew the khan was expecting him.

Slung across his shoulder was a plain rucksack, nothing magical, packed tightly with the bones of his previous life. He felt an odd sense of nostalgia and guilt at having to surrender these remains, as worthless as they were to him.

“Kurama,” Yul said. “I thought you might join me. I see you’ve left _____’s side.”

“Am I not to assume her ancestral father would offer protection in his own fortress?”

“You may. I already promised I would not harm her. No one under my instruction is to harm her.”

“Then, who would be so foolish as to slink beneath your wary eye to do harm to your daughter? Would that not incite your ire?”

Yul nodded. “A fair assumption.” He stood, stepping down from his cushioned throne. “You have the bones?”

Kurama responded by tossing the rucksack at Yul’s feet.

“The surrounding forests are festering with hungry demons,” Yul said. “They’ve laid claim to the land since you’ve been gone, Kurama. In this body, I doubt they recognize you — and if they don’t know who you are, they can’t fear you.” A servant picked up and opened the bag, and Yul peered into it. Satisfied, he turned toward around, gesturing for Kurama to follow him. “I was pleased when I felt Yoko Kurama’s energy pulse in the surrounding area last night. Clearly, you’ve come to your senses.”

“I came to deliver the bones. Are we done?”

“You’re not the least bit curious of the ritual to follow? I doubt you have dabbled in black magic before.”
Foxes were always curious. It was in their nature. When there was a learning opportunity, Kurama felt at least a twinge of interest. He knew about bloodpacts, their utility, how and why they were used. This was his first time participating in one, however, and understanding their origins and ammunition could be useful.

“Very well,” Kurama said. “Be quick about it.” He trailed after Yul through a door, down the stairwell, and into the darkness.

Oktai took the lead through the hallways, his robes flowing around him as his strides became brisker. You followed after him, finding yourself having to jog to keep up.

“You walk so fast,” you said, almost breathlessly.

He turned around to look at you. “Oh? I can slow down, if you’d like, my lady.”

“No, I don’t mind running. I was just taking note.”

“Demon World is a vast expanse of land. You’ll find the best way to get anywhere is to move quickly.” He offered you his arm. “Why don’t you hold on? I’ll be able to set a more accommodating pace this way.”

You did as he suggested. “Who do you think these demons are?”

“I have several guesses. I’m sure many demons from all over will be joining us at the banquet tonight. We sent word days ago, after all, and this will be a good chance for them to witness the competition.”

“Whose idea was this?”

“Mine, of course. I like to think all good ideas come from me.” Oktai gave you a cheeky grin.

“Well, I’m sure Yul appreciates it. It sounds like you’re the brains behind the operations.”

“It comes with the territory. If you wish to remain in the khan’s good graces, you must contribute. You may soon learn that.”

You paused to think about his words. Yul had not made any attempt to hurt you thus far for two reasons: a) He wanted to hatch the spirit beast and b) Kurama ensured your safety through the bloodpact. He had no reason to do you any harm. But if and when you became irrelevant, your life was surely dispensable.

You would have to either remain relevant or find a way to defeat Yul. This, of course, was assuming Kurama could break the bloodpact. While you had faith, the situation really did seem impossible. You could only hope Kurama’s cunning could challenge Yul’s insidious plans.

You came to the main doors of the palace, propped wide open, and Oktai stepped through them without a second thought. “Let’s go,” he said, beginning the descent down the stairs.

The morning was cool, and you pressed the egg in its pouch to you to keep it warm. Your own maternal instinct surprised you. You followed Oktai around the palace and to an open clearing, where the umagi grazed.

“Hm,” Oktai mused, looking thoughtful. “The energy is coming from above. They must be flying.”

“Flying?”
“Some demons can do it. Depends on their biology, sometimes their energy. It’s not exactly common — they are more likely to have the ability to glide — but it’s possible.”

Fascinating. You had never even thought of demons flying — you doubted you’d met any who could. “Is that them?” you asked, pointing to a figure in the red sky.

Oktai nodded. “I think so.”

The figure became larger and larger as it came closer. You saw the great wings of a bird gliding toward the palace. The field you were in was no doubt the best place for a landing for a beast of this size. The bird began its descent, wings beating heavily and causing a draft to swirl around you, not unlike that of a helicopter. With a graceful thud, it landed.

You were now able to get a good look at it. Its blue plumage was thick, a black mane trailing down its swan-like neck. Two floppy ears sprung from its head, golden beak pointed and sharp. It was huge, bearing three riders on its back.

“_____! Thank goodness you’re safe!” Botan hopped off of its back, feet touching the ground. She glanced quickly at Oktai. “Is this one friendly?”

You laughed, racing up to her to give her a hug. “He’s not a dog, Botan. This is Oktai. He’s friendly enough.”

“Charmed,” Oktai said. “Welcome to Xanadu.”

“So this is Xanadu, huh?” Kuwabara said as he joined you on the ground. “You've been here all this time? Man, I was worried you'd be locked up in a dungeon or something.” He grinned. “This place is really nice.”

“It looks like a fucking tea garden,” Yusuke said. “Are you sure a demon king lives here?”

“Yulkhan is, in fact, the ruler of these lands,” Oktai said. “I welcome you all on his behalf. Any friend of our lady is a friend of mine.”

“Our lady?” Yusuke blinked. “You're talking about this” — he pointed at you — “one? Kurama made it sound like you all wanted to eat her or something.”

“Ah, you know Kurama as well. Even better.”

“Speaking of Kurama, where is he?” Botan asked.

“He’s somewhere in the palace,” you said. “I don’t know what he’s told you. We really should catch up.” The last part was intended for the three of them.

Oktai smiled, gesturing for everyone to follow. “I was telling Lady _____ about the banquet Yulkhan is hosting tonight. Of course, you’re all invited to our event, and even as guests for the duration of your stay. I recognize you two from the last tournament. Fearsome warriors, you are — surely, you'd want the chance to meet some of this year’s competitors.”

“Well, we came all this way,” Yusuke said. “Why not stay for a bit of R&R?”

The expression on Kuwabara’s face stiffened. “I dunno, Urameshi. I don’t trust these demons. We should talk with _____ and Kurama first before accepting any invitations.”

“Oh, you can do whatever you’d like!” Oktai said. “The invitation is an open one. No need to
A lot has happened in the few days I’ve been here,” you said, looking at the ground. Speaking with your friends in private was really what you needed to do. As much as you liked Oktai’s personality, you didn’t fully trust him — you couldn’t. “Why don’t we go inside? You must be tired and hungry, having come all the way here from the Living World. You can all relax in my quarters, and we can chat and have something to eat.”

The looks on the boy’s faces lit up at the mention of food.

“You beast can stay in the stables,” Oktai offered. “I’ll have our servants take good care of him. Hopefully, he won’t antagonize the umagi.”

Qara was busy refilling cups and preparing snacks, and she ran back and forth from the den to the kitchen, probably the busiest since you’d been here.

“So, it looks like you’re in less danger and in more luxury,” Yusuke said. “What the hell is going on here? Last we heard, you were kidnapped, and when Kurama texted us the coordinates, he didn’t give any more details.”

You sighed. “It sounds like he didn’t tell you much anything. It’s probably best for us to start at the beginning.” You began, explaining all the details. Although you left out the part about your running off in the forest, you told them about how Yul was your ancestral father, how Kurama formed a blood pact with Yul, how you were both expected to fight on his behalf in the upcoming tournament. After many interruptions and exclamations of surprise, you finished your account.

“Wow,” Botan said. “Kurama obviously didn’t know any of this when you started dating, but who would have thought you’re more involved with the supernatural that the average person? What are the chances?”

You shrugged. “I didn’t know until recently, either. I had no idea the adventures you all had gone on until Kurama told me. It’s actually really… touching, I guess, that you’ve been through so much together. I can see why you’re all so close.”

Botan wrapped an arm around your shoulders. “Well, I’m so happy you’re not in the dark anymore! We’ve been hoping your boyfriend would tell you the truth so we could stop tiptoeing around you. You’re one of us now!”

Kuwabara was still very interested in the appetizers on the table, but he looked up to grin at you and Botan. “Yeah,” he added, “I’ve said this before, but we’re your friends. You can count on us for whatever.”

“Kuwabara’s not usually right about anything,” Yusuke said, “but he’s right about this. Your dad sounds like a dick. We’ll figure out how to break that blood pact and send him to the moon.”

You had never felt so grateful in your life. “It’s not going to be easy, but I’m really glad you’re all here. Kurama has good friends.”

“You have good friends,” Kurama said as he stepped into the den. “Hello, everyone.”

“Kurama!” Botan greeted.

“Yo, fox boy,” Yusuke said. “You’ve got some explaining to do.”
While the boys caught up with each other, you and Botan stepped into the bedroom. You were relieved to see that Qara had changed the sheets and made the bed for you. You really were a slob sometimes.

“I have some supplies for you,” she started, dumping the contents of her backpack onto the bed. “I wasn’t sure if Demon World had all the necessities, so I brought shaving cream, deodorant, soap, shampoo, conditioner —”

“Come on, Botan,” you laughed. “Demons might be different, but the ones here have basic hygiene, at least.”

“I’ve smelled some pretty foul demons in my time, ____. One can never be sure! But anyway, I’ve brought ibuprofen, clean underwear, hot cocoa mix, hair ties, fuzzy socks, lotion, and all of the birth control pill packets in your medicine cabinet. You sure are lucky you’re on your sugar pill week, sweetie —”

“Oh, good lord, Botan! You’re a savior!” You hugged her tightly, thankful that she had the insight to bring your medication. “How did you know?”

Botan chuckled. “I’d love to take all the credit, but actually, Kurama was the one who thought of it. He texted me before I left — I found your almost-finished packet in your toiletry bag at the cottage, and I was able to search for your other packets while in his apartment.”

“You might be my best friend as of today.”

“Well, I couldn’t let the both of you go without your birth control, could I?” She gave you a wink.

“Okay,” you started with a nervous laugh. “You do know that birth control pills are used for many things other than preventing pregnancies, right? Like regulating periods, endometriosis, acne, PCOS, lowering risks of ovarian and uterus cancers, hormonal therapy —”

“I get it! Fun stuff aside, I’m sure Kurama is aware of that. He didn’t just ask me to bring your birth control, by the way. He wanted me to check for any other medications in your toiletry bag and medicine cabinet, too. He was looking out for you, ____.”

You smiled, thinking of him fondly. It was moving how much he cared about you. “I’ll have to thank him later. He really is the perfect boyfriend.”

Botan squeed. “That look on your face right now is one of pure bliss! I’m really so happy for you and Kurama.”

“Thank you, Botan. For everything. For bringing all this stuff. I’m relieved to have it, especially the hot cocoa. I don’t think they have chocolate here in Demon World.”

“That is a shame. Why don’t we have Qara brew some up for us?”

“I think that sounds like a great idea. It’s so cold today. Can you go show her how to do it? I doubt she’s ever made a drink from a packet before. I’ll find a place for everything here first.”

“Sounds great, ____!” She waved at you as she stepped outside your room.

There were so many items on the bed. Botan had stuffed her backpack to the brim. It sure must have been heavy. “That poor bird they were riding on the way here,” you thought, “I’ll have to ask about it later and bring it a treat.”
Chapter End Notes

As a note, I don't know how many of you are on BC, but I get mine three-months at a time, so I figured the RC might just be lucky in having the next three month's worth in her medicine cabinet. lol.

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have through the end of November to participate.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Qara pointed you to the training grounds behind the fortress, where you would be able to begin your lessons with Kurama. Yusuke, Kuwabara, and Botan came along as well. The former two had not sparred in a long while and wanted to have some fun, while Botan simply didn't want to be alone in the palace — you didn't blame her.

Kurama stood across from you, watching you with gentle eyes, while your friends practiced a small distance away, Botan cheering them on.

You wondered how this man, your boyfriend, could be such a fearsome warrior, how he could so easily transform into the cold brute you met just yesterday. He sliced through those toad demons like a knife through butter. You were too shocked at the time to really think about the blood and gore, but there was so much of it, hacked carcasses strewn across the spring and surrounding land. Yoko Kurama’s hands were stained red.

“____? Are you listening?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just thinking.”

“About what?” His gaze was so tender, loving, reaching into the depths of your soul. Anytime he asked you a question, it was a sincere inquiry. You had never been in a relationship with someone so concerned for your mental well being.

You shrugged. “Yesterday. I was impressed by how you fought. I know I’ll never as strong as you.”

Kurama tilted his head to the side, thick eyelashes framing his eyes when he smiled. “I’ve had a few thousand years as a head start. I hardly think it’s fair to compare yourself to me.”

“I understand,” you said. “But if the tournament is as dangerous as what we experienced yesterday, I don’t think I’ll ever become strong enough.”

“I think the best you can do is to push yourself. Your spirit beast will hatch as an extension of your soul, and it will be able to fight on your behalf.”

“Are you sure?” You touched the egg nestled against your side. “What if I’m too weak and the
energy it’s feeding on is too feeble for it to become strong? What if it’s a useless spirit beast?”

“You’re braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”

“Did you just quote Winnie the Pooh?”

“It seemed appropriate. Although best known for Winnie the Pooh, A. A. Milne published many poems, plays, and books, all with little gems of wisdom.”

“Did you say Puu?” Botan said as she stepped into the conversation.

“Yes, Winnie the Pooh,” you said. “Have you seen the movie or read the books?”

Kurama chuckled. “She’s referring to to Puu — P-U-U — Yusuke’s spirit beast.”

It finally clicked for you. “You mean that big, blue bird you flew in on?”

“Oh! It just occurred to me that we haven’t introduced you!” Botan looked especially excited, her hands clasped together. “We should head over to the stables right now.”

“I’d love that, but I haven’t even started training. Maybe afterward?”

“All right!” She playfully punched you in the shoulder. “Knock him dead!” she called in a sing-song voice as she ran to the sidelines to observe.

“Knock him dead,” Kurama repeated, giving you one of his mischievous looks. “She seems to have plenty of faith in you.”

“I wish I could say the same for myself.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get there.” A breeze drifted through the air, ruffling his hair.

You nearly swooned at how attractive he was. He probably didn’t make the best teacher for you, considering how often you caught yourself staring at his beauty.

“First, you have to understand what fighting is,” he started. “It’s more than swinging fists.” He nodded his head toward Kuwabara and Yusuke, who were carelessly trading blows. (You winced.)

“It’s an art form. A proficient fighter will develop a unique set of skills that serves him well on the battlefield.”

“Like how you manipulate plants?”

“Yes, but plant manipulation is merely the execution. The true skill comes from understanding your enemy, thinking at least two steps ahead, and forcing his hand.”

“Sounds more like a game of chess.”

“It can be. Not everything is about brute force as some may have you believe.”

“Good, because I don’t have that.” You laughed sheepishly. “So where do I start?”

“Physical fitness.” Kurama gestured for you to follow him. “Let’s go for a run.”

“Really?”

He saw the pout. “_____ it doesn’t matter how clever you are. If you can’t execute a strategy
because you’re out of shape, you might as well not have one at all. We need you at least working toward peak condition before we begin the martial training.”

“Fair enough,” you sighed, starting after him. You were not looking forward to this.

“So what’s up with this bloodpact, Kurama?” Kuwabara asked, now that they had a moment alone. “_____ mentioned it this morning, but she didn’t give any details.”

“She doesn’t know any.”

Kuwabara gave him a sideways glance as he watched his friends walk toward the stables. “You mean you’re keeping more secrets from her?”

“No secrets,” Kurama said. “I just don’t want her to worry. I’ve been transparent about the bloodpact, the terms under which it was forged. She doesn’t need to know the macabre details of the ritual.”

“You mean the blood part?”

“It’s called a bloodpact for a reason.”

“What happened?”

“The origins of the bloodpact is nebulous at best, but they’ve been around for as long as I can remember, created as a neutral party to ensure transactions are fulfilled between two demons. It is fueled by an ancient magic that requires a literal piece of each participating party for it to operate. The first night I was here, I gave it my blood.” Kurama looked at his arm, the bandaged gash he conveniently hid under the sleeve of his shirt. “Usually, blood is enough, but in this case, Yul wants something more — he doesn’t just want to bind my human blood to the contract but Yoko’s demon influence as well, which is why I was instructed to seek out my demon remains.”

“Ugh,” Kuwabara said. “Gross.”

Kurama chuckled dryly. “It is vulgar, isn’t it? At any rate, I surrendered my demon remains to him this morning. It was sacrificed to the ancient magic.”

“What happens next?”

“I don’t know. Bloodpact magic works in mysterious ways. I pledged my allegiance to Yul, so I cannot defy him. If I do, he is released from his end of the contract.”

“Which means _____ is in danger,” Kuwabara finished. “People like him make me sick, holding helpless girls hostage to get you to do evil things for him!”

“I concur. Nevertheless, this is the hand we’ve been dealt. We must work with it.”

“Please tell me you have some sort of plan to get out of here.”

“Not anything comprehensive yet. I figure we have three months to plot, and I doubt Yul will do anything to further upset us before _____’s spirit beast hatches. Truthfully, I’m curious as well. The beast will be loyal to her, not Yul. I wonder if we may leverage it to our advantage.”

“You think it’s going to be anything like Puu? I mean, that bird was just a little guy for a while. I dunno if _____’s will be useful for at least a few months.”
“We’ll just have to see,” Kurama said. “I don’t know what form _____’s spirit beast will take.”

“Hopefully, a really large, scary dragon or something.”

“That would be convenient.”

You had never been more sore in your life. You plodded after Botan and Yusuke breathlessly as they headed toward the stables. Your legs were shaking — it was embarrassing how out of shape you were.

“Are you excited, _____?” Botan said. “You’re going to love him. Puu really is a darling!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Yusuke said. “He could peck your eyes out, you know?”

“But he wouldn’t!” Botan said with a gleeful expression. “Don’t listen to Yusuke — he’s just jealous that his spirit beast self is more cute and cuddly than he is!”

“Does he really enjoy cuddling? He’s huge,” you said.

“Oh, yes!” Botan said. “I visit him and Genkai sometimes at her estate, and he loves to cuddle.”

You glanced at your egg, noting how small it was compared to the beast you saw this morning.

“Kurama said Puu was a little thing when he hatched. How long did it take for him to grow into a bird of this size?”

“It only took a couple of months for that sack of puny feathers to turn into a sack of lots of feathers,” Yusuke said. “And I wouldn’t really call it growing. It was more of an… evolution, you know? Almost like a Pokémon!”

“A Pokémon? Really, Yusuke!” Botan said.

You opened the door to the stables, the smell of hay and umagi filling your senses. There, right in the corner, was Puu, nestled into the straw. He lifted his head at the sight of you, giving you a cry of curiosity.

“Hey, buddy,” Yusuke greeted, walking right over and petting him on the head. “This is _____.

Puu shifted, raising his elegant neck toward you.

“Hi, Puu,” you said, glancing at Yusuke. “Can I pet him?”

“Sure. You don’t have to ask. He’s friendly.”

You pressed your hand against the side of the bird’s head, and he nuzzled right into it with a contented chirp. “He really is adorable,” you said, feeling the exhaustion of today’s run melt away.

He tilted his head to the side, a realization forming in his eyes. Puu began to burrow his beak into your side, searching for something.

“O-oh!” It was ticklish. “He knows I have something for him,” you said, rummaging through your pocket. “Here you go.”
Puu immediately gobbled up the snack, giving you a delighted purr.

“I think he likes you,” Botan said.

“Good,” you said, as Puu became more excited, thinking you had more of this treat. He sniffed at you, gently prodding at you with his beak. “Okay, okay! I’ll bring you some more. That’s all I have for right now.”

Yusuke gave you a wry grin. “Not too many treats. He might start liking you better than me.”

“That would be problematic, considering he’s your spirit beast. Can’t have a conflict in loyalties, can we?” You scratched Puu behind the ears. “Don’t worry,” you whispered. “I’ll sneak you as many as I can.”

“I heard that.”

“I’ll just pretend they’re from you.”

“He already knows they’re not.”

You shrugged. “Well, you’re just going to have to start being relevant, then. We’ll see who brings the best treats.”

“Oh, get your own spirit beast, you thief,” Yusuke quipped.

“I’m trying,” you said with a small laugh. The egg at your side seemed to become warmer, a little larger, brimming with brilliant energy.

Before the banquet began, you took a bath, stepping into the bedroom with a towel wrapped around your torso. You opened the wardrobe, rummaging through the selection of clothes. You had no frame of reference for what kind of banquet this was going to be. Formal? Business formal? Snappy casual? Completely casual?

“Dress accordingly, now. You wouldn’t want to disappoint your ancestral father.”

You turned around to see Kurama, who had just stepped into the room. His very presence brought a smile to your face. “Kurama, that’s not funny. And I don’t even know where to begin. What should I be wearing?”

“Whatever you’d like,” he said. “Remember, this is a banquet for warriors from all walks of life. I trust most of the guests won’t be so extravagant.”

“What about this?” You selected an outfit.

“That’s fine.”

“And this?”

“That’s also fine.”

“You don’t seem to have much of an opinion.”

“I don’t think it’s my place to dictate how you choose to dress yourself.”

You looked at him, an impish gleam in your eyes. “So you wouldn’t be opposed if I just pranced
He paced toward you. “Very well,” he said, touching his lips to yours in the lightest of kisses. “I may have an opinion. But I trust your judgment.”

“Nevertheless, if you have an opinion, I’d like to hear it.”

Kurama chuckled. “I find you attractive in anything or nothing at all. I’m probably not the best person to ask.”

“That’s not a real opinion.”

“I’d rather you not run around in lingerie?”

You leaned up to kiss him. “All right, I that’s fair. It’s probably a common sentiment for lovers to have. I guess I wouldn’t want you showing off your boxer briefs in public either.”

His hands found your hips through the towel as he pulled you closer. “I doubt anyone here would be interested in my indecency. But you — be careful, _____. Some demons have enormous appetites.”

You nodded slowly, remembering Yul’s harem. You had not thought of them since the night you saw them. Perhaps you were shielded here too well from the reality of Demon World, but you weren’t surprised that some demons lusted after human women.

“Don’t go anywhere alone tonight,” Kurama warned. “We may be in Yul’s palace, and while he has vowed not to harm you, there will be many demons here tonight who do not owe him their allegiance. Stay with me. I will protect you.”

You intended to obey. “I will,” you promised. You weren’t going to put Kurama in a vulnerable position ever again, not if you could help it.

Chapter End Notes

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Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Happy Thanksgiving weekend! I hope you all spent time with family and friends and got some good Black Friday deals, if that's your thing! :) 

I'm super excited for the events that will follow this chapter. :D Hope you enjoy!

Thank you to those who commented: FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Mei Mei, and FranMakara! I appreciate your feedback so much! ^_^ 

“Kurama?”

“Yes, my love?”

“What kind of banquets do demons have?”

“What do you mean?” He slid on his shirt, a long-sleeved tunic with a stiff collar and intricate knots for buttons that lined down the center.

“How are they different than human celebrations?” you asked as you stepped toward him to help straighten the shirt and begin buttoning it. “I’ve been to galas and parties and all sorts of human events in the Living World, but I guess this one won’t be the same.”

“As humans have different celebrations for different occasions, demons do, too. This seems to be a welcome banquet of sorts, bringing fighters from every corner of Demon World together. I imagine it won’t be anything extravagant, but there will be plenty to eat and drink, and time to mingle. The training grounds will be available so fighters may brandish their weapons or techniques.”

You smoothed out the cloth of his shoulders, admiring how handsome he was in this cultural garb. “Will there be anyone there you’d recognize?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Kurama said. “I’ve fought in a few tournaments in my time.”

“Would you call them friends?”

“Some.” He gave you a small smile. “I’ll be sure to introduce you should they arrive.”

You returned his smile. “I love you,” you said, leaning into his chest.

“I love you, _____.” He kissed your forehead. “You look beautiful, by the way.”

“You always say that. How do I know you’re being honest?”

His hands trailed down from your back to your waist. “I always say it because it’s true,” he said as he leaned in for a quick kiss. “I’m sure others may agree, which is why I need you to be careful tonight. Stay with me, all right?”

“You don’t have to tell me twice. I’m happy to stay with you. Honestly, it’s where I want to be, not
out of fear for my safety, but because I wouldn’t rather be anywhere else.” You saw the flicker of mirth in his eyes. “I’m sorry, that must sound so sappy.”

Kurama brought your hand up to his lips. “No,” he said. “I feel the same. I’m happiest when I’m by your side.”

“Good. I plan on sticking around for a while.”

“I could not be more pleased.” He kissed your fingers. “I swear I’ll do right by you, _____.

“You’re doing that already.”

“Do you really think that?”

“You’re here, aren’t you? We’ve been over this. You know you didn’t have to come for me when I was taken. You could have left me to fend for myself, but you didn’t.”

The gaze in his eyes softened. “_____, when you walked away from me that night, I thought we were done. I thought our relationship was over, that my mistake had cost us a lifetime of happiness.” He looked away for a moment, letting out a dry laugh. “I would have begged you for your forgiveness, for a second chance.”

“I know you feel like you’re responsible for what happened,” you started, “but I see now why you kept so much from me. I honestly don’t know if I would have been so open-minded if I weren’t thrown into the middle of it. It might be foolish to say, but I think this might be a blessing in disguise.”

“That’s very optimistic of you,” Kurama said. “Gracious, even. I must be the luckiest man in the world to have you.”

Your conversation was interrupted by a knock on the bedroom door. Qara opened it, peeking inside. “My lady,” she said, “the event is about to begin. Guests are already arriving.”

“We’ll be right there, Qara.” You leaned up to kiss your boyfriend. “We can continue this conversation later.”

Kurama offered you his arm and an affectionate glance. “Very well. Let’s go.”

As soon as you stepped outside for what you equated to a casual cocktail hour, you were amazed by the diversity. While humans were certainly unique, they all looked relatively similar — demons were completely different. Some walked on all fours; others didn’t even have humanoid shapes. Their skins varied drastically in color, texture, and even odor. The size contrast was also fascinating as there were imps small enough to rest on your shoulder and brutes the size of a truck.

Kurama’s arm rested protectively around your waist the whole time.

You could tell that while he was calm, he was also gathering information. His eyes were sharp, shoulders held high, each direction of his next step calculated. He seemed to test the crowd’s reaction to you — he noticed every hungry glance, each deep breath, and he took great care in guiding you where the threats were minimized.

You pitied the poor egg in the pouch at your side. It was absorbing your energy, and you must have seemed like a coward. These demons intimidated you.
“It’s all right,” Kurama whispered, taking note of your dread. “You’ll be fine.”

A long table in the corner served an elegant spread of appetizers. Many demons gathered around it, stacking their plates greedily, though not as quickly as the servants refilled the buffet. They came from the kitchen with trays of food, clearly accustomed to the sheer volume that their guests would consume.

In the distance, you heard war cries and felt blasts of energy emanating from the training grounds. You looked in that direction, noting the number of demons making their way over to observe the competition.

“I noticed you’re becoming more cognizant of the energy around you,” Kurama said. “That’s good. I think after your demon energy awakened, you’ve become more spiritually aware.”

“Is that what I feel? It’s almost like a premonition.”

“I’ve heard humans describe it as such. If you’d like to learn more about it, I recommend spending some time with Kuwabara. His spirit awareness is unmatched.”

“Speaking of Kuwabara, where are our friends?”

“They should be here,” Kurama said. “If they’re not eating, I would assume they’re training. Perhaps we should go find them — that energy felt like Yusuke’s.” He began guiding you toward the training grounds.

“Aye, Kurama! How’s the craic? Fancy seein’ you here. I knew you’d be comin’ back for more brawls, but the tournament int for another three months. I didn’t think Yul’d be sendin’ invitations all the way to the Livin’ World!”

You turned to see a guest waving after you. You had never heard anyone talk so quickly in your life, but at least he looked pleasant enough, a wide and crooked smile on his face. His hair was red, not unlike Kurama’s, wayward and piled atop his head. His ears were pointed, like those of elves you saw in high fantasy, wiggling even, as he greeted you. A short, white horn protruded from his head, most of it buried in his hair, no doubt, and a small canine poked out from the corner of his mouth.

“Jin,” Kurama said, “it’s good to see a familiar face. I was in Demon World for other matters.”

“Ah, an adventure, I see! You’ll hafta tell me more ‘bout that later, but first, who’s this ya got tucked in your arm?”

“This is _____. _____. this is Jin. He’s a friend.”

“Good to meet you,” you said, relieved to finally meet someone friendly. Of all the demons here, he even looked somewhat human. You reached out to shake his hand.

Jin eagerly grasped yours. “Pleasure is all mine! Didn’t think Kurama would be bringin’ his pretty lass all the way from Livin’ World. It’s a dangerous place for humans, ya know? Ya sure must pack a punch if he feels comfortable bringin’ ya ‘round!”

“Actually, it’s a long story. I’m not much of a fighter.”

“She’s learning,” Kurama said. “We’re on our way to the training grounds, if you’d like to join us.”

“Aye! Don’t mind if I do! It’s what we’re here for!”
“I assume the others are here, too, then.”

“Of course! They wouldn’t miss it for the world. I’m sure they’re all ‘round here somewhere, probably piggin’ out on that nice spread over there.” Jin’s ears twitched. “Oy, I might just be hearin’ Urameshi’s cry — I’d recognize that call from anywhere! Let’s go join the fun!”

As you approached the training grounds, you saw someone come flying out of the ring, hitting the ground, the force of the blow moving him several yards before he stopped. It was Yusuke.

“Don’t worry,” Kurama assured. “He’s fine. I’ve seen him take worse.”

“Worse than that?” You watched Yusuke stand up with hardly any effort at all, wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth. An average human would have broken at least several bones and probably wouldn’t have a grin on his face.

“Far worse. Yusuke is a glutton for punishment. He enjoys a good fight.”

“Back for another knock to the jaw? Ripper!” In the elevated ring, you were able to see just the head of Yusuke’s opponent — a very tall demon with a blue mohawk, raising a glass bottle to his lips. You couldn’t see any more of him behind the jeering crowd.

“That’s Chu,” Kurama explained. “Another friend.”

“A very drunk friend, I see.”

“Alcohol empowers him. He has mastered a rare technique that allows him to vastly improve his hand-to-hand combat skills the more he drinks.”

“I didn’t know that was possible.”

“It’s not, for most people.”

“I’ve never been able to do it either,” Jin said, his arms crossed across his chest, “but that sure don’t stop me from havin’ fun tryin’!” He leaned toward you, nudging you with an elbow. “If you’re feelin’ up to it, we can take a whack at it together!”

You couldn’t help but laugh — you liked Jin already.

Several other fights took place in different rings across the grounds, each one with a referee. Although they seemed violent to you, Kurama assured you these combats were well-natured. “The demon body can take far more damage than human biology allows. There are exceptional humans, such as Kuwabara, who can stand up to the brutality of these fights. Still, those are far and few between. What you’re observing here is normal demon brutality in a controlled context.”

You bit your lip. The thought of fighting these demons made you anxious — you didn’t think your fragile human self would ever be strong enough. As you were right now, you probably couldn’t withstand a single blow. “I know I’m should be watching right now, but I don’t even know what to look for. It’s just all looks so… painful.”

“You’ll learn,” Kurama said with a gentle squeeze. “It’s no different than learning something new. Do you remember when you first studied options contracts or insurance policies?”

“I get you’re trying to make some sort of real life metaphor here, but options contracts and insurance policies can’t kill me.”
“If you put the wrong beneficiary on your insurance policy, it might.”

“Very funny,” you said, rolling your eyes. It was then you realized something. “Kurama, if we ever get out of here, remind me to list you as a beneficiary on my accounts.”

He smiled at you, the first one you had seen since you stepped into the event. “We’ll find a way,” he said. “I promise.”

“I guess I should probably stop whining, then, huh?” You leaned your head into his shoulder. “I’ll do my best.”

“There you are!” Botan said, Kuwabara following behind her. “I was getting nervous around all these demons.”

“Hey, you have me!” Kuwabara said. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you!”

“It’s nothing personal, Kuwabara, but you’re human, too. Most of the demons here are giving you the stink eye as it is.” She looked up to see Yusuke and Chu pummeling each other. “Well, at least we have a few friends up there. And Jin! Wow, what a reunion!”

Jin and Kuwabara began a friendly conversation — it seemed they had known each other for quite a long time. There were so many histories and dynamics you would have to understand. Clearly, there were good demons and evil demon, and probably many shades of alignments in between, just as there were good humans and evil humans.

Botan sighed as she watched the battle. “I can’t believe Yusuke’s already gotten himself into a fight. The event has barely begun.”

“It is like him, isn’t it?” Kurama said. “Somehow, his temerity serves him well.”

You watched as Yusuke swung a flurry of fists at Chu, striking him in the chest. Chu was thrown backward, though he caught his balance and dove at his opponent with a gleeful roar. They continued their fight, blissfully ignorant of the crowd’s howls — some of the demons offered advice (“Break his neck!” or “Hit ‘em while he’s down!”), while others shouted encouragement (“Get ‘em, Urameshi!” or “Come on, Chu! Show ‘em what you’re made of!”).

They collided, their fists slammed into each other’s faces. There was a lull in their fight, the crowd falling into an uneasy silence. Both Yusuke and Chu seemed to realize how quiet the world had become, their muscles relaxing as they noticed someone approaching.

It was Yul. He held his head high as he walked, his vast strides carrying him into the ring. He wore a long, sleeveless vest over his tunic, which trailed down to his knees. His pants were loose, but not baggy, and his shoes allowed him to move lithely without a sound.

Oktai followed him, handing Yul a cordless microphone with a dip of his head.

“Welcome,” Yul said, his voice deep, as he waited for the feedback to settle. “I appreciate you all for coming all this way to Xanadu to celebrate the coming of the fourth Demon World unification tournament. Please enjoy the refreshments as dinner will be served shortly in the banquet hall. Meanwhile, I would assume you are here to meet this year’s competition. My trusted advisor, Oktai, will be fighting this year, along with many of my retainers. Perhaps one of you will be brave enough to test Oktai’s strength tonight?”

No one volunteered. In fact, many demons shied away, their gazes diverted. There were no whispers, not a sound at all.
Apparently, Oktai’s strength was well-known.

Yul didn’t seem to mind the silence as he scanned the crowd, silver eyes piercing as a confident grin curved on his lips. “What about you, Kurama? Are you up for the challenge?”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: **An Expression of Thanks**. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there will always be an open raffle.

Follow me on [Tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) for updates and insight on my writing process!
Hope everyone had a wonderful Thanksgiving weekend! I saw the MIL, close friends and their family, and I'll be heading a city away this weekend to visit my family. Writing time might be limited this weekend for that reason, but I'll try to find some time. :)

This chapter is loooooonnng. I originally wanted to keep writing, but then it'd probably be twice as long, so I thought I'd save more for the next chapter. Really, I'm just staying true to the anime because cliffhangers happen all the time, right? Right. :'D Feel free to yell at me, if you want.

Thank you to those who commented: Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Mei_Mei, LadyAmazon, FannibalToast, CrossYourTeez, Spliffy_330, and TK091! <3 You have my gratitude!

“**What about you, Kurama? Are you up for the challenge?**”

Kurama stiffened, eyes narrowing in irritation. This was a power play, no doubt a thinly veiled attempt to test him, to make him vulnerable, to force his hand.

His insolence this morning probably didn’t help. Although his pride had eroded after being humbled as human Shuichi, he still bore a healthy amount of self-respect. Bowing to Yul’s every whim, especially in conversation, did not sit well with him.

He glanced briefly at ______, who was looking at him with concerned eyes. If anything, her worry was touching, but it was unnecessary — if Kurama could ease her doubts, he would.

This was not a life or death match. Yul needed both of them in three month’s time, so he would not allow them to badly injure or kill one another.

This was a display of power, the potential at his fingertips. This was an effort to intimidate his opponents, to spread the word of Xanadu and its legendary warriors; at the same time, he was able to remain gracious in his actions and hospitality. While this furthered Yul’s interests and did not hurt Kurama’s, Kurama still felt annoyed that he would be used in such a public demonstration.

But he had little choice.

And, truthfully, Kurama was curious about the extent of Oktai’s powers. Other than the brief skirmish at the border with Hiei, he had never seen him in battle before. Fighting Oktai at some point was inevitable — an exhibition match, where the stakes were low, was not a poor time to do so.

Oktai had a characteristic grin on his face, confidence in the way he held himself. He watched Kurama for a response from besides the khan — he seemed eager to fight as well.

Kurama’s hand left ______’s waist as he stepped forward. “Kuwabara,” he said, his eyes forward.
“Look after her.”


“But Kurama,” _____ said, catching his arm as he began to walk toward the raised ring. The concern in her eyes had not diminished.

Kurama gave her a reassuring smile. “I’ll be quick. I promise.” Demons parted to give him a path as he made his way to the ring.

Yusuke bumped shoulders with him as he stepped down. “Kick his ass,” he said.

“I second that, mate,” Chu added, following Yusuke as they both exited the ring. “Beat ‘em senseless.”

Kurama stood in front of Oktai, about a dozen feet apart. They looked at one another, the silent challenge between them.

Yul stepped backward. “Use whatever techniques and weapons you please,” he said. “Try to keep your limbs intact. I’d prefer it if my two strongest warriors not kill each other.” He then left the ring, nodding for the referee to take her place.

The battle began.

“Oh, goodness,” Botan said, touching your shoulder as she came closer. “Is this the first time you’ve seen him fight?”

You shook your head. “No, not technically. I saw him fight off some of these awful toad demons yesterday, but that wasn’t in a controlled setting like this. And I don’t think I’ve seen him so agitated before.”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. He’ll be fine. That boyfriend of yours is quite the strategist, one of the strongest fighters I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s right, lass!” Jin added. “Don’t ya be worryin’ ‘bout Kurama. He can take care of himself!”

“So I’ve gathered,” you said with a sigh. “I still can’t help it. I’m sure you understand — watching someone you care about fighting for his life is daunting.”

“You heard Yul,” Kuwabara said. “This is just a test of strength, a way for us to check them out before the upcoming tournament. No one’s going to die or get seriously injured.”

“I know.” You wrung your hands. “Like I said, I can’t help it. There could always be an accident or something. I guess I’m just being illogical.” If Botan, Jin, and Kuwabara didn’t seem worried, you had no reason to be — after all, they understood how these fights worked better than you did.

Yusuke found you in the crowd. “Hey,” he said. “You get to watch your man fight. Aren’t you excited?”

“We’ll call it that,” you replied, sparing him the briefest of glances as you stood on tiptoes in a poor attempt to see Kurama.

“She’s nervous,” Botan said to Yusuke. “Keiko was just like this whenever you fought in the Dark Tournament. Be a little more sensitive, will you?”
“Crikey! You mean to say this little sheila belongs to Kurama?” Chu had followed Yusuke toward your group. You hadn’t even noticed him until he opened his mouth. His voice was deep, loud, thick with what reminded you of an Australian accent. He towered above everyone, easily seven feet tall, at least — his mohawk added another few inches to his height. He leaned forward, bending at the waist. “Lemme get a good look at you, sheila!” he said, and you could smell the alcohol on his breath. His facial hair was scraggly, a green stripe tattooed across the bridge of his nose. Despite his rough appearance, his eyes were affable.

“I like you already!” he declared, backing away with a hearty laugh. “Let’s enjoy a good fight, then!” He noticed just how far you were away from the ring, and though he had no problem seeing from above the crowd, he saw just how you struggled. “HEY!” he shouted at the demons in your way. “CAN’T YOU BLUDGERS SEE WE’VE GOT A SHIELA TRYIN’ TO WATCH HER BLOKE FIGHT?”

Intimidated by his vocal declaration, the demons stepped aside immediately, revealing a path for you.

“Thank you,” you said, rushing up to the border around the ring, your friends following close behind.

She was right there, having found a way to the edge of the ring, thanks to Chu’s brazen demand. While her concern made Kurama’s heart swell, he also felt a little mournful for her. She was such a beautiful human being, dragged into this mess by an ancestral father who wanted nothing but power and an illusive order to unify Demon World under one perilous banner.

As cruel fate would have it, it had to be her. Kurama fell in love even before he realized she had demon heritage, before she had a connection with those of his origin. He chose her because he admired her smile, her compassion for others, her sense of wonderment and curiosity. She was so different than most humans, a woman who unwittingly stole away his heart, the part of him that was both Shuichi and Yoko Kurama.

He would do anything to protect her from harm. He wished he could do more, safeguard her emotional health and wellness. It was unfair that she was exposed to this danger and torment. Even though Kurama was thrilled that she accepted him, loved him, for who he was, he did not want the truth revealed like this.

Earlier, she told him she thought all of this was a blessing in disguise. If it weren’t for the sheepish expression on her face, he might have laughed.

He appreciated her positivity — he really did. However, he knew how bleak their future together was and how it would be, unless he found a way to defeat Yul and break the bloodpact.

Yul’s death would satisfy both of those conditions. But having sworn his allegiance to the khan, Kurama could not be the one to do it.

He would have to be more cunning, more ruthless, more decisive than Yul was. He thought he could do it as just Kurama.

But in the past, he knew he struggled with actions that Yoko Kurama never would. He remembered his duel with the Amanuma, the Gamemaster, who had been manipulated by Sensui. While his
execution was perfect, he felt immense guilt over having to slay a mere child to ensure victory for his friends. Kurama would never forget Amanuma’s pleas for mercy, his tears, and trembling voice. As much as he knew he couldn’t, he wanted to throw their game, wanted to strategize along with the child so that he may return to his naive innocence.

Yoko Kurama would have secured that advantage without a second thought, without a shred of remorse. It was not that Kurama valued victory over those virtues of compassion and sympathy, but in desperate circumstances, he needed to focus. He could not afford to be blinded by human emotions — a single mistake could cost him his life, her life, their future together.

He needed Yoko Kurama. He had no choice, not if he wanted flawless execution, no second thoughts to obscure his judgment. He needed Yoko’s ruthless, vindictive ambition and coldhearted initiative.

_____ had already expressed unease about his demon form. Although she was kind about it and would sincerely try to be open-minded, Kurama knew Yoko would continue to intimidate her. Through Shuichi’s human heart, Kurama learned how to be affectionate and loving — this was what _____ saw and experienced when they were together. Yoko, however, was callous and aloof, not at all like his human counterpart.

But she would have to understand. He needed Yoko Kurama. They needed Yoko Kurama.

“Kurama!”

He turned around and locked eyes with her. For a moment, his heart softened at her distinct call.

“Please be careful,” she said, her voice nearly drowned out by the crowd.

He heard her nonetheless and saw the hopeful expression on her face. Kurama responded with a succinct nod, and he turned back to Oktai, who stood across from him.

“You’re fortunate,” Oktai said, “to have someone care about you like that.”

“So I am,” Kurama said. “What is your point?”

“Oh, nothing aside from the obvious one. I envy you.”

His confession took Kurama by surprise.

The referee and announcer, an overly cheerful demon, approached them both. She had a microphone in her hand, glancing at both combatants, left and right. “Ready? All weapons and techniques permitted. Let’s begin with our exhibition match! Go!”

Oktai raised his staff. “So how would you like to do this, Kurama? Shall we both go all out? Or do you prefer making it a bit of a show first?”

“I prefer to be done with this as soon as possible.”

“Ah, it seems we have the same opinion,” Oktai said. “If neither of us are meant to die or incur any serious injuries, then I suppose we fight until Yulkhan is pleased. I would assume our lord would wish to see some effort.”

“Agreed.”

“Though, I have to admit, I’m very curious about the way you weaponize plants. Your rose whip is
not uncommon among animal spirits, but you’ve taken plant manipulation to the next level. It’s quite impressive.”

“Aside from your position as Yul’s most trusted advisor, I know little about you and your methods,” Kurama said.

“Well, there’s nothing like a good battle to break the ice.” Oktai tapped his staff to the ground with a clang, the stone beginning to glow in a faint red light.

“You may have others believe your weapon is a rare and magical artifact, but in reality, you use that staff as a focal point for your energy.”

“You have a good eye,” Oktai said. The stone burned hot, thick waves of heat radiating from it. “You must have noticed how I channel my energy during our brief encounter in the forest. It’s actually not that much different than how you manipulate your plants.” A burst of power came forth, surging toward Kurama in a straight line.

“And there it is, boys!” the referee announced into the microphone. “Oktai makes the first attack! I can feel the hot energy coming from his staff!”

Kurama dodged to the side at the last minute, and the tall demons in its path had to duck to avoid the laser-like blast. It seemed to go on forever, zooming out of sight into the horizon. “His energy is potent,” he thought. “It feels different than demon energy.”

Then came another burst. And another. They were easy to avoid, and Kurama did so effortlessly, moving from one side of each beam to the other. While they required much skill to aim, they were strong, and each lengthy blast would surely do enough damage to pierce through flesh and bone. But due to how obvious each barrage was and the time it took the staff to recharge, this could not have been Oktai’s strategy — it would only prove successful on a slow, large, or otherwise already injured target.

Kurama did not yet fully understand what Oktai intended to do, but with someone this dangerous, he would at least draw his weapon. He brought his rose whip forth, the vine lashing out, each thorn sharpened to a perfect spike.

“Hm.” Oktai looked pensive for a second, his blue eyes alight. “Good. You can defend yourself now. I don’t have to go easy on you anymore.” He tapped the staff to the ground again, and from it burst energy in a flat and elongated beam.

If Kurama assumed Oktai were standing in the middle of a circle, his attack would erupt, spanning exactly 270 degrees away from him. This burst moved faster than the laser from before, covering ground at an even pace level with the stone, exactly parallel with the earth. Kurama tumbled forward, somersaulting to duck below the energy. It flickered, almost, another heated wave following it.

“That’s oddly structural,” Kurama thought. “It takes talent to manipulate energy with such precision.”

Oktai smiled knowingly. “Predictability is good, isn't it? Straight lines, angles in increments of 90 degrees — it's a mathematician’s dream! But geometry alone is for the simple-minded.”

“What does he mean?” As Kurama scanned the ring, he noticed something interesting. The energy that radiated from Oktai’s staff was not only coming from its direction. There would almost inevitably be remnants of his energy everywhere he sent it, but this was different. At first, Kurama
thought it was someone else’s energy, as there were many other fighters surrounding the ring. But it still felt like a piece of Oktai — only a fragment — like reaching a hand underwater to search for a pebble, only to find a lost penny.

Oktai fired another burst from his staff, a single beam not unlike the first few, and Kurama dodged it. Instead of soaring off into the distance, however, it clashed with something he could not see just outside of the ring, an almost hollow thunk in his ears. The beam came right back at him from behind.

Kurama was caught by surprise. He tried to move out of the way, but he was not quite quick enough to clear the blast radius. Instead, he turned and was flung out of the ring by the impact.

“Ouch!” the referee cried. “Did you see that, boys? Somehow, Oktai managed to bend his laser beam, and Kurama took a hit! That was glorious!”

He heard _____ cry for him as he hit the ground, desperation in her voice. In reality, he was fine. He had taken worse blows before, and while he was unable to avoid the blast radius, he did not take a direct hit. When the smoke cleared, he saw _____, Kuwabara and Jin holding her back — he would have to thank them later. She needed to stay clear of the fight.

Still, the fact that her first instinct was to run to him, despite the danger to her safety, was heartrending. He stood, pushing himself off the ground.

He couldn’t make eye contact with her. If he did, he wasn’t sure how he’d handle the fright in her eyes; he’d want to comfort her, hold her, tell her everything would be all right.

But he couldn’t right now. He had a task.

“Kurama seems to be all right!” the referee said. “Other than a few minor cuts and bruises, he seems to be fighting condition. He has ten seconds to return to the ring — I’ll start the count! One!”

Oktai stepped toward the edge of the ring. “Huh,” he said, tilting his head to the side. “That was clever, Kurama. You avoided the beam and let your body take the brunt of the explosion, protecting your organs. You really are formidable, aren’t you?”

“And you?” Kurama said, taking note of what had just transpired. “You must have some human blood in you as you utilize a mix of both demon and spirit energy. I see now that the beam you fire from your staff is mostly demon energy, destructive and powerful, but there is a thin layer of spirit energy that is summoned along with it.”

“Your observation skills serve you well.”

Kurama ignored the compliment, leaping back into the ring, as the referee was on her ninth count. He unleashed his rose whip, attempting to slash at his opponent.

Oktai was fast, stepping to the right to evade the whip. He stepped again, narrowly avoiding the next attack. He lifted his staff to block the third one, the whip curling around his weapon. It was yanked from his hand and across the ring, flung into the crowd. Oktai dashed gracefully after it, demons parting to let him pick up his staff.

Meanwhile, in those few seconds, Kurama studied the energy pattern in the air, trying to sift through what little information he had. He felt concentrated pools of spirit energy in certain areas but not others. It didn’t take long for him to develop a strategy, and by the time Oktai returned, he was ready.
“Now only to execute,” Kurama thought, removing a specific seed from within the locks of his hair.

“And what mischief are you up to? I know that was just a diversion,” Oktai said, his staff in hand again. “Have you figured my technique out?”

“It’s a unique one,” Kurama said.

“No one’s ever been able to duplicate it before.”

“Few can. Only those of two worlds can wield both demon and spirit energy.”

“Then doesn’t that mean you should be able to?”

Kurama paused. He had never tried to harness what little spirit energy he had from Shuichi’s human body. Demon energy always seemed far more convenient and efficient.

“Let’s put my hypothesis to the test.” Oktai’s staff began to glow hot again, another beam coming forth, one right after another.

“Oktai’s decided to go on a full assault!” the referee announced. “Laser beams are everywhere, people! I don’t even know where to stand! Everybody duck!”

Kurama saw the blasts of energy heading toward him, doing his best to avoid the attacks. Now that he knew Oktai could redirect them, he realized what he was up against. It was no longer a single, powerful blow like before — Oktai decided to go for short, quick bursts instead, making it far more difficult to dodge. They came from every angle, and before long, he found himself buried within an assault of energy, the blasts stirring up a small explosion in the ring.

“Kurama!” _____ cried.

He barely heard her voice among the devastation.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Oh wow! It's been a whole FIVE DAYS since I've updated. lol. I spend the weekend with my parents, so it was pretty busy. I also sponsor children every year for the holidays, and along with doing the shopping for my team, I crocheted three stockings, one for each of the kids we adopted. They were due today, so I was in a crochet frenzy this weekend. x_____X BUT IT'S ALL DONE, AND I CAN WRITE AGAIN.

Thank you to Mei Mei, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), seelu, FannibalToast, CrossYourTeez, and Kouryuu for the comments! I love reading your thoughts and certainly appreciate your feedback! <3

This is the final half of the fight between Kurama and Oktai, so please enjoy. I hope it makes sense. ’D I might have gotten too excited and carried away with the technique in here. Please enjoy!

Also, I wanted to bring your attention to my **1,000 Kudos Flash Raffle!** Anyone is welcome to join -- there are no stipulations for entry! You have until December 13th!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kurama!” you cried, Kuwabara’s hands on your shoulders to keep you away. “No!”

The blast was larger than the last one, summoning dust and debris, even decimating a portion of the ring.

There were no words of comfort from your friends — they must have been concerned as well, silent as the beams from Oktai’s staff ceased, the shifting dust settling on the ground.

Your heart couldn’t take much more of this. If this was what it meant to protect you, you weren’t sure if you wanted him to anymore. You would rather take your chances. Perhaps hiding was better, running away from it all where Yul could never find you.

Your dread was accompanied with a familiar, eerie feeling in the air. It was the same energy you felt yesterday in the forest, potent and cold, but powerful. It cracked like thunder, wisps of mysterious cloud frothing through the ring. Fear pulsed in your heart. From the rubble came Yoko Kurama, his strength enough to propel him toward Oktai.

“Oh my!” the referee announced. “Here is the moment we’ve all been waiting for, folks! The legendary Yoko Kurama!”

He was poised, graceful in his return, his white tunic draped over his broad shoulders. His whip was gone, and in his hand were two perfect roses. He flung them at Oktai, the roses exploding right before they made contact.
“Woo wee!” Jin said, looking rather enthused. “Yoko Kurama is back, that old scoundrel!”

“That bloke’s gonna rock staff-man’s socks off,” Chu added. “Just wait and see, sheila.”

Kuwabara seemed solemn, but even he admitted: “This should even the odds.”

You remembered your conversation with Kurama last night. You would try to accept Yoko. He had not lied to you — now was as good a time as any to rely on Yoko’s strength. Still, the chill of the fox demon brought you a sense of unease.

Yoko Kurama stood tall as he waited to see what his opponent would do. His eyes gleamed like molten gold, a profound and cold intensity in them.

“Ah, finally!” Oktai said as he cleared the explosion, stepping from the smoke unharmed. “It is a pleasure to meet the legendary bandit.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Yoko Kurama warned, his voice dangerously low. “Most demons don’t survive an altercation with me.”

“Who said anything about an altercation? This battle’s just a bit of fun! Or have you lost your sense of humor?”

The fox demon did not return his banter. “You may not find this so amusing when I’m through.”

“Very well!” Oktai said. “Let’s continue.” The stone in his staff glowed again, releasing a burst of energy. The laser surged past Yoko Kurama, immediately redirected back at him.

With his newfound speed, he avoided the blow with ease; and with his heightened senses, he was able to decipher the specifics of Oktai’s technique. Another beam came at him. He released his demon energy, pouring it into the seed he had secretly planted in the damaged rubble when he was attacked.

A monstrous plant sprung from the ground, its large leaf stretching out behind him right as he dodged the burst. The moment the beam touched the plant, Yoko Kurama turned the stem, ever so slightly, calculating the exact degree the leaf needed to reflect the blow. He launched it precisely at Oktai.

The half-demon was caught off guard, only able to raise a hastened shield as his own energy was turned against him. He was tossed out of the ring, slamming against the ground.

The referee was quick on her feet. “Oktai is out of the ring!” she declared. “Time to start a ten-count!”

“I see,” Yoko Kurama said. “You begin to unravel the spirit energy from the demon energy as it is fired from your staff, and with the spirit energy, you create an invisible springboard. This is how you redirect your attacks from anywhere in the vicinity. Interesting maneuver.”

Yoko Kurama had infused the plant was his demonic power, hardening the leaf with layer after layer of his energy. This was what allowed him to use the plant as a reflector. However, Oktai’s redirections were still stronger than his attempt. “How is the energy just as potent after being deflected, if not more so? How is that possible? Physics dictates that upon colliding with another surface, some of that energy is transferred from the original source.”

Then, the realization came to him. “You’ve polarized the two energies, not unlike the positive and
negative ends of magnets,” he said. That was the only way Oktai could utilize his technique without compromising the integrity of his initial attack. He used the staff to focus his energies, letting them burst toward his target at full potency. He would then begin to unravel the spirit energy from the mix, while his beam was already released, creating his reflective springboard and placing it someplace in the path of the laser. With minute adjustments to his spirit energy, he could mirror his attack wherever he pleased. It was a combination of geometry and physics calculations. The quick execution — accomplishing what he did in mere milliseconds — required much skill.

“Clever! Very clever,” Oktai said, using his staff to pick himself up. “I’m impressed by how quickly you figured it out.”

The referee was now on her seventh count.

Oktai returned to the ring with a great leap. “You may have appraised my technique, but what will you do now? You still need to get past my barriers, and I can promise you won’t catch me by surprise again.”

Yoko Kurama had a nonchalant expression on his face. “Oh? But the road to defeat is so often derived from underestimating a single enemy.”

“I don’t dare underestimate you, Kurama,” Oktai said, his blue eyes particularly sharp. “I can only hope to rise to your level of cunning and resourcefulness. Even after your disappearance, legends of your cutthroat intellect were told all over Demon World. The stories still are.”

He was not flattered, only disturbed by the nature of his overthrow in the first place. Yul had betrayed him to Spirit World. It was his own fault for not realizing it, but it enraged him all the same. He was the king of thieves, the one who had amassed a group so devastating to the noble and wealthy demons of the realm. His fall from power was humiliating enough. Now he was forced to serve the one who arranged it.

Still. Unbridled anger was never Yoko Kurama’s style — it left too much up to chance. Emotions were precarious. He was calm and collected, analyzing each predicament from every point of view. As much as he loathed Yul and, by extension, his trusted advisor, he would not allow his resentment to define his future.

He stole a glance from the corner of his eye at ____. She met his gaze but then looked away. It seemed she had reservations about his true form.

He could not change that. Yoko Kurama knew he was intimidating. It was how the entirety of Demon World felt about him. While he had no particular ambitions for infamy, the fear he struck in the hearts of others certainly made his tasks less complicated, and as such, he enjoyed his notoriety.

He did not need ____ to fear him; he did not want her to fear him. She was his woman, after all. His. What good would her apprehension bring?

Ultimately, he wanted her to be happy with him. In the confines of Demon World, there were many dangers to women. They were the inferior sex, the physically frail. Many female demons never made it past their adolescent years, falling prey to the greed and lust of men. Those who survived often ended up in brothels, where they could make a meager living and stay where they were relatively protected. Those who wanted freedom required a mate who could defend them from the cruel world, those who hunted women for wanton desires or simple hunger.

Yoko Kurama needed to protect his prize. Women were fickle, in his experience. They sought out
the strongest of demons — it was a biological advantage, the desire to mate with a man who could give their offspring the best chance of survival. Their loyalties could change on a whim to ensure the future of their children.

It was no lie that he loved her as deeply as any ancient demon could. He wanted her to need him, too, to value his strength as she loved the rest of him.

Yoko Kurama looked toward Oktai, who had a cheerful expression on his face, despite the damage he took earlier. “What is he planning?” he thought. “I’ve already discovered his strategy… ah.”

He saw the wires, much like the web he and Hiei encountered in the forest days ago. They glistened just lightly under the Demon World sun. It was irrelevant on that day, but it seemed that these were spun with Oktai’s demon energy, finely curated into an intricate pattern around him. Curious, he moved a hand to touch the web, only to feel a violent jolt against his tips of his fingers. It reminded him of the time he made contact with the kekkai barrier as he chased Sensui into Demon World.

“It seems that Oktai has contained Yoko Kurama in some sort of netting! It looks strong!” the referee said.

He was trapped. Nevertheless, Yoko Kurama remained calm, bringing his hand to his lips to lick at the wound. In his demon form, his saliva possessed healing properties. When he needed to expend his energy for fighting, a quick dab of his tongue could prevent infection.

“You think you can ensnare a fox, hm?” he said, a tenacious gaze in his eyes. “I would warn against it as we have a tendency to show our teeth, but you already know that.” With a flick of his wrist, plants sprang from the ground — his Ojigi plants, vicious and aggressive to anything that moved, their fangs dripping with acid.

They went after Oktai, who could barely avoid their quick reflexes.

“Oh, my!” the referee said. “Oktai is injured from that deflected blast. He seems to be having trouble keeping away from the plants!”

Oktai raised his staff as he ran, leaping just out of the reach of a snapping Ojigi. He let loose a strong burst of energy, the Ojigi bursting into flame as it made contact. He attacked again and again, each head of the plant succumbing to his assault.

Yoko Kurama looked on, amused at Oktai’s attempts — he was only enraging the Ojigi plant further, as they reacted to aggression.

Oktai dodged to the side, toward the edge of the ring. The stone in the staff glowed red, thrusting a laser, not at, but behind Yoko Kurama. Oktai realized he would never make a direct hit, even with him trapped. His opponent was far too clever — his only hope was to catch the fox demon off guard. The beam was reflected back past the entrapped Yoko Kurama again, bouncing to another source of Oktai’s energy before being redirected at his target.

A plant emerged, its leaf layered with Yoko Kurama’s demon energy. When the beam made contact with the leaf, the laser was fired back toward Oktai.

Oktai saw it coming, drawing another pool of spirit energy from his staff to send it away.

“This is like an old-fashioned game of ping-pong,” the referee announced. “I’m having trouble following where this laser is going! One moment, it’s behind Yoko Kurama, and the next moment, it’s being sent toward Oktai! This is crazy, folks! I’ve never seen anything like this! It’s all
happening so quickly, coming at our two combatants at different angles and at varying speeds!"

Yoko Kurama tired of this stalemate. He pondered over what his opponent said earlier. It was a risk, of course, executing this strategy because he had never manipulated his spirit energy before — and he had nowhere to run. Still, it would put an end to this battle.

In a pulse of supernatural energy, he shifted back to his human body, right as Oktai’s beam shot back at him, charged with its polarity of spirit energy.

“This is insane! Yoko Kurama is just plain Kurama now!” the referee said. “How is he going to defeat Oktai now? His plants have withered away without his abundance of demon energy!”

You were relieved to see your Kurama again, but in the heat of battle, you wondered if it would have been better had he harnessed his demon side — especially now that he was trapped in Oktai’s web.

“Whoa! Bold move!” Kuwabara said.

“What is he thinking?” Botan cried.

It came at him quickly. Kurama began by positioning the plant’s leaf in the trajectory of the beam, angling it just right. He coated it first with demon energy, thickening it to preserve the integrity of the plant. He tried to release some of his spirit energy.

It felt strange, tapping into his human reserves. He had never done so before, always relying on his demon energy — it was far more bountiful in Shuichi’s body, and he had better control over it, especially after having recovered after all those years in Shiori’s loving care. The sensation of drawing on his small amount of spirit energy was akin to learning to ride a bicycle for the first time. It was awkward, and although he knew how spirit energy functioned in theory, the balancing was difficult. He had to rely on more than mere instinct.

The burst came closer and closer. Kurama focused, dipping into his meager reserve of spirit energy. He managed to coat the leaf in a thin layer, hoping it was enough. The beam collided with his plant, and it was propelled directly toward Oktai, successfully polarized for speed and potency.

It hit Oktai’s defensive barrier, attempting to break the shield. Several seconds passed with Oktai struggling to deflect the blow, heat and electricity crackling around him. His brows were furrowed, lips parted in strain as he pumped energy into the barrier. The beam continued to force its way forward, pushing Oktai back little by little. He nearly stumbled trying to thrust it back.

But it was all for naught. Kurama’s blow was too strong, and as it continued pressing against Oktai’s barrier, energy thick and hot, his defenses began to slip. A fracture formed, the fault creeping little by little along the shield. With a small explosion, the beam made it through, throwing Oktai from the ring. His body was tossed into the crowd, thudding against the ground.

The referee rushed toward him. “Oktai is out, and I’m not jealous! Time for a ten-count!” she declared chipperly.

You were still while she counted, watching Kurama, who stood stoically in the ring. He was no longer bound by Oktai’s web — the energy that created it had dissipated as soon as Oktai was hit. Kurama wouldn’t make eye contact with you. You thought he might not until the fight was finished. It must have been distracting to see your friends and loved ones during combat.

“And ten!” the referee said. “Oktai is out! Kurama takes the win!”
The crowd erupted in excitement, demons pushing themselves forward toward the ring. Many others wanted to partake in a fight to test their strength, encouraged by the phenomenal display of power between Kurama and Oktai.

Kurama stepped from the ring, walking toward you. His eyes were their usual vivid green, serene like the mountain pines — they softened when he saw you. The expression on his face was otherwise neutral.

“Hey, congrats, man,” Yusuke said. “I’m impressed. I couldn’t hear all of that conversation up there, but it seems like you might have tapped into some spirit energy.”

“It was a risk,” Kurama said, “but I had to, if Oktai was to fall. His demon energy is immense.”

“I never had a doubt you would,” Botan said with a wide grin on her face. “You sure showed him!”

“Yeah, I’m sure he regrets sending that crazy blast your way,” Kuwabara said, laughing.

While you were certainly glad that your boyfriend was alive and relatively unharmed, you looked toward the crowd where Oktai had fallen. You couldn’t see him beyond the gathering of demons.

“Will he be all right?” you asked.

“He’ll be fine,” Kurama said. “We demons heal quickly.”

“I hope so. That was terrifying.”

He tilted his head to the side, finally giving you a small smile. He was covered in a light layer of dust, small cuts and bruises covering his body. “Don’t worry. I am well.”

“I’m so relieved. I don’t know what I’d do if you were hurt badly.”

“All right, all right, you love birds,” Chu said, resting an arm around each of your shoulders as he literally lowered his head between yours. You smelled alcohol on his breath. “Kurama’s an ace, and I reckon you’re tired of watchin’ these blokes fight. Why don’t we we grab some grub and a cold one, and catch up like old mates?”

You were looking forward to leaving the ring before the next fight started. “That sounds great,” you said.

Kurama approved with a head nod, and although Chu functioned as an awkward third wheel, you were glad of the company to follow.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
“Ah, nothin’ like a fancy gatherin’ with some good scoops to enjoy the night,” Jin said, his words strung together in eager appreciation. He handed you a mug filled to the brim with some sort of fizzy drink, the froth spilling over the sides.

You smelled it — it was definitely alcoholic, but it had a sickly sweet scent that you weren’t so sure about. If you had to put a Living World equivalent to it, it was almost like a carbonated bourbon.

“Careful,” Kurama said. “Demons generally have faster metabolisms than humans. The alcohol here is strong.”

Normally, you would have made a joke about being drunk, but you figured this wasn’t the right venue for that. Kurama was already concerned for your safety — making his life any more difficult was ill-advised.

You passed the mug to your boyfriend. “Maybe you’d prefer to drink it, then.”

He seemed to relax, if only a little, now that you were among friends. There were still many demons who looked at you with unfriendly (or too friendly) eyes, but they were deterred by the number of companions who surrounded you. Still, Kurama remained near, so close that you could feel his body heat at all times.

It was nice, actually. He was warm against the chill of the evening air, and the scent of roses was far better than some other odors your nose picked up.

You leaned into him, your head against his shoulder. “Hey,” you said, taking a breath. You didn't know if Kurama could hear you above the excitement of the crowd, but he could see and feel you.

“Hey, you,” he said affectionately, his arm sliding around your waist.

“Are you really okay?” you asked. “I don't mind sneaking out of here for a little bit to patch you up.” You nodded at the burn on his hand, from where he touched Oktai’s web.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but that’s not necessary. I've seen far worse. I’ll be good condition again by morning.”
You noted the cuts and small splatters of blood. They were minor, but your heart ached for him.

“Was it difficult?”

“Hm?”

“Fighting, I mean. It looks terrible.”

Kurama chuckled. “It’s not so bad. You may think us all violent and primitive, but there is a certain freedom that comes from the act of fighting. When there is good will between two opponents, there is much to learn and explore in the ring.”

“I guess this is one of those cultural differences I may never understand.” You paused. “Then again, even humans have fought each other since the beginning of time, now that I think about it.”

“That’s a good observation,” Kurama said. “I still doubt the majority of the human population is quite as interested in battle as demons are. You’re right in that this trait is primarily a desire of demons, fostered from culture, history, biology, even.”

“And to think I’m going to have to do it.” You sighed nervously, touching the egg at your side. Maybe if you were diligent in raising it, it would gladly fight for you — it would certainly do a better job than you would.

“Everything will work out. We still have three months to train. I’ll teach you everything I can.”

While Kurama’s care was touching, you had your doubts. These demons had centuries, perhaps even thousands of years, to train and hone their craft. You had only three months. It was daunting, to say the least.

He gently squeezed your shoulder, about to add something. But, then, someone else appeared, eyes settling on your group. Two circular objects slithered forward, eventually gaining momentum and slamming Chu in the face. His drink spilled to the floor.

“Oi! What the hell was that for, you bludger?” he shouted, looking around for the source of the blow.

To your surprise, a child appeared, wielding two yo-yos as if they were normal weapons, the toys returning to him and rolling neatly along their strings. “That’s what you get for leaving me behind,” he said. “You didn’t even tell me where you were!” He was short, wide-eyed, a broad smile on his face. A colorful baseball cap topped his head, three pink stars tattooed below his left eye. Although he feigned irritation, he seemed to be in high spirits.

“You were actin’ like a maggot,” Chu said, “showin’ off your little yo-yos. I wanted somethin’ dardy, so I found these ol’ cobbers to watch a fight. And when I finally get down to a piss-up with a good coldie, you puck me with your swarmy yo-yos, you ankle-biter!”

The boy stuck his tongue out at him. “Well, serves you right for running off without me. I thought we were friends. Good thing I found Toya.”

He was referring to the demon standing behind him, who had a serious expression on his face. His eyes were ice-blue — they reminded you of the sky in the Living World on the clearest of days. He looked quite human as well, his hair almost like a turban around his head, turquoise bangs jutting out and angled to the side. “Well, Chu and Jin were exactly where we expected them to be — if not in the ring, at the bar,” he said, his voice an even tone.

Jin looked a little sheepish, though he handed Toya his mug. “Ya can’t expect me to turn my nose
Toya did not look impressed, though he did smile when he saw Yusuke, Kuwabara, and Kurama. “I didn’t expect you to be here,” he said.

“We’ve been getting that a lot,” Yusuke said. “It’s nice to be back every once in a while.”

“Exploring Xanadu before the tournament, I see,” Toya commented, his gaze falling to you. “And who are you?”

“This is _____,” Kurama said, introducing you. “This is Toya and Rinku, friends of ours.”

“It’s good to meet you both,” you said, offering your hand.

“You don’t look like much of a fighter,” Rinku said, tilting his head to the side.

“Well, that’s because I’m not much of one.” You weren’t sure if it was wise to admit it, but you weren’t going to pretend to have any sort of martial ability when you honestly didn’t. “I’m here with Kurama.”

Rinku nodded, his lips forming the shape of an “O.” He looked between you and Kurama. “So why bring your girlfriend to Demon World when she can’t fight? Sounds like an accident waiting to happen.”

You laughed nervously, unsure of how you’d even begin to explain the journey you and Kurama had been on together. So much had happened in the past month — you had been tested far more than the average couple. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later, if there’s time.”

“The story’s not just long,” Botan said under her breath. “It’s also a fan favorite!”

You gave her a mock-glare. “Is that so?”

“Well, it’s one of my favorite love stories! The other boys aren’t nearly as romantic, and never has an outcome been so exciting!” She pursed her lips, touching a finger to her chin. “Besides, I was so tired of calling Kurama ‘Shuichi’ — I always felt like I was going to slip up. I’m glad Yusuke was the one who made that blunder!”

Kuwabara laughed heartily. “Yeah, Urameshi even tried to save himself with ‘melodrama Kurama!’ What a loser!”

In mere milliseconds, Yusuke lunged forward, slamming a fist into Kuwabara’s face. His blow was so hard that Kuwabara was knocked comically to the ground. “I’d like to see you do better, you douchebag,” he said. “It’s stressful pissing Kurama off!”

“Well,” Kurama started with a chuckle, “in Yusuke’s defense, I did charge Yusuke with _____’s care and my secret while I went to the florist with Keiko. And you’re not excluded from that name mishap, Kuwabara. Don’t think I’ve forgotten how you burst into the chemistry lab shouting my demon name in high school.”

Kuwabara sighed, rubbing his cheek. “You just had to remind me, didn’t you?”

“Oh, stop it,” you said to them, offering Kuwabara your hand as you pulled him to his feet again. “All is well. Besides, I’m just glad to be in the know now.”
“And we’re glad to have you, sweetie!” Botan said. “Any idea on when dinner is going to be? I’m famished!”

It was as if her declaration summoned the servants, who announced the evening meal and began to usher everyone into the banquet hall.

You looked at Kurama, who gently guided you toward the palace. While everyone shuffled inside, eager to sample the bounty of Xanadu, he leaned in, brushing his lips against your cheek. “How are you doing?” he whispered.

“I’m fine,” you said. “Thank you for asking.” In reality, you were a little uneasy being close to so many demons. You didn’t want to make a ruckus about it — after all, you had seen kindness in them. It didn’t bode well to bear discriminatory thoughts. Of course, while there were some unsavory personalities, most of whom you met were not so different in temperament than humans. At least, these were your first impressions:

Jin was the comical and easily enthused foreign visiting on a work visa, and in his excitement, you couldn’t understand all of what he said with his thick accent. He spoke English, but his English was very different than yours — not that it mattered. His toothy smile was what charmed you.

Chu reminded you of a friendly college frat boy who carried liquor around in a flask, no matter where he was — he’d even take a swig for good luck before exams! He was boisterously mannered, always adding to his ever-expanding collection of tattoos, and would ensure that you were never empty-handed at one of his famous parties.

Rinku was the little brother who came to visit on the weekends, mischievous and clever. He liked hanging out with the big kids, showing off his yo-yo tricks. His childish magnetism captured the attention of all the women in his life, young and old.

Toya was the quiet, analytical one, his gaze enough to send chills up your spine. He reminded you of the serious coworker who didn’t know how to have fun, though he would eventually open up and share something personal about himself. You were especially good at talking to people like him, allowing a comfortable silence to surround the both of you.

If Kurama sensed your unease, he didn’t say anything. Instead, he kept you close, an arm around your waist.

Once inside the great hall, you saw the long banquet tables lined from nearly one end of the room to the other. They were low to the ground, plush cushions available for seating. Large platters of vegetables, mushrooms, and rice dishes were ready for tasting. The guests wasted no time seating themselves among comrades, partaking in the bountiful food. You sat down, Kurama to your right, Botan to your left. Yusuke and Kuwabara were across from you; Jin, Chu, Rinku, and Toya were seated at the same table. Everyone began to eat with gusto. You had to admit that the cuisine of Xanadu was delicious. It harbored intense flavors — spicy, sweet, salty, sour, even bitter. The food was prepared exquisitely, no doubt by chefs selected by Yul, who wished to keep a very particular perception and tradition.

Kuwabara and Yusuke ate like they had not had a proper meal in weeks, shoveling food into their mouths so quickly you wondered if they even chewed before swallowing. Botan was very cheerily examining everything, commenting on the flavors and textures — you thought she would make a good food critic. Your newfound demon friends were eagerly enjoying their dinner and alcohol. Jin and Chu had a passionate argument about the best kind of alcohol, which eventually devolved into a drinking contest, while Rinku cheered them on. Toya seemed subtly amused, though he did throw
a few well-natured verbal jabs at Jin for his rambunctious behavior.

All in all, you thought their fellowship was delightful.

Course after course came out, brought in large dishes as servants filed one by one into the banquet hall. Next was the fish course, which included whole steamed fish piled high with ginger and scallions; plump shrimp, already peeled, sauteed with egg noodles; and fried lobster with garlic and soy, cooked in their own juices, and seasoned with lemon slices. There was then a poultry course: crispy whole roasted bird, served with savory pancakes, finely sliced cucumber, and spring onions.

Finally, when it came time for the meat course, you smelled a very distinct odor before the dish was even brought to your table. It made you wonder what kind of meat it was, what kind of spices or sauces the chefs prepared with it.

You felt Kurama stiffen besides you. “Don’t touch the meat,” he said, a warning in his tone.

The serious expression on his face caught Kuwabara’s eye. “Why not?” he said. When the dish arrived at the table, he studied the meat, leaning in close. “Looks pretty normal to me — like beef, if I had to take a guess.”

Kurama closed his eyes, breathing in and exhaling. “It’s human.”

Chapter End Notes

I was going for shock factor. I hope you're shocked. lol. ‘D More to come about my inspiration for going in this direction.

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
HELLO. I hope the holiday season is treating you well! I've been busy! x___X I had two D&D sessions this weekend, and I crocheted this adorable octopus for a coworker's kid who colored a pretty unicorn picture for me! I've had two white elephants to participate in, organized a catered event at work, and volunteered at Feed My Starving Children! I am on FIRE this holiday season with stuff to do! I hope you're keeping the good kind of busy in your personal lives, too! <3 Remember to be kind to others and to yourself!

ANYWAY. Let's chat about the last chapter! :D I mentioned this to some of you already, but I originally wasn't sure if I wanted to go the human-eating route because it's just dark and depressing and kind of a fun-suck. However, after watching the final season for YYH, I've always kind of wanted to address it -- it's such an important theme, and I'll delve into it a bit more in this chapter with the current state of affairs (from Kurama's perspective, anyway). I wanted to give the RC something to feel conflicted about because even Kurama, with his relatively newfound humanity, isn't going to feel the same way as she does about demons eating humans. She's going to have to find a solution to quite an impossible problem. YAY, CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT.

Thank you to those who left a comment: Queensunasama, Kupid, Mei Mei, CrossYourTeez, SailorCupcake, LadyAmazon, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), Anon, seelu, and FannibalToast! <3 I always say this, but thank you! I love hearing from you guys! It gives me writing inspiration!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Human?” Botan had a look of blatant disgust on her face, and she pushed herself away from the table. “What do you mean it’s human?”

“Exactly what he said, I’m guessing,” Yusuke replied. He was calm, though in his eyes, there was uncertainty.

Even Kuwabara had to cover his mouth with both hands, eyes widening. “UGH. I think I’m going to throw up!”

“Me, too,” you said, weakly. You looked away from the freshly prepared dish, warm steam coming from the meat. “I need to get out of here.”

Kurama helped you up, bidding the others goodbye. “Excuse us. I think we’ll be retiring for the night,” he said.

If your newly found demon friends were opposed or had concerns, you didn’t hear them — but, then again, you didn't feel as though you were of sound mind at the moment. The news was an absolute shock to you, and your stomach turned in nauseating revulsion.

“I’m coming, too,” Botan said, pulling Kuwabara along with her. Yusuke remained behind, though
he didn’t touch the dish.

You left far more quickly than you came, your feet instinctively carrying you away. Kurama led you out of the banquet hall, beyond the proud pillars of the foyer, and up the winding staircase to your quarters.

You held onto him the whole time, your arm looped around his — you weren’t sure whether you wanted to cry or vomit or scream. Maybe all three.

“Are you all right?” Kurama asked, as he finally set you down in the armchair.

Botan and Kuwabara crashed on the couch across your way, looking rather peeved.

“I can’t believe I breathed in cooked human fumes!” Botan said, her disgust giving way to anger. “What the hell is Yul trying to do? I can’t eat human! What the hell am I supposed to tell them as I’m guiding their spirits to the Spirit World? ‘Hello, I’m Botan! You tasted great!’? How awful!”

Kuwabara was equally infuriated, his fist curled tightly. “I knew demons ate people, but Yul has a lot of gall serving it to us.”

“You weren’t his target audience,” Kurama said. “In fact, you weren’t even invited — you just happened to be here.” He paused. “Admittedly, even I didn’t expect him to serve human. It’s considered a rare delicacy to demons, difficult to attain, especially with Enki’s edict that no mischief is to be committed in Living World. Yul has resources, given the small human population in Xanada, but to serve human to such a large group of demons is a bold and extravagant exploit. Perhaps he wishes to share what Demon World could be if he were to win the next unification tournament.”

You shuddered. “We can’t let him win, then,” you said, staring straight ahead. You were appalled. “We can’t let him do this to human beings. It’s wrong.”

Kurama looked at you with a careful expression on his face. “____, I understand this is difficult to accept. The reality is a dark one — humans have been consumed by demons for ages.”

“Why?” Kuwabara said, the gaze in his eyes fierce. “We can’t possibly taste better than a good steak or bacon.”

“Some demons simply like the flavor. Some believe it can make demons stronger. A smaller population requires spirit energy for sustenance — they cannot live without human meat in their diet. Yusuke’s ancestral father, Raizen, falls into this category. He died of starvation, not because he refused to eat anything at all, but because he refused to consume human.”

“I don’t care,” you said, your fingers tightening along the arms of the chair. “It’s still wrong.”

“Would you begrudge a lion for preying upon an antelope?” Kurama said gently. “It’s a biological requirement. Without the proper nutrition, they die. They can’t change that.”

“Does every single demon in that banquet hall require human for sustenance?” you asked, your tone more intense than you meant it to be.

“No.” Kurama remained calm, despite your emotional state. “As I said, it’s a very small percent of the population — but those who require spirit energy in their diet are among the strongest. It is said that consuming human can make demon energy more potent, their very essence stronger. These demons have little incentive to turn down this delicacy, especially if offered freely.”
“It’s still wrong,” Botan said, hugging her shawl tightly to herself. “It’s not the same as eating livestock or game. Humans are on an entirely different intellectual and spiritual level than mere animals.”

“Then how does a human compare to an S class demon who has lived for thousands of years with perception and wisdom far beyond that of a mortal human? Are they intellectually and spiritually compatible?”

“Whose side are you on, man?” Kuwabara said. “It’s like you’re defending these demons!”

“I’m defending no one,” Kurama said. “I am merely explaining why human meat is valued among demons, and why seeking to change this will only result in your frustration and disappointment.”

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence.

You weren’t upset with Kurama. He spoke logic and explained the relevant point of view succinctly. Still, this couldn’t be the reality for hundreds, if not thousands, of enslaved humans. It was too dismal a future.

How were you so naive?

You remembered Qara mentioning the ranch she came from. While you weren’t able to finish your conversation before being interrupted, it made sense for you now. This was a human ranch, where humans were prepared for slaughter. Some of the more skilled humans, such as Qara, might have been selected for other work, but you had a feeling that most of them were for consumption.

You felt sick, and you stood up. “I need to take a walk,” you said, restlessness stirring in your heart.

“You’ll go with you,” Kurama said.

Although you preferred some time alone, you understood why he wanted to be with you — he wanted to protect you. You wouldn’t deny him that. With so many unknown demons in the palace and your lack of martial ability, you needed someone with you at all times.

You offered him your hand to assure him you agreed with his decision, and he followed you through the doors. Botan and Kuwabara stayed, splaying out in the den to try and relax — the prospect of eating human meat on a full belly was exhausting and uncomfortable.

You set the pace, walking silently with Kurama at your side.

After a few minutes of silence, Kurama spoke, searching your face for answers. “Are you all right?”

There were a million thoughts running through your head. For a moment, you had even forgotten he was there. The halls of the living quarters were rather empty as nearly all the servants had been called upon to assist with the banquet — you could walk around aimlessly as you pleased. “I’m… okay,” you said, selecting your descriptor gingerly.

Kurama said nothing in response, encouraging you to elaborate.

“It’s hard,” you added, and the more you thought about putting your feelings into words, the more the tears stung at your eyes. “I get everything you’ve said. Demons eat humans, whether that’s because it’s cultural or spiritual or for some sort of biological need. I get that. But it feels wrong from where I’m standing because I know how emotionally rich our lives are, how intellectual and
sentient we can be. I just can’t sit back and let it happen. I can’t.”

“Then, what are you going to do?”

His question made you angry — not at him, but at the idea of how helpless you really were. “I haven’t gotten there yet.” You still needed to learn about demons, about their motivations and values. You needed to learn about the ranch that Qara mentioned days ago. You needed to figure out exactly how much leverage you had to change things without stepping on too many toes. You didn’t belong in this world, after all.

“____.” He spoke your name so gently, so tenderly that you stopped to look him in the eye. “It’s all right,” he said. “It’s all right that you’re upset and angry. It’s all right that you feel helpless. This is a journey you never should have had to take, and yet, you’re strong. You’re resilient and resourceful. I could not ask more of you.”

“But this isn’t about me,” you said. “It’s about the hundreds, maybe even thousands, of humans out there who are scared and hurt and hopeless. I can’t believe demons like Yul would subject them to that. For all his touting of this paradise, someone out there is paying the price for Xanadu’s prosperity.”

“I know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

He squeezed your hand apologetically. “I’ve already inundated you with information since we’ve been here. I figured the topic would come up sooner or later. The last thing I wanted was for you to feel overwhelmed — had I known Yul had it on the menu tonight, I would have warned you beforehand. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” you said. “I do have a question, though.”

“You want to know if I’ve ever eaten human.”

You would have laughed at his perceptive response, but you were actually feeling nervous. You didn’t want to hear that he contributed to this awful treatment of your race, even if it was before he fused his soul with that of a human.

“I have not,” Kurama said. “Although popular among many demons, it has never interested me. As a fox demon, consuming spirit energy is not necessary for survival. You can relax.”

You breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s right — you have no appreciation for food with your ‘food is fuel’ mentality and whatnot. I’ve actually never been happier to hear that.”

He chuckled. “I’m learning,” he said, pulling you closer. “I think our time together has improved my palette and kitchen skills. I have you to thank for that.”

“Definite improvement.” You did not say anything about him still being a terrible cook — he was probably self-aware of how he butchered vegetables. (You remembered the last onion he attempted to chop, and it was not pretty.) “I’m looking forward to returning to the Living World. There’s still so much I want to show you.”

“I’d like that.” His brilliant eyes crinkled in amusement, and he leaned in to kiss you on the cheek. “We’ll make it happen, _____ . Stay strong.”

“I’m trying.” You looked at him. “Are you really okay?” you asked, reaching out to touch his face.
Despite your disturbing experience at dinner, you knew that it was Kurama who had taken the brunt of the blow this evening — quite literally. Even though his cuts and bruises were minor, your heart ached when you saw his injuries.

“I’m fine, I promise,” he said, grasping your hand. His skin was warm against yours. “Please don’t worry about me.”

“Well, while we’re up here, we might as well get you cleaned up. I’m not exactly a nurse, but applying bandages looks easy enough.”

He wove his fingers between yours, bringing your hand to his lips. “If playing the nurse makes you feel better, I have no objections.”

“Ahem.”

You turned around to see a servant, whom you recognized immediately. “Arban,” you greeted. “I was wondering where you went. I haven’t seen you since yesterday.”

“I managed to slip away from the banquet hall just after you left.”

“I was hoping no one noticed our escape.”

“Not many did,” Arban said. “You were as discreet as you could have been. Your new demon friends were a little concerned, but otherwise, your leave was unnoticed.”

“Oh.” You stared at your feet. “I hope we didn’t worry them too much.”

“You might be pleased to know they did not partake in the meat course.”

“Really?”

“Not all demons choose to eat human,” Kurama explained. “It’s a personal preference, and I imagine demons like Jin and Chu choose not to consume human out of respect for their friendship with Yusuke and Kuwabara, perhaps even among other reasons.”

So there was a light at the end of the tunnel. “That’s a relief,” you said. “I’m not sure how I feel about being friends with someone who thought I was food.”

Kurama turned his attention to Arban. “You didn’t come all this way to tell us this. Surely, they’re missing your services downstairs.”

“I come and go as I please,” Arban said. “Nevertheless, you’re right. Your friend Hiei has returned — he is slinking around in the shadows as he enjoys doing so often. I believe your exhibition match with Oktai made him curious. Perhaps he detected your energy signature with that Jagan of his.”

“I should have known. If you see him again, will you send him up here?”

“I’m not your messenger.”

“No, and Hiei’s not one to march to a fife,” Kurama said. “I would fetch him myself, but I’m not leaving _____’s side, and I doubt she wants to wander back into the banquet hall tonight.”

You usually weren’t a fan of people speaking your feelings on your behalf, but you couldn’t argue with Kurama. He was right. After the odor of cooked human meat was permanently etched into your senses, you weren’t in the mood to return. The very thought of food made your stomach turn.
Arban looked agitated, but he relented without argument. “Fine. Better head back to your chambers, then. I’ll see if your friend is interested in cooperating.” He disappeared down the hallway, footsteps as silent as they came.

You glanced at Kurama. “Hiei? The grumpy one, right?” He was first mentioned during your dinner with the whole gang, the night you returned from Inoji and found your apartment trashed, your dog gone.

He chuckled. “So you remember.”

“I also remember your reaction to my fox keychain. I now understand why everyone thought it was so funny.”

“Yes, well, I hope you like foxes.”

You laughed, cozying up to him. “I do like foxes, probably even more now.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
I'm glad I got to find some time to write during the bustling of the holiday season and post before Christmas! I have one more day of work left tomorrow -- I'm currently in the process of making homemade granola for my team at work. It smells fabulous. Afterward, I'll be spending a day with the in-laws and then heading down to Tucson to visit my side of the family for a few days. I don't know if I'll have time to write, so if I don't post before then, have a wonderful holiday! Merry Christmas, if you celebrate it! <3

There's not a whole lot to be said about this chapter. All the characters are kind of gathering their thoughts about what happened at the banquet. :3 Please enjoy!

Thank you to Mei Mei, Kupid, LadyAmazon, Seelu, TheRedStreak33, CrossYourTeez, and Hana (Scarlet_Hana) for the comments! I know it's a busy time of year, but I appreciate you taking the time to leave me some feedback. ^_^
stand, it would have to be without him.

You had not a clue how you would go about this. You only knew you could not sit around while these poor humans were treated like livestock.

The prospect of defying demons was a frightening one. You were powerless to defend yourself, but you had your principles. You would have to play your cards very carefully. Perhaps you could rely on your spirit beast for assistance after it hatched. For right now, you would have to gather information, learn all you could about the ranch and the human food trade.

You would have to start with Qara. Maybe Arban. Even Oktai or Yul — you would only have to be more careful with these two. Kurama wasn’t your only means of acquiring knowledge here in Demon World.

“You seem to be deep in thought,” Kurama said as he led you back to your quarters.

“Just about the events of tonight,” you said with a shrug. “It’s hard to know how to feel now that I realize that I’m on the menu for some of these demons. I guess that’s what you meant when you said they had enormous appetites. I thought you were referring to something more sexual.”

“My warning earlier stands true in either interpretation. Regardless, you know I’d never let them come near you.”

“I know. I just wish I wouldn’t have to rely on you so much.”

Kurama paused, looking at you with a mindful expression on his face. “Is that so bad? Depending on me?”

“I don’t mean it like that. I just want to know that I can rely on myself, too. It’s what I’ve done my whole life, and now I feel rather useless.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“That’s awfully nice of you to say, but in case you’ve forgotten, I don’t know how to fight. In fact, I’m still sore from our run this morning.”

“Physical endurance must be built over time,” Kurama said. “You’ll feel differently in a month or two.”

You looked at the egg tucked in the pouch at your side, remembering how miserable that jog was. “I think I’ll take my chances with the spirit beast,” you joked.

He chuckled. “Even so, you need to learn some basic martial skills. Your spirit beast will protect you, but it wouldn’t be wise to be completely unfamiliar with battle.”

You nodded. “You’re right.” If you were to do anything about the human food trade, you would certainly need to acquire some skills. You planned on snooping around a little bit once you felt confident in Demon World.

Kurama reached for the handle of the door, opening it for you. “Well, let’s rest for tonight. I’m sure a hot bath might help your aching muscles.”

“That’s a grand idea,” you said. “It sounds amazing, actually.” You had already taken a bath earlier, but it was a quick one to wash away the sweat and grime from your training this morning. If you could soak in the bubbling water for thirty minutes, you were it’d do wonders for your body.
“You know what sounds amazing?” Kuwabara said as you stepped inside. “Demons not eating humans.”

You sighed, glancing at him from the door. “As much as I agree with that sentiment, I’m not sure dwelling on it is going to do us much good. I mean, I suppose you could win the tournament in three months’ time, and that would be a step in solving that problem.”

“That would be one way to go about it,” Botan said. “But even if Kuwabara won the tournament, do you think the demons would crown him the Demon World ruler?”

“Possibly,” Kurama said. “I’ve never read the full rulebook before. I’m sure one of the tournament officials would know the answer. Nevertheless, Kuwabara would likely be in danger of a coup if he were to accept the position of Demon World ruler. There are many demons who may not respect a human in power.”

“Well, while you all debate that, I’m going to take a bath,” you said. “Where do you two plan on staying tonight?”

“Oh, don’t worry about us, _____!” Botan said. “Did you know there are two other bedrooms in your quarters? It’s really very much like a fancy resort suite. Qara already made the beds and let us know we’re welcome.”

“That’s awfully nice of her. I’m glad you’re staying here, actually. Better than being on the other side of the palace. We can chat and play games tonight or something.” You left the others to their own devices as you headed into your chambers.

Qara was inside, hanging clothes in your wardrobe. When she saw you, she set down her things and bowed her head. “Welcome back, my lady. I wasn’t expecting you so soon, but since your friends are here, I’ve started the fires in each of the bedrooms.”

“Thank you for doing that — you’re so thoughtful.” You gathered your robe and a fresh set of undergarments, about to step toward the washroom, but you paused. “Qara?”

“Yes, my lady?”

“I have a question for you.” You took a breath, wondering how to best phrase it. “During the banquet tonight, I learned about how some humans are treated in Xanadu. It came to me as a surprise. I know all the signs were there — I just hadn’t noticed them. I remember you mentioning something about a ranch. Can you tell me about it?”

Qara looked away. “It brings back horrid memories,” she whispered. “I’m one of the lucky ones.”

“I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to remind you of something so horrible. I just want to help change the circumstances for humans in Demon World, and in order to do that, I need to learn as much as I can. You’re one of my few resources who can give me that perspective.”

She didn’t respond, eyes trained on the floor.

“It’s okay,” you said. “We don’t have to talk about it now. I’m just hoping you might be willing to chat with me later. You might be one of the only people who can give me the information I need. Please consider it.”

Yusuke thought long and hard about the dish in front of him. It was gone, having been given to demons the next table over when they asked if he was going to finish it.
Although he had demon blood coursing through his veins, even he could not bring himself to touch human meat. The thought of consuming it disgusted him — it could have been Keiko or his mom on that platter. Even though his experience among his ancestral kin made him sympathetic to demons, he was still very much a mortal man.

Yusuke had no qualms fighting humans. When he killed Sensui, despite being possessed by Raizen, he committed a great sin — he took human life, and Spirit World was forced to respond in kind. He was angry for what Raizen did, what freedoms he took from him. Yusuke would have willingly killed Sensui on his own, knowing what horrors of which the former Spirit Detective was capable, but his ancestral fathered denied him that choice. Yusuke was furious for a time. After spending months in Demon World, however, his anger waned. He began to see the struggles of demons, the conflict that dictated their time and place.

He learned that if Raizen had continued to eat human to fuel his biological and spiritual needs, he would have been far stronger than his sovereign counterparts, Yomi and Mukuro. The very truth that some demons required human meat to survive provided Yusuke with murky clarity, the values he fought so hard for as Spirit Detective challenged.

He already knew there were good and evil demons, just as there were good and evil humans. While it was considered a horrific crime to take human life, a small percentage of the demon population had no choice. They required it to live. And who was Yusuke to deny them life? Were Spirit Detectives not meant to protect life? Why was human life held in far higher regard than that of demons when they were equally capable of good and evil? He could send the most depraved humans, the murderers, the tormentors, and rapists, to feed these demons. Was that not justice? Not according to Spirit World.

Yusuke would not partake in consuming his own kind, but given how much strength some demons took from eating human meat, he found it difficult to blame them. Only, most of the demons in this banquet hall did not actually require human as sustenance. They merely wanted a taste of this rare delicacy, harboring erroneous superstitious beliefs that eating human meat would make them stronger.

He stared at the empty platter, feeling a little melancholy. It was not fair to the man, woman, or child who was butchered to be served to these demons today. Inside him, his ire smoldered, furious that Yul would have so many humans killed to feed his dinner guests.

“Hey, mate.”

Yusuke turned to look at Chu. “What?”

“Don’t get your panties twisted up in a knot, all right?” he said. “As far as we’re concerned, humans aren’t any good for wrappin’ your laughin’ gear ‘round — there’s better barbies to be had out there.”

“That’s right!” Jin added. “You can’t eat your friends, says I! And last I saw, humanfolk had the potential to be makin’ friendships and fightin’ the good fight! Ya don’t see that kind of possibility in boars or cows or bears — now, those are for eatin’!”

“Yeah! I could use a marbled steak, like some ribeye or something,” Rinku said. “It smells better than human, and I don’t really want to think about eating a cute girl.”

Toya glanced over. “Besides, if these demons here think they can get stronger by eating human, they’re sadly mistaken. Unless they’re like you’re ancestral father, Raizen, biologically geared
toward consuming human flesh and the spirit energy within it, it really doesn’t do them any good. There’s no evidence otherwise.”

“Well,” Yusuke said. “Glad to know you all share the same opinion. Thanks for not eating the human race. We appreciate it.”

His friends grinned at him.

Arban held a stack of empty platters in both hands as he snuck out of the banquet hall. Hiei would not be inside. The demon kept his distance from others, and with his Jagan, he didn’t need to be close in proximity to gather information.

With a contortion of flesh, Arban shifted into the same form he took when he and Kurama were searching for Hiei — a slightly blemished form of Kuwabara. He set the platters down and ran a fair distance away from the palace and into the nearby brush where they could have a private conversation.

If Hiei were searching for answers, he would surely see Kuwabara, realize it was Arban, and come forward.

Arban was right.

“You’re looking for me,” Hiei said, appearing behind him. “Why?”

“Kurama asked me to,” Arban replied, shifting back into his most comfortable form — the golden Akita mix. “He requests your presence in _____’s chambers.”

“I’m not here to help his woman. I already did that. I was only curious about the energies I felt here today and decided to investigate.”

“Then what about Kurama?”

“What about Kurama? He can take care of himself.”

“Then you don’t know.”

“Know what?”

Arban sat down on his haunches. “Kurama forged a blood pact with Yul.”

“He what?” Hiei blinked, the small pupils of his eyes shrinking even further. “Then he’s a fool. He knew the risks.”

“He cares for _____, and he made a sacrifice. It’s that simple. Surely, there’s someone out there for which you’d do the same?”

“_____ has value to Yul, and that’s the only reason why she’s made it this far,” Hiei said. “Otherwise, the strong live, and the weak die. That’s how this world works. You should know that — or have you lived among humans for far too long?”

“Then by your logic, she has value to Kurama as well.”

“And you, by the looks of it. You don’t owe her your loyalty. Look where that’s gotten you — you have been reduced a dog, a human pet.”
Arban stared at him, a calm ferocity in his eyes. “Do not profess to understand my relationship with her. It began long before you were born, demon.” He paced away, shifting back into the servant. “I have delivered the message. Do what you will.”

Hiei stood where he was, watching Arban leave. “Well,” he thought, memories of his sister, Yukina, conjured in his mind. “Perhaps there are people worth protecting, bonds worth keeping, after all.”

Both Botan and Kuwabara had excused themselves to their respective rooms for a moment, probably freshening up for the evening.

Kurama sat in the den, as Qara stepped out and closed _____’s chamber doors. She looked a little uneasy. He wondered why, able to smell the apprehension, though he did not ask. Perhaps _____ told Qara of the human course served in the banquet hall. He would not pry.

Qara walked past him without sharing a glance, disappearing down the hall.

He breathed out in a short sigh, running through the events of the day in his head. _____ was woefully out of shape. He did not normally care what she did with her body, how much she exercised as long as she was healthy, but she needed to be in peak physical condition if she were to outlast the challenges of the upcoming tournament. Even if that spirit beast hatched as a formidable fighter, she would remain vulnerable without the proper martial training. He had faith that he could teach her, but it would be a long three months.

Oktai was fascinating. Irritating, but fascinating. From what Kurama gathered, Oktai was young, no older than a few decades — yet, the amount of power and skill he was able to amass in this short amount of time rivaled that of the strongest of demons. _____ told him Oktai was only half-demon, which meant that he could utilize both demon and spirit energy, like Yusuke. “Like me,” he thought, though he would have to master this newfound ability for himself.

Kurama also wondered from where Oktai came. Yul must have been particular about his devout advisors, screening them judiciously before allowing them into his inner circles. Was Oktai the unfortunate victim of one of Yul’s conquests? Was he someone selected from Xanadu? Did Oktai come to Yul of his own volition? And, if so, what were his motivations?

During their battle, Okai said he envied Kurama for having _____ care so much for him. The admission surprised him. From the moment they met, Kurama had associated Oktai with Yul, for obvious reasons. He did not trust anyone from Xanadu, suspicious that they might be under the influence of its khan. There was too much at risk.

The more time he spent here, the more Oktai seemed his own person, apart from Yul’s empire. His cheerful disposition was bewildering, a mask behind which he hid a much darker side. Kurama would not let down his guard. He wondered exactly what made his position so enviable to Oktai. Was it because he had someone who loved him? Or was it specifically because _____ loved him?

In reality, it didn’t matter. Jealousy would do him no good — neither Oktai, nor Kurama.

Oktai lost their match on purpose. He had plenty of other secrets he did not yet with to reveal, which was fine by Kurama. It was an exhibition match, and it would not do for either of them to divulge their powers to the rest of the world or seriously injure each other. However, in the next few months, Kurama would have to dig further, continuing his search for more information, unearthing the mysteries that Xanadu hid from the outside world.
A familiar scent crossed his senses. “Hiei,” Kurama said, turning around to look behind the couch. “Your sense of urgency is impressive.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. :) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Ah, after a few days with my parents, I am back home! I was hoping to get some more writing in, but life is hard when you're surrounded by family again. My brothers, dogs, parents, and husband all drove me nuts in different ways. XD;;; I'm looking forward to some time to myself -- that's why I'm still awake at 3:01 a.m. I just love my alone-time that much! Hope everyone had a wonderful holiday!

This chapter features Hiei, which is super exciting. He's his grumpy old self. :3 Hope I kept him in character. He's always hard to write with females because he doesn't really interact with females in the anime, aside from minor moments with Botan (whom he's ALWAYS rude to), Yukina (whom he barely speaks with), and Mukuro (whom he has a very unique relationship with). Tack on the RC's relationship with Kurama, who's Hiei's BFF, he really doesn't know how to behave. XP

As a reminder, you have until December 31st to get your raffle submissions in! Details in the end notes!

Thank you to: TheRedStreak33, Queenasunasama, Kupid, FannibalToast, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), and LadyAmazon for your comment! :)

Please enjoy! Comments and kudos are much appreciated! <3 Enjoy your New Year!

“Hiei,” Kurama said, turning around to look behind the couch. “Your sense of urgency is impressive.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I’m only here to see who’s fighting in the tournament this year. I was hoping Yul would show his face in the ring, but it looks like the coward shoved you and that imbecile Oktai up there instead.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“At least you forced Oktai to reveal some of his techniques.”

“That was the intention.”

Hiei stepped further into the den, seating himself across from Kurama. “You did what you could.” A moment of comfortable silence fell between them before he spoke again. “I hear you made the most ludicrous decision of your life, not even an hour after we arrived,” he added.

“It’s all relative,” Kurama said. “Depends on how you delineate the word ‘ludicrous.’ For me, protecting someone whom I care for doesn’t quite fit the definition.”

“I won’t lecture you,” Hiei said. “You know the consequences of engaging in a contract with Yul. I trust you have a plan.”

“Several. There are many variables that require interpretation first. Fortunately, time is on our
“Time? What time do you think you have?”

“We have three months to leverage wisely.”

“You can’t do anything in three months. Not against a titan of the Demon World, a monster among demons.”

“Not with that type of thinking.”

“So you’ve resorted to childish optimism to solve your problems. You have even less hope than I thought.”

Kurama chuckled quietly. “You haven’t met her yet, Hiei.”

“I’m not sure I care to. Your affection for this human has clearly driven you to insanity.”

“If what I’ve experienced this past month is insanity,” Kurama started, amused, “then I may just embrace the hysteria.”

Hiei had a look of disgust on his face.

“Besides,” Kurama said, “what choice do I have? I will not abandon her. I am deliberate when I say I have a few ideas. I only need to pursue their execution, measure which alternatives are most viable.”

“Then you better hope your ultimate plan is better than whatever Yul has in mind. With what I’m guessing you wagered, you could lose everything. Maybe you already have.”

“This is all temporary. I’m setting the stage — sometimes one must allow his opponent a few small victories in battle in order to win the war.”

You soaked in the bath until your skin was wrinkled, the heat from the water relaxing your sore muscles. You were actually feeling a little lightheaded from the steam — in a good way, of course. With a contented sigh, you stepped out of the in-ground tub, reaching for a towel.

It was nice having some time alone to consider the events of the day. As much as you loved Kurama, his constant presence was not conducive to independent thought. He made you feel comfortable — almost too comfortable — and he caused your heart to flutter whenever you exchanged glances. You noticed how his eyes softened when he looked at you — you could swoon at the thought. When he touched you, you felt your skin warm with a gentle fire, and you wanted to embrace him, to have him hold you close. Being so enamored with your significant other was a blessing, but you needed at least a little solitude to clear your head.

You dried yourself thoroughly and slipped on the robe before stepping out of the washroom, the cooler air penetrating your senses. The fire in the corner drew you toward it, and you brushed your hair while sitting by it.

You pondered Qara’s reaction earlier. You felt bad, of course, that your question elicited unpleasant memories for her, but you had to know. She was the perfect person to ask, having experienced that life herself. You wondered how far you should press the matter, especially if she chose not to help you.
How could she not?

She could help hundreds, if not thousands, of humans in need by sharing what she knew. Of course, the argument wasn’t convincing right now because even you didn’t know how you would eradicate the human food trade. You’d need information first. It was a vicious cycle, you decided with a sigh.

You could ask Arban instead. Despite him being so secretive about his own life, hiding his very identity from you, you trusted him. You had to — if there was anyone to whom you owed your trust, it would be him. He had been by your side all of these years, always the silent protector, never asking for anything from you. You wondered how transparent he would be with you if you brought up the topic of the human ranches.

Would he shut you down completely and take Kurama’s point of view? Or would he be more open-minded about ending the human food trade? Would he be willing to bring you to one so you could see for yourself? Was he even opposed to the consumption of human flesh?

And if Arban refused to help you, to whom else could you turn? You thought about Oktai. He was always chipper and willing to address your questions. However, you remembered how cold Yoko Kurama was to you after you called for Oktai when you were attacked by the toad demons. Would Kurama still feel the same if you went to Oktai without asking him first?

You exhaled in thought. Of course, you wanted to be honest with your boyfriend, but you did not want to burden him either. Striking this delicate balance was going to be a challenge. You looked toward the door, wondering what he was thinking right now as he waited in the den. Kurama was never idle. If he was not doing, he was biding his time, strategizing his next plan of attack.

Even if you were committed, could you even keep a secret from him?

He was incredibly intuitive. You now knew why the highly regarded Shuichi Minamino was so perceptive at work, always at least two steps ahead of everyone and everything. He was successful in all of his aspirations, sought after as an expert in his field of economic and financial research. Furthermore, as a demon who had been alive for thousands of years, he had time to study others, understanding how their minds worked, how they would react in certain situations. Human ambitions seemed like child's play to him; he remained in the Living World, likely only because of his attachment to his human mother and friends.

Really, Kurama was in his element here, his senses heightened now that he returned to his homeland. How could you compete with him? You wouldn’t lie to him outright, but even lying through omission was not the hallmark of a healthy relationship — you knew that. In fact, you had experienced it when Kurama neglected to tell you of his demon ancestry. How was keeping a secret from him any different?

Was it for the greater good?

You hated that philosophy. That was where evil festered, hidden in plain sight. Once you chose to sacrifice one good for another, you were already accepting the shades of grey in morality, in your choices. Then, you would have to justify every one of your future actions in an escalating attempt to remain consistent with your core beliefs. This was how the greatest crimes against humanity were committed — how people were prejudiced against their neighbors, how families and kinships could be split apart, how these discriminatory practices could give way to slavery and war and destruction.

You had no reason to keep the truth from Kurama aside from not wishing to burden him. He would
not risk what you already had, and adding yet another objective onto the stack of precariously balanced blocks was putting too much pressure on him. Otherwise, he would have to decline his assistance — which you thought was most likely, given your situation — and know that his refusal would break your heart. You could not put him in that position.

And, even though you felt a little childish, perhaps even selfish, to admit this to yourself, you wanted to be helpful. You had been nothing but weak and irrelevant since you’d been here. Kurama and Arban both made sacrifices to stay here with you.

For some, getting out of this alive might have been enough. Not for you. You wanted success, and then you wanted a little bit more. You sought purpose, to prove your worth to these demons who may have only looked at you as their next snack. It was not an act of revenge, but the desire to do good while you had the opportunity and make yourself useful along the way. You could not afford to be insignificant when so many lives were at stake.

You had always thought that a single person could make a difference. That was why you were so giving of your time to those in need when you were home. You were charitable in your donations of money and efforts. Now it was time to affect change on a broader scale — you needed to take action to support your beliefs.

Kurama would just have to cope with not knowing your plans. It was the best decision in your mind. It minimized risk and allowed him to continue his strategy without interruptions, neither theoretical, nor emotional.

You finished brushing your hair, rubbing most of the moisture out of it with a towel. You then changed into your pajamas, fitting a dry robe on over your nightclothes. With a clear objective in mind — as clear as you thought it could be right now, anyway — you headed back into the den.

You opened the door, only to see that Kurama, Botan, and Kuwabara had all seated themselves around the coffee table, a deck of cards split between them.

“_____!” Botan said, waving you over, ten or so cards fanned in her hand. She was in a robe as well, a towel wrapped around her wet hair. It seemed she had the same idea as you did. “Come join us! We just started.”

You paced over to them, leaning over your boyfriend’s shoulder. “What are you playing?”

“Progressive rummy,” Kuwabara said with a wide grin. “I am the master of card games! You ready to lose?”

“Oh, come one!” Botan said. “Half of this game is luck!”

“And the other half is strategy,” Kurama said. “You should be watching to see what cards your opponents discard, which ones they buy, and choose your discards and purchases accordingly. Even with a poor hand, you may come out ahead.”

“So not much different than life, hm?” you said. “You can’t change the cards you’re dealt, but you can choose how you play. Besides, if I remember the rules of progressive rummy, it’s not at all about winning each round — it’s about minimizing your penalties throughout the whole game. You can win the game if you play every round carefully.”

It was then that you noticed someone else in the den. He was settled in the very corner of the room, seated on the decorative bench, oiling his sword with a cloth. He paid you no heed, ignoring everyone.
Kurama noticed the target of your gaze. He gave you a smile as he set down his cards and stood, taking your hand into his. “_____, this is Hiei. Hiei, _____.”

“I figured,” Hiei said, looking up only briefly. Your eyes met, and he ceased the maintenance on his sword. “I hear Yul went to a lot of trouble to find his descendant daughter.”

“According to Arban, we’re thirty-two generations apart,” you said, shaking off the intensity of his gaze. His eyes, pupils small as they were, gleamed crimson red, vibrant and telling. “I’m not sure I’d call him my father.”

“He’s your ancestral father, regardless of your personal feelings toward him — unless he’s mistaken in your heritage. For your sake, I would hope not.”

“Yul’s spirit beast egg reacted to her and is growing, so I doubt he’s made a misstep in calculation,” Kurama said.

“That bodes well for you,” Hiei replied, eyes on you again. “He doesn’t have a reason to kill you yet.”

“Hiei!” Botan cried. “What a horrible thing to say!”

“Yeah!” Kuwabara agreed, throwing down his cards. “You can’t cut anyone a break, can you, short stuff? She’s here against her will, surrounded by demons even nastier than you, and you just implied in two different sentences that she could die!”

“Can’t she? I’ve said nothing but the truth.”

“What a statement,” you thought, though you were not offended. Kurama had already warned you about Hiei. “He is grumpy.”

Kuwabara looked like he was about to pounce on Hiei over the back of the couch, but you interrupted him, stepping between the two. “It’s okay!” you said to Kuwabara. “It’s really okay. I’m not upset. He’s right, you know? I’m not exactly in a position to defend myself.”

Kurama squeezed your hand. “Not yet,” he said, gently. “And until then, you have me. You’re safe.”

You could have sworn you saw him flash a quick glare at Hiei, who looked away, almost like an indignant child who had just been scolded but wasn’t willing to admit to any fault.

“It sounds like you’ll be fine, _____,” Botan said, “and I mean that honestly. If Yul really wants you to hatch the spirit beast, obviously no harm can come to you before then. Otherwise, the spirit beast may find yet another person to bond with. You’re perfectly safe until the spirit beast hatches, and even then, if Yul wants you to fight on his behalf during the upcoming tournament, he can’t do anything to you in the mean time.”

While she had greatly simplified the situation in her logic, you appreciated the sentiment. Clearly, Botan was not yet aware of the fiasco with the demon toads and how Yul sent you on that mission with Kurama, fully intending you to meet aggressive demons along the way. Even today, the fright you experienced watching Kurama fight against Oktai surely made you lose a few years of your life. And most of all, the uncertainty gnawed at you, for both your and Kurama’s futures, and the lives of the humans subject to demon appetites.

The realization spurred you on, igniting a fire inside you. You would have to act quickly and deliberately.
I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: *An Expression of Thanks*. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. :) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on [Tumblr](http://example.com) for updates and insight on my writing process!
You played cards with Kurama, Kuwabara, and Botan. Round after round, the points were scored, and sometime between the first and the fifth round, you noticed that Hiei had disappeared from the corner of the den.

“Where did Hiei go?” you asked.

“What cares?” Kuwabara said, dealing out the cards. “That little freak can do what he wants. He doesn’t care about anyone else.”

You didn’t believe that. You looked to Kurama, his lidded eyes on his cards, lashes fluttering in what you recognized as amusement. He and Hiei had a special relationship. He didn’t say it outright, but you knew it — you could hear it in the way Kurama spoke of him. If Hiei were so selfish and cold as Kuwabara made him seem, as he had acted so far with you, Kurama would not tolerate him.

“He’s probably just scoping out the rest of the competition,” Botan said. “That’s why he’s here, isn’t it?”

“I don’t usually question what Hiei does,” Kurama said. “His business is his own.”

“Probably sneaking around like his owns the place,” Kuwabara muttered beneath his breath. “Besides, I’m more curious about what Urameshi’s up to.”

As if on cue, the doors burst open, a rather inebriated Yusuke, hanging off Jin’s and Chu’s shoulders, lumbered in. They all had giddy expressions on their faces, cheeks tinged pink, each step wobblier than the last.

“That’s good timing, if anything,” you said, baffled. “Kurama wasn’t wrong when he said you had great intuition.”
Kuwabara seemed to puff up with pride. “What can I say? My spirit awareness is impressive.”

“Heeeeyyyy~!” Yusuke said. “Where were you guys? You missed out on the booze downstairs! These two losers drank it all!” He playfully conked Jin and Chu on the heads.

Chu shoved Yusuke to the wooden floor in response, crossing his arms. “This bloke can’t hold his plonk,” he said boisterously, as if he weren’t drunk at all. “Should’ve seen him spew his tea on the curb — never seen such a bloody large chunder in my life!”

“That’s right,” Jin added, falling to the ground himself, seated with his legs crossed. “Urameshi might be wantin’ a good night’s sleep at this rate. Ossified enough, says I! Fun is all fun ‘till ya wake up feelin’ like boiled shite.”

You set down your cards and stood, walking over to Yusuke, who was laying on the floor, looking rather comfortable. “Well, you certainly can’t let him sleep like that. We should get some water in him first, maybe a bit of food since it seems he has an empty stomach now.”

Kuwabara sighed. “Yeah. Come here, Urameshi.” He practically dragged his friend to one of the guestrooms.

“I’ll find something in the kitchen for him,” Botan said.

“Thank you for bringing him up here,” you said to Jin and Chu.

“No worries, shiela,” Chu replied, shrugging off your thanks with a wave of his hand. “We can’t have a good brawl with the bloke if a bunch of feral low-lifes start chomping on him while he’s all ratshit.”

“Do you have a place to stay?”

“Youl’s offered some lodgin’ for the night. Gives us a chance to sleep off the scutterin’,” Jin said as he winked at you. “Would ya link to join us for a lash? Don’t want ya to be missin’ out if you’re lookin’ for a gas time.”

“As much as I appreciate the offer,” you said, “I think I’m about to turn in for the night. Maybe tomorrow, if you’re still here?”

“I’ll hold ya to it, lass.” Jin waved goodnight as he and Chu left, shuffling out with gleeful skips in their steps.

“Do you think they’ll be okay?”

“They’ll be fine,” Kurama said. “They may seem like carefree drunks right now, but they’re exceptionally talented fighters with good reputations. And while I suppose I don’t know how Jin fights under the influence, Chu is sure to intimidate.”

You looked to him, tilting your head to the side with a small smile. “How does sleep sound to you?”

His hand found the small of your back as he gently pushed you toward your room. “I think it’s been a long day,” he said, “and you deserve a well-earned rest.”

“What about you?” You leaned your head into his shoulder. “You’re probably exhausted, too. And you still haven’t tended to your cuts.”
"I thought you wanted to play nurse."

You laughed. "So you’re saving your injuries for me?"

"I want to quell your concerns." He opened the door for you, gesturing for you to enter first. "I heal far faster than the average human does, so you may find that my injuries have already begun to mend."

"That’s a relief," you said, studying his face. The cut on his cheek was gone, and you reached up to touch him, his skin as smooth as though nothing had happened. "I never would have believed it, but you’re right."

"You see?" His hands circled around your waist, pulling you close. "I’m fine."

You wrapped your arms around his neck, leaning up to kiss him. "I do see."

Kurama returned the kiss, pressing his forehead against yours as he broke away. "Go snuggle up in bed," he said. "I’ll be there shortly. I need to bathe first."

"All right." You didn’t let him go, however, instead resting your head beneath his chin. "I guess I’m taking three baths today."

In the morning, you awoke to Kurama gently nudging you awake. "_____," he said, your name a tender call on his lips. "I’m meeting with Kuwabara this morning in the training grounds. I have a few questions for him about manipulating spirit energy. Stay here, my love. I’ll come for you when we’re finished so we may begin your training today."

That was fine by you. You nodded sleepily, curling up back under the covers. It was so warm, a contrast to the cold air.

Kurama kissed your head before slipping off the bed and heading out. As soon as he shut the door, you rolled onto Kurama’s side of the bed, breathing in his clean scent of roses — it brought you a sense of home. You thought you would drift back to sleep in just a few seconds, enveloped in the warmth of the comforter.

But, then, you heard a shuffling beneath you.

Your eyes opened, your heart beating rapidly in your chest. Was there someone hiding under the bed? Horror stories and nightmares began to plague your thoughts. So many human stories told of murderers and monsters hidden beneath beds. It always seemed so childish to be afraid, but now
that you were faced with the reality of having a threat in your room, where you were supposed to be safe, you froze.

More shuffling. And then a thud. It sounded like a metal object hitting the ground, rolling across the floor.

Your breath caught in your throat. What were your options? You could scream and hope someone who could help you could get to you in time. You could fight, though you weren’t in arm’s reach of a weapon — not that you were particularly proficient with any such weapon. You could hide and hope whatever was down there did not realize you were there.

The rolling continued until you were sure the object cleared the side of the bed — specifically, your side of the bed — where it stopped suddenly.

You gathered your courage, and as quietly as you could, you peeked over the edge of the mattress. You saw an hourglass on its side, sand distributed equally within both ends.

Your anxiety did not yet dissipate. “The Mirage Hourglass,” you thought, recognizing the smooth gold curves of the frame, the purple sand, like small gemstones, glistening even in the dim light. Kurama told you about this when you were in his hidden cove of artifacts. It called to you, and while you couldn’t entirely shake the uneasiness, you felt a tug in your soul to touch it.

With a deep breath, you reached for the hourglass, your fingertips making contact with the cool metal. When nothing happened, you hooked your fingers beneath the frame, bringing it up to the bed, where you studied it, still on its side. The artifact was beautifully polished, magically, even, as though your fingerprints could not collect on the smooth glass. You noticed an inscription in a language you did not recognize carved into the top, and when you turned the hourglass over to get a better look, you realized you inadvertently activated its ancient power.

The sand began to filter into what was now the bottom, the grains glowing in luminescent radiance as the magic swirled around you. It was warm, almost like a familiar embrace. There was nothing cold and uninviting about the hourglass and the magic it conjured. Your uncertainty slowly faded.

A shape materialized besides you, golden threads of energy diminishing, revealing a woman. She was a faint pulse of light, though she was definitive enough for you to see each feature on her face, even the details in her clothes. She smiled at you, legs dangling over the side of the bed. You thought she might have been incorporeal. From what Kurama told you, the Mirage Hourglass summoned spirits.

“_____,” she said, the expression on her face tender, the tone of her voice gentle. “Be not afraid. I don’t have much time, so I will speak quickly.”

“Who are you?” you said, staring at the beautiful woman who had, quite literally, magically appeared. Her robes were form-fitting along her body, falling in graceful wisps around her, cloth made of the finest silks. She wore elegant jewelry around her neck, in her ears, and even in her hair.

“My name is Eri. I am your ancestral mother, your first relation with Yul.”

You stared at her. You didn’t dare doubt her because, as crazy as it sounded, she looked a lot like you — you shared the same eyes, the same chin, the same nose. Perhaps it was the best compliment you would ever give yourself because you thought she was gorgeous even before you realized just how similar you looked.

“I’m sorry I startled you,” she said. “I needed to speak with you alone, and this seemed like the
most opportune moment.” She reached for your hand on the hourglass. She was not here in the flesh, but you could sense her touch through a more spiritual means — you couldn’t explain it.

“Okay,” you said with a nod. She seemed sincere enough. “I’m listening.”

“I’ve been watching you since you were brought here. I admire your determination and willingness to work through this terrible situation you’re in. You are fortunate to have Kurama by your side, protecting you, guiding you. But if you want to secure your future together, you must defeat Yul permanently, dismantle his legacy from its foundation upwards.”

“How do I do that?”

“You’ve already begun. While last night was a test of physical strength for most demons, you must remember that the battle you will fight is one of an intellectual nature. For all the training you will go through in the next few weeks, for all the strength your spirit beast will lend you, know that not all battles require bodily strength.”

“But Kurama—”

“Kurama knows this,” Eri said, holding up a finger to silence you. “He is highly intelligent and resourceful, but for all of his talents, he has little leverage here, given his sacrifice for you. You have far more. Yul thinks of you and your spirit beast as his weapon — that alone gives you an advantage. Your position here as a human, a female nonetheless, makes you unassuming.”

You understood everything she was saying. You just didn’t know how much help you could be. Kurama and Yul had been fighting for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Who were you to step in between their duels of strength and wit? You were a pitiful human.

She seemed to see the doubt on your face. “____, here is my advice: Train well with Kurama. He will teach you how to analyze these cutthroat situations, how to read people, how to prioritize your ambitions. Seek out allies, but be careful. Not everyone can be trusted. Friends may very well be enemies; enemies may very well be friends. You must differentiate between them.”

“That sounds challenging,” you said. You had met many people these last few days, and you were sure you’d meet many more. How were you to know the good ones from the evil ones? Most everyone, especially those in the palace, seemed accommodating and friendly. You had not put your full trust in anyone, aside from Kurama, perhaps Arban. Who else could you hold in complete confidence?

“Challenging, yes,” Eri said, “but not impossible. This is the task that you face.” She stood, reaching out to touch the egg nestled atop a cushion on the vanity. “This spirit beast served a cruel master a thousand years ago; when he now hatches, he will serve a kind one. Your choices, your emotions, even your very thoughts will affect his nature. Nurture it, ______. Give it your compassion, your courage, your heart.”

“I understand.” You looked at her. The gaze in her eyes was one of regret as she stared at the egg, a deeply buried mix of complex feelings. “Can I ask a question?”

“Yes?”

“What was your relationship with Yul?”

Eri gave you a sad smile. “I’m afraid that story might have to wait. My time here is done.” Just as she finished speaking, her body began to glow again, disintegrating into golden bits of thread, starting at her feet. “Summon me in one cycle of the moon, my child. I still have much to tell you.”
You looked to the hourglass, noting that the sand in the upper chamber was nearly gone, down to its last few grains. “Goodbye for now, Eri,” you said, feeling a little somber that she was leaving already. You had so many questions. “Thank you for the advice.”

She waved at you. “Do me one favor: say hello to Arban for me.” And with that, she was gone, blinking away into nothingness.

The hourglass lost its gleam as it sat on the bed — it was still now, and you doubted it would move of its own accord again. You were left wondering about your brief meeting with Eri, your ancestral mother. Her advice was decent, but it wasn’t anything world-changing. You already knew you would have to nurture your spirit beast, though she confirmed that your actions would impact how it would develop. Finding friends and avoiding enemies was an obvious one, though her warning made you more cautious about those around you. What did surprise you, however, was her comment about you having more leverage than Kurama at this point. It made sense — you simply hadn’t thought of it this way before, and Kurama, concerned for your safety, would never mention it.

You would have to tell him about all of this, and you began to think of what you’d say when he returned.

Chapter End Notes

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To Protect

Chapter Summary

Kurama is trying to move beyond his past as the highly sexualized Yoko Kurama.

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone had a wonderful New Years and holiday! One of my New Years resolutions is to finish this in 2020, along with a few other writing projects.

I really, really, really enjoyed writing the first part of this chapter. I was originally wondering if surrounding Kurama with a bunch of women would be telling about his thought process at all, but it's interesting to see how he reacts. Later on, there's a bit more fluff, but it's cute fluff. :'D

Thank you to Kupid, FannibalToast, and TheRedStreak33 for the comments! I really enjoy hearing from you, and I appreciate you taking the time to leave your thoughts!

^_^

<3 Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kurama began his trek back to the palace after a morning of training with Kuwabara. They discussed the usage of spirit energy, and even though Kuwabara was not always well-versed in explaining his techniques, Kurama was able to glean quite a bit of useful information from their conversation.

“I guess I’m coming with you,” Kuwabara said. “I’m starving. You think Qara’s up yet? I could really use some of her cooking.”

“Qara’s awake before dawn,” Kurama said, “and does not retire until we do. Sometimes I wonder if she sleeps at all.”

“So what’s her deal anyway? She’s, like, thirteen or something. Don’t they have child labor laws here?”

“She’s a slave — and, no, Kuwabara, demons don’t have child labor laws.”

Kuwabara made a face. “This place just keeps getting better and better.”

“Slavery exists in modern day Living World as well, dark as it seems. It comes in many forms, some far more violent than others. Debt bondage, forced labor, human trafficking, even arranged marriages — as long as those in power can force people into positions of exploitation, is that not slavery?”

“I guess you’re right. Damn, that’s a depressing thought.”
“Although demons tend to brutality, at least historically, humans may have equally dark crimes buried in their accounts.”

“Reminds me of that Chapter Black tape. That was some god-awful stuff.”

Kurama didn’t respond. His friend was right, but he didn’t require any affirmation to know that.

“I guess I’ll make my own breakfast, then,” Kuwabara muttered. “Eggs and toast aren’t too hard, and I’d rather not use slave labor.”

“Anything you eat here is prepared or brought in by human slaves. Every bed is made, every tile is polished, and every article of clothing is pressed, likely, by human hand. Will you not partake here at all?”

“Jeez, aren’t you Mr. Sunshine?”

Kurama gave him a sideways glance. “I only speak the truth — unfortunately, reality is not always to your liking.”

They made it up the steps of the palace and through the grand doors in the back. Upon stepping inside, eyes adjusting to the relative dim, they noticed a small group of four women, huddled together, covering their delicate mouths in small giggles as they greeted their guests.

By any standard, these women were considered beautiful. They were garbed in dresses made of the finest silks, layered in the traditional ensemble of Xanadu. These clothes were brightly colored, patterned with hand-sewn designs. Each of their graceful steps brought the gentle flow of these soft fabrics around their legs and feet as they made their way toward Kurama and Kuwabara.

“Hey, ladies,” Kuwabara said, breath caught in his throat. He gulped.

Their hair, brushed thoroughly until they shone, were spun and twisted in intricate braids, adorned with pins, flowers, and beads. Their makeup was perfect, faces powdered, eyes enhanced with eyeliner and eyeshadow, a dainty blush dusted over their cheeks. Jewelry made from jades of all colors and exquisite golds dangled from their ears, necks, and wrists. Their expressions were coy, eyelashes fluttering at the sight of these men.

“You’re Kurama,” one of them said, snapping her fan closed as she drew closer. She seemed to be the oldest of them, the most seasoned, an air of confidence about her. “We’ve heard a lot about you. Allow me to introduce us: I’m Satomi, this is Michiko, Aiya, and Kimi. We are among Yulkhan’s imperial consorts.”

“We saw your battle last night with Master Oktai from the balcony,” Aiya said. She had the heaviest makeup of the four, eyes darkened with kohl, large gold hoops in her ears. “You sent him out of that ring and even knocked him unconscious for a moment. You must be very strong to have bested Master Oktai. He’s a favorite of ours.”

Kurama had zero interest in these women, but that didn’t keep them from attempting to get under his skin. He returned their enthusiasm with an empty gaze.

“Oh, come now, Kurama,” Michiko said, sidling up to him. She was the shortest of them, a bright pink sash accompanied with a beaded cord tied around her middle. “Don’t be so cold. But I suppose that’s the norm for you, isn’t it? We were very pleased to see that Yoko Kurama had made an appearance last night. We’ve heard so much about him.”

“Yes, Yoko Kurama,” Aiya cooed. “I love your ears and flowing tail, and those cold eyes —
they’re like a wintry, golden steel. They can send a shiver up any woman’s spine. Wouldn’t you care to show us?”

“Now, that’s far too forward” — Kimi stepped in on his opposite side — “I think I prefer the red-haired Kurama. He seems more gentle, soft-spoken, and romantic — don’t you remember his roses? I like a man who appreciates beauty.” She reached up to touch his face in a flirtatious caress.

Kurama caught her wrist before her fingertips made contact. “I insist you refrain from touching me.”

“Oh?” Satomi laughed, fanning herself again. “That’s definitely the human in you talking. From the stories I’ve heard, Yoko Kurama would have enjoyed a night with us. He was fond of women, wasn’t he? An absolute virtuoso in the bedroom, he charmed all of the ladies, playing them all like instruments in the palms of his hands.”

Kuwabara looked toward his friend, lips parted in awe.

“Don’t deny it, Kurama,” Kimi said, though she withdrew her hand. “There’s still a bit of Yoko in you, isn’t there? The legendary bandit was just as much of a legend in bed. Maybe you’d like to show us.”

“Yes, please show us.” Aiya batted her eyelashes seductively at him. “We’re among Yul’s favorites — we’ll be sure to show you a good time, too. How about it, you ravishing fox?”

“I must decline,” Kurama said, brushing past them without a second glance. “There are plenty of other demons here for you to service. I suggest you find them.”

Kuwabara followed awkwardly, waving at the women.

“That’s right,” Michiko sighed. “Kurama has his very own human girl he brought from the Living World.”

Aiya gave an exaggerated gasp, looking after him. “His? How can she possibly be his? I didn’t see a mark on her.”

“You hear that, Kurama?” Satomi teased, twirling her fan between adroit fingers. “We notice these things. A powerful demon like you would surely mark his woman, would he not? That’s how we know you’re serious about her. That’s how the demon riff-raff knows to stay away from her. Can you really say she’s yours if you haven’t claimed her as a mate?”

Kurama was already a distance away from these women. He chose not to respond to their provocations.

As cool as he seemed, Kuwabara knew his friend was not unaffected by their jabs. “Are you okay, man?” he asked as soon as they were out of earshot. “What are they talking about with all this marking business?”

“It’s a barbaric practice. Though its roots are ancient, it remains popular, even today. Traditionally, male demons mark their intended mates, usually by fang or claw. Sometimes the process is more artful — a tattoo or brand, perhaps. These marks are a symbol of ownership, a small amount of demon energy injected under her very skin. The process is painful and often leaves scars as its purpose is to be noticeable.”

“Ugh, why?”
“As contrary as it may seem, the practice originated from a need to protect women. A mark on a female indicates she is already taken or claimed — any harm that comes to her is an affront to the male demon, so it’s wise to know whom you’re offending if you choose to assault her.”

“That’s awful. I can’t imagine doing that to Yukina.”

“No, I would hope not. It came from an era of necessity. If your mate were unmarked, she would be in danger. In essence, your demon energy protected her.”

“So in your case, if you marked _____, no one would touch her out of fear of you coming after them, huh?”

“Exactly.”

A short moment of silence fell between them as they climbed the stairs.

“I dunno, Kurama,” Kuwabara said, trying to lighten the mood. “It’s not really romantic or chivalrous. I think _____ would prefer a ring.”

Kurama wasn’t often left speechless. He could only smile in response, exhaling quietly, imagining a future in which those words rang true.

You sat in front of the hourglass for a few minutes, staring at it. You were even bold enough to turn it upside down, watching the purple gems of sand slip into the bottom chamber. Nothing happened. You supposed the magic that fueled this artifact was now gone — at least, for the time being. In about one month’s time, you’d be able to try again.

Meeting Eri was fascinating. You were so absorbed with being Yul’s descendent that you had forgotten you had an ancestral mother as well. Eri must have somehow tapped into the magic of the Mirage Hourglass to reach out to you, and you were glad she did. Even if her advice was not particularly specific, you were simply glad to meet her, to know that you were not a child born from complete darkness.

You thought about seeking out Arban — and then you wondered how you would go about doing that. He always seemed to be exactly where you needed him. Historically, when you were growing up in the Living World, he followed you everywhere. You had no doubt he might have been watching you here, whenever he was able to sneak around the palace, undetected.

A gentle knock sounded at the door, and you took a breath as it opened.

Kurama stepped inside. “You’re awake,” he said, the expression on his face gentle. He then noticed the hourglass on the bed next to you. “_____, what happened?” He did not seem angry — only surprised, perhaps a little concerned.

“You’re not going to believe me,” you said.

He came toward you, seating himself on the edge of the bed. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because it’s crazy.”

“And being brought into a world beyond your home, given a spirit beast to hatch, and dating a demon isn’t?”

You were so glad he had a sense of humor. “Point taken.”
“How did you find this?” he asked.
“...didn’t. At least, I wasn’t trying to. It rolled out from underneath the bed.”
“That’s where I hid the rucksack.”
“I promise I didn’t touch it.”
“I believe you,” Kurama assured, his hand finding yours. “Even if you did find the rucksack, you wouldn’t know how to use it. It’s a magical item, and only those who know how to undo the knot can open it. You said the hourglass rolled out from underneath the bed of its own accord?”

You nodded.

“Interesting. What happened next?”

You explained to him what transpired after you tipped the hourglass. You told him everything about Eri you could remember. You described her, her advice, and her instructions to summon her a month from now.

Kurama picked up the artifact, setting it on the nightstand. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine. Just dazed, I suppose.”

He leaned over you from behind, wrapping his arms around your shoulders. “It seems your ancestral mother wanted to share something with you and took the first opportunity she had to speak with you alone.”

“If it makes you feel any better, she spoke highly of you.”

He chuckled. “I’m not searching for a compliment, _____.”

“I know,” you said, touching his face with your hand, your thumb running along his smooth skin. “You’re too modest for that.”

Kurama grasped your hand, bringing it to his lips in a soft kiss. “Some say modesty is another form of arrogance.”

“False modesty, perhaps. Do you think you’re arrogant?”

“Not particularly, but I’m not trying to impress myself, either.”

“You certainly impress me.”

“Well, then, my life’s work is accomplished,” he said, glancing back toward the hourglass. “Is there anything else you can remember about your interaction with Eri?”

“I asked her what her relationship was with Yul, hoping she could tell me something valuable, but time ran out.”

“Mmm. That’s a shame. It seems you only had half of the allotted five minutes since the hourglass rolled out on its side.”

“Oh, she wanted me to say hello to Arban.”

Kurama looked pensive. “It doesn’t surprise me. Arban says he stole your ancestor away a
thousand years ago. I would assume his presence in the Demon World at that time lines up with that of Eri. I imagine he may have more information about her.”

“I’ll have to ask him,” you said.

“Better you than me. I think he prefers your company to mine.” He nuzzled his face into your neck affectionately, his breath tickling your skin. “Then again, who wouldn’t?”

You laughed, leaning away to avoid the tickling sensation. Your fingers were entwined in his silky hair. “How was your training with Kuwabara?”

“It went well. Are you ready for yours?”

“That depends. Are you going to make me run again?”

“It’s good exercise.”

You sighed, knowing he was right. This training was important, as awful as running laps was — you were still sore from yesterday. “All right. Give me a second to change, and we can go.”

He kissed you on the cheek. “I’ll wait in the den.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
The Elements of Power

Chapter Summary

Kurama teaches you the elements of power, while you learn about different aspects of fighting from your friends.

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! This chapter is a mix of fluff and some technical expertise. I've discussed this with a couple of you before, but I actually have a few years of competitive martial arts training, so my knowledge of fighting is really not bad. However, I don't think you all want to sit here and read the nitty-gritty details of martial arts theory and strategy, so I summarized a lot of the RC’s interactions with her multiple mentors. :'D

And then, of course, fluff. <3 Love me some fluffy conversation.

Thank you to: Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, FannibalToast, CrossYourTeez, Queensunasama, Kupid, and HauntedLament for the comments! I find your thoughts so fun to read. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We’ll take it easy today. I know you’re sore. Let your muscles rest for a day before we continue the running regiment.”

You breathed a sigh of relief. “You could have told me that back at the palace. I was feeling anxious about having to run again.”

Kurama gave you an artful glance. “I know,” he said, an impish twinkle in his eyes.

“You’re awful.”

He chuckled. “I am aware.”

Kuwabara and Botan were having breakfast, prepared by Qara. They would join you as soon as they finished. You only brought a pastry to munch on while you walked.

“So what are we doing today, then?” you asked.

“I’ll teach you the basics of martial arts. I only wanted to start early today because we’ll have the training grounds to ourselves. Most everyone is still asleep.”

“I’m sure they had a grand time last night, if Yusuke was any indication.”

“Work hard, play hard, I suppose.”
“More like ‘work hard, party harder.’ Reminds me a bit of college, actually.”

“Did you enjoy your college experience?”

“So much. Sometimes, I wish I could go back for a Master’s degree, but I don’t know what that’d do for my career. It might just be a lot of money for something that won’t help.”

“There’s no harm in furthering your education. We can afford it.”

You noted his usage of “we,” and you glanced at him, a look of surprise on your face.

“Did I go too far?” he asked, his expression calm, perhaps even coy.

“No,” you said. “You just caught me by surprise, is all. We’ve been keeping our finances separate all this time, but it sounds like you might want to do it differently.”

“If we’re serious, I don’t see why not.”

It was a sincere sentiment from Kurama. He clearly made more money than you did, having been in the industry longer. He was more experienced, and his research papers were highly regarded; he was often asked to make presentations at conferences and symposiums, and he was compensated well.

“Are you sure?” You certainly didn’t feel entitled to his money.

Kurama tilted his head to the side. “Of course, ____. When we return to the Living World, I suspect money will be the least of our worries. We’ll have both survived one of the most powerful demons in the world.”

“What are we going to do for the next three months?” you asked. It had been on your mind. “Time doesn’t stop in Living World, just because we’re here.”

“I’ve taken the liberty of making a few arrangements with work. I have asked for unpaid leave to complete some research, leaving Ryohei in charge. For you, because of your relatively short tenure, I told HR you resigned because of an international family emergency. I’m sure we’ll have no problem getting you your position back once we return.”

You never thought you’d be so relieved to hear you no longer had a job. Naturally, Kurama took care of everything.

“I guess I shouldn’t have worried,” you said.

“No.” Kurama leaned over to kiss your temple. “The cell phone I patched will work, if you wish to call friends and family to let them know you’re not around. Service may not be perfect, but it will suffice.”

“Thank you.” You touched his hand, weaving your fingers through his. “I’m not used to having someone like you around.”

“What do you mean?”

“Someone who’s always a few steps ahead of me. When it comes to your career, your life, our relationship, you’re on top of everything.”

He didn’t respond.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a small laugh. “I’ve been friends with Yusuke and Kuwabara for far too long.”

“Actually, I’m glad you find sex jokes funny. It makes you seem less perfect.

“I assure you, _____, I’m hardly perfect.”

“You’re perfect for me.” It wasn’t the first time you said those words, but you still meant it, even after everything you both had been through.

Kurama smiled tenderly at you, leaning closer, his hand sliding around your waist. “You are my wonder, ____.”

“The four elements of power: hips, stance, reaction force, and focus. Remember them.”

You committed Kurama’s teachings to memory. “Okay. What do they mean?”

He stood next to you. “Focus,” he said, “usually manifests in a cry, some sort of vocalization. You may be silent, if that is a part of your strategy, but you may find that a shout helps with directing your energy.”

“Is that why everyone is screaming in martial arts movies?”

“I can’t tell you what they’re doing in martial arts movies because choreographed fights are quite different than a battle in the ring, but you may use whatever reference you prefer.” He bent his legs slightly, feet shoulder width apart. “Reaction force” — he threw a punch with his right fist, his left fist recoiling — “is Einstein’s third law of motion. For every action, there is an equal reaction. Do you see how each punch is accompanied by a return of force?” He punched again, this time with his left — his right recoiled.

You nodded slowly.

“Stance.” Kurama shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “No matter what you’re doing in battle, a steady stance will keep you grounded. It will help you remain balanced, deliver attacks, dodge blows, and channel your energy. It won’t matter how hard or accurately you hit if you consistently fall to the ground afterward. Your legs need to be strong.”

“And hips?” you asked.

“Your hips are the source of your physical power. Whether you’re striking with your hands or feet, elbows or knees, head or chest, all attacks should be launched from your hips. It is your core, your center of gravity.”

“Really, Kurama?” someone said. “You’re going to start with this stuff? It’s so boring.”

You looked behind you to see Rinku, the boy demon you met yesterday.

“Good morning, Rinku,” Kurama said. “What would you recommend if you were teaching someone to fight?”
He twirled his yo-yos around in a tight circle with one hand, looking particularly pensive. “I dunno. The way I learned was just throwing myself into fights, getting beat up, and then becoming stronger ‘cause I didn’t want to get beaten up anymore.”

“That sounds like a lot of unnecessary pain,” you said. “I think I can find motivation in other ways.”

Rinku grinned. “Yeah, I guess. That’s just how I learned, and it worked well for me, you know?”

“You learned by getting beat up?” Yusuke had arrived, stretching in the morning sun. “You’re not alone. That’s how Kuwabara learned how to fight.”

“Hey, man. Not cool,” Kuwabara said, not looking the least bit defeated. “AT LEAST I LEARNED HOW NOT TO GET HANGOVERS.”

Yusuke covered his ears, grimacing at the loud jab. “Ow! Really?”

Kuwabara laughed heartily. “You deserve it, you punk.”

You couldn't help but laugh, too. “You did kind of deserve it, Yusuke. Don’t throw punches if you can’t take them.”

Yusuke rubbed his head sheepishly. “I knew getting out of bed today was a bad idea.”

“So what’re we doing today?” Kuwabara said. “Training, huh? Let’s get to it.”

Rinku sighed. “I thought I was here on vacation. I’d much rather train someone else.” He sidled up to you, giving you a sly look. “Hey, ______, is Kurama boring you?”

“Well, no, not particularly,” you said, glancing at your boyfriend. “I think he’s giving me valuable information.”

“But information isn’t useful unless it’s applicable,” Rinku said, pointing his finger at you. “I think getting involved in the fighting is going to be a more worthwhile lesson than you just standing here listening to someone talk at you.”

Kurama sighed, a smile on his lips. “Very well, Rinku,” he said. “You’re quick on your feet. Why don’t you teach ______ the importance of footwork?”

The young demon’s eyes lit up. “You bet I will!”

And so it began.

In the upcoming days, between the cardio and strength training, you learned, not only from Kurama, but from your friends as well.

Rinku showed you why his size never was a disadvantage for him. What he lacked in strength and weight, he made up in agility and skill.

“You’re not as small as me, but you’re still going to be smaller than most fighters in the ring,” he said. “You’re going to have to be fast. You can’t take the blows, so you’ll have to avoid them. Flawless footwork is the key to this.”

He gave you a set of exercises to work on — you would have learn to maintain your balance, master your center of gravity, each step purposeful. He played the role of your opponent, coming toward you, explaining what you should be doing in response.
Kuwabara sat down with you one day to explain how he used his spirit awareness. He had you focus, training not just your body, but your mental stamina.

“It sounds like this is something you’re born with,” you said, struggling with his instructions.

“Well, yeah. Some people are better at it than others, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get better at it. It’s the same with anything. You might not be great at running marathons, but with hard work, you can improve. You won’t ever beat the world record if you don’t have the genes for it, but you’ll still be better than you were on day one.”

“I suppose that’s incentive enough to keep working at it.”

“It should be.” Kuwabara smiled at you. “Come on, ____. You can do it. Spirit awareness comes in handy — you’ll want it as a skill in your toolbox.”

Later that afternoon, Chu took one look at you and shook his head. “Sheila,” he said, “you won’t be hittin’ nobody with those mousy fists of yours. Why, look at me — I’m built like a shithouse! You try hittin’ me, and you’ll be pissin’ into the wind!”

“I can’t change the size of my fists, Chu,” you said.

“No sweat. You can change your tactic.” He lifted his leg, balancing on his other foot. “Use your legs. You got a nice pair, sheila. I’m sure Kurama thinks they’re ripper” — he winked at you — “They’re longer and stronger than your arms, and will have you floggin’ those bludgers in no time!”

His suggestion made a lot of sense to you. Your knuckles felt a lot more fragile than the balls of your feet, after all.

Toya taught you the importance of remaining calm. He saw how anxious you were during training, even though your fights were obviously staged to teach you specific techniques.

“You need to take a breath, ____. Your opponents will be skilled. They’ll be able to see right through your anxiety and take advantage of it.”

“I know,” you said. “I can’t help it. How did you learn to stay calm when a single blow can kill you?”

“Well, the good thing is that the tournament rules dictate these battles as a contact sport, not death matches.”

“True, but I don’t know if it really matters. If you hit someone hard enough, they’ll die, and I’ve been told by just about everyone here that I’m a fragile human.”

“That may be the case,” Toya said, “but a frantic mind isn’t going to help. You need to learn to control your breathing. Mind over matter. That’s the first step to finding composure you need.”

You spent some time with Yusuke and his spirit beast, Puu. You learned about his background with Puu, how he originally sacrificed his egg to save Keiko from a horrible fire. It was all a test, of course, and in choosing to be selfless and brave, he was given the opportunity to live again.

“So I guess it’s especially important for me to do good things while I’m nurturing this egg,” you said, holding it in your lap. It was getting larger, little by little, day by day.

“I’m not exactly a poster child for good behavior, but it all seemed to work out for me,” Yusuke
said. He tossed a piece of bread at Puu, who eagerly swallowed it.

“Did you have any expectations of your spirit beast before it hatched?”

“Nah. I didn’t even realize Koenma was taking care of it for me.”

You blinked. “Who’s Koenma?”

Yusuke responded with a short laugh. “I would say I can’t believe Kurama hasn’t told you about pacifier breath, but Koenma’s really not that interesting.”

“Okay, then,” you said, unsure what to make of Yusuke’s comment. You would have to remember to ask Kurama later.

When Jin approached you, eager to be of service, you asked him what he planned on teaching you.

“To fall,” he said.

“To fall? Don’t worry — I can do that on my own.”

“No, lass. There’s a fine skill to it, I’ll have ya know. What do ya think I used to do before I learned how to fly? I fell a lot, and those trainin’ to be a Wind Master, well, they don’t do too well if they don’t survive the splat to the ground. You’re goin’ to be shoved out of the ring, thrown onto the floor at some point. Best not be breakin’ any bones.”

You nodded slowly. “All right, then, Wind Master. Teach me how to fall.”

This would be one of your more painful sessions.

Over a week had passed since you started your training. You were sore all the time and in places you didn’t know you could be sore. You came to rely on your hot baths for comfort, the steaming water able to ameliorate your tender muscles.

When you stepped out of the washroom, towel wrapped around your torso, you thought you saw some movement from the corner of your eye.

“The egg.” You walked toward it, placing a hand on the shell — it was warm to the touch as it usually was. After a few seconds, when you had not felt it move, you figured you had saw wrong and continued drying yourself by the fire.

You had learned so much from your friends. Yusuke and Kuwabara had returned to Living World, back to Keiko and Yukina. They promised they would be back in time for the tournament, if not sooner. However, you encouraged Yusuke in particular to stay with his wife — Keiko was a nervous person by nature, and growing a baby inside her probably didn’t help.

Chu, Rinku, Jin, and Toya left as well. Xanadu was not their home. They had fun training for the week, but they had other matters to attend to.

You would miss them all. Their company gave you hope, and you actually enjoyed this week of training, even with the immense strain you put on your body.

“____.” Kurama slipped into the room, closing the door behind him. “How are you doing?”

“Hi,” you said. “I’m okay.”
“Still sore, hm?”

“The hot water helps.”

“I’m proud of you. You’ve worked hard this week.”

You gave him a small smile, feeling a little bashful at his compliment.

“You have a tenacity and zest for learning I admire,” Kurama continued, settling next to you by the fireplace. “Your progress is inspiring.”

“I have you to thank for it. I know you designed the curriculum this week to their strengths. It was nice being able to spend some time with everyone else and see their perspectives.”

“Mm. I see you’re becoming analytical about this.”

“Just like you,” you said, leaning your head on his shoulder.

He responded in kind, resting an arm around you. “Don’t they say couples start to look alike after a while?”

“Whose silly observation is that?”

“It’s something I’ve noticed. I think when you’re around someone long enough, you tend to adapt. You share quirks and facial expressions, and you learn one another’s body language.”

“I suppose it’s possible. I’ve never noticed it before. Did you see it in your mom and Kazuya when they started dating?”

“Yes. My mother used to never fidget with her hands — she was so proper and polite, concerned about how people perceive her. After meeting Kazuya, a musician, always tapping away on the kitchen table or moving his fingers as if he were playing the guitar, she began to twiddle her hands. It was like she welcomed a piece of him into her heart in a way she could not control.”

“You make it sound so romantic.”

“It certainly can be.”

“Do you think we look any more alike yet?”

“Time will tell.”

“That’s a non-answer, if there ever was one.”

Kurama shifted, gently pulling you close. “I do my best,” he said, his fingers running along your bare arm toward your hand. When he reached your wrists, he stopped.

You saw what he was looking at — the remnants of the bruises from your bound hands when you were brought here. They were almost gone. You had nothing to be ashamed about, but you had a strong urge to hide them. You resisted, knowing any sort of weakness from you would magnify Kurama’s guilt.

“They’re healing, hm?” you said.

He sighed, hugging your close, his arms tightening around you, and he buried his face into your shoulder as if breathing in your scent could take away the edge. “It should never have happened.
I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. It’s not your fault, Kurama. You’re not the one who did this to me. Even though I know you want to take the blame, maybe because you want to believe it’s in your power, it’s not your burden to bear. Please don’t do this to yourself.”

“I’ll try not to,” he said, his head against yours. “But it does infuriate me that someone would treat you in such a manner.”

You had never heard him express his anger before. It was eerie, calm, almost like an omen on the distant horizon.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. :) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Freedom

Chapter Summary

Kurama and Oktai have a moment to chat. Meanwhile, Arban tells you about Eri.

Chapter Notes

This weekend was crazy busy, so I apologize for how long it's taken me to update. @____@ My husband and I inherited his grandmother's cat when she passed away. Although the whole family encouraged us to bring him to a shelter, we refused since we knew he'd be put down immediately. We named him Mochi. He was 23 lb, clearly and morbidly obese. Over this past year, we got him down to 17 lb through portion-control, exercise, and training. However, we also learned that I'm allergic to cats. Mochi lived upstairs, so my allergies weren't too bad, while we and our dogs lived downstairs because Mochi could not stand our dogs at all. We were willing to "catify" the whole house so he could escape the dogs and move freely up and down the stairs, but he was too overweight (and unfortunately declawed) to climb. We FINALLY got him rehomed this Saturday with a kind coworker who loves cats, so it's been kind of a bittersweet weekend for me. He now can have a better quality of life, and I'm so relieved.

Aside from that, I'm just happy I can sit down and write again! This chapter is an interesting one. Lots of conversations happening that need to happen. ;) Please enjoy!

Thank you to Kupid, FannibalToast, Mei Mei, and HauntedLament for the comments! <3 I love reading them, and they give me so much inspiration!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kurama was summoned to Yul’s throne room the next morning. He had wanted to sleep in with _____ as they agreed to take the day off from training, now that their friends had left Xanadu.

However, Qara knocked gently at the door, even as the sun barely touched the mountain peaks in the distance, to relay the message. Kurama answered; _____ was fast asleep, too exhausted to even stir.

“What could he want?” he thought as he paced down the hallway, dressed and groomed for the day.

“Ah, Kurama. Good morning. I see you were summoned as well.”

“Oktai.” It was all Kurama offered as a greeting, even as Oktai joined him in the hallway, walking right next to him.
“You’ve been training Lady _____ well,” he said. “I’ve seen her progress.”

“Can’t escape your prying eyes, can we?”

“Does our lady know you can be so cold?”

“No. She’s never given me a reason to be.”

Oktai shrugged. “While I agree with that sentiment, a foul attitude doesn’t really change things for you. If you think I’m nosy, know that Yulkhan is the ultimate emperor, the puppeteer who pulls all the strings, the harbinger of progress. What he wants, he gets. He has eyes and ears everywhere.”

“You must have learned that from an early age.”

“I did, actually.”

Kurama was interested. Although Oktai was talkative, especially with _____, he seemed tightlipped with others. As Yul’s most capable servant and trusted advisor, understanding Oktai’s intentions and motivations may prove fruitful in destroying the tyrant. “You’re young,” Kurama said. “How is it that you came to serve Yul in such a capacity?”

“It’s the choice I made when he destroyed my village. Any man over the height of an umagi’s shoulder was executed. Only women and children were permitted to live. After so many were slaughtered, I saw my service as an opportunity to become strong.”

“So you were forced.”

“No, not forced. I was given a choice.”

Kurama gave him a sideways glance. “But the options were stacked against you. You were offered a future with Yul; otherwise, you were nothing but a half-breed in a defeated community, likely to be forced into a life of servitude. You’re a slave either way, your freedoms stripped from your very being.”

Oktai grinned, the reaction an eerie one. Who in their right mind would smile during such a conversation?

“Someone who wishes to hide his emotions,” Kurama thought. “He’s a poor actor.”

They arrived at the throne room, the doors shut.

“Let me get that for you,” Oktai said, polite as ever. He waved his staff, the stone glowing faintly, as the doors opened.

“Come in,” Yul said, his voice a rumble. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

You awoke with a stretch and a yawn, noticing that Kurama was not beside you. You weren’t too alarmed — he often awoke before you did, and if he wasn’t cuddled up next to you, he was usually doing something productive.

When you made your way into the den, you searched for Kurama. He was nowhere to be found.

“Yulkhan summoned him, my lady.”

You turned to see Qara, who held a tray of tea and pastries for you. “Oh. Thank you. Do you know
what for?"

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, my lady. I was given no specifics.”

“It’s all right. You don’t have to apologize.” You watched her as she set the tray down on the coffee table, her eyes averted. “Have you thought about what I said the night of the banquet?” you asked, deciding to bring it up for the first time in over a week.

Qara froze for a moment, only moving to slip the empty tray beneath her arm. “I’ve thought about it, yes.”

You quieted, encouraging her to continue.

“I… I don’t think I’m strong enough,” she said, dipping her head toward you. Her short hair framed her face, so you couldn’t see her eyes. “I don’t want to be involved. I’m sorry.” She turned and left the den.

You sighed quietly. That conversation did not go the way you had planned. Perhaps you would see better results next time if you weren’t so direct. Or maybe you needed to connect with her on a deeper level first.

“Don’t blame yourself,” a voice whispered in your ear.

You nearly jumped. You turned around, only to see no one behind you; you looked forward again, and from side to side. No one at all.

“Don’t fret. It’s me, Arban. I’m resting on your shoulder in the form of a fly.”

You had almost forgotten he could do that, and you breathed a sigh of relief. “You scared me,” you said.

“Sorry.”

“It’s all right. I’m just startled, is all.” You now saw the small, dark fly on your shoulder. “I actually wanted to talk to you. I haven’t seen you all week.”

“Hm?” His voice was deep, almost comically so for an insect.

“Do you think we could go for a walk?”

“If you’d like,” he said. “I imagine you’d be safe as long as you stay in the confines of the palace.”

You opened the door, looking left and right before stepping out. “Maybe the garden,” you said. “That sounds like a nice place, huh?”

“As nice as this wretched palace can be.”

“Do you have memories here?”

“It’s certainly different, remodeled many times over since this was my home, but it feels the same — suffocating and dreary, despite the material beauty.”

“Arban,” you started, “I wanted to ask you about a woman. Her name is Eri.”

There was a pause. “What do you know of Eri?” he finally asked.
You explained your experience with the Mirage Hourglass, making your way into the garden after you descended the stairs and stepping outside. It was nice being among well-trimmed plants — it reminded you a bit of home, of civilization in Living World. “She said she was my ancestral mother,” you said. “Who would have thought? She seemed so kind. I wonder what her relationship with Yul was like.”

“It was neither romantic, nor consensual. She was a slave, the highest ranked imperial consort in his harem. Relatively respected, but with little freedom and even less happiness.”

“How awful.” It was hard finding words for how you felt. You did not have a personal relationship with Eri — you had only known her for, at most, three minutes. But understanding her plight and position stirred your heart.

Arban did not respond, sitting silently on your shoulder.

You continued walking, strolling along the stones laid out along the pond. Brightly colored fish swam in the water. They looked like koi, though you were sure they were of a different species. One of them leaped from the pond, sharp fangs revealed, to attack an insect, and you looked to your shoulder to make sure Arban was still there.

As you wandered deeper into the garden, a calm silence between you, you saw an elderly woman sitting among the flowers. Her skin was pale, even tinted in the red Demon World sun. She was dressed elegantly, her clothes akin in design to the gown you wore the first time you met Yul. Her hair was spun and twisted in a beautiful bun, jewelry dangling from her ears and neck. A girl, no older than Qara, sat next to her, teapot in hand.

“Who do you think she is?” you asked.

“She must be a retired imperial consort,” Arban said. “There is a complex hierarchy of consorts in Yul’s harem. Normally, when he loses interest in women, he disposes of them. Never the highest ranking imperial consort. Imperial noble consort is their official title. He feels too much respect for them, for they have served him for so many years, providing advice and favors. They are both beautiful and wise, intelligent and talented. Instead, he retires them, allowing them to live the rest of their lives in his palace in peace. As you can imagine, the competition for this position among the consorts is cutthroat.”

The woman noticed you, gesturing for you to come closer.

You stepped toward her, wondering what she could possibly want. “Can I help you?”

“Child,” she said, eyeing you carefully. “You must be Yulkhan’s ancestral daughter. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“I’m surprised. I’ve only been here a few days.”

She tugged on your wrist, asking you sit down. “Yulkhan has been long-awaiting you, child. Even decades ago when I was the favorite in his bed, he would talk about you. He has wanted to find you for so many centuries. You look so much like her.”

“Who?”

“Eri.” Her voice was low, raspy now from old age. Yet, her eyes were expressive, her posture stiff.

“How do you know?”
“He still worships her. Even after her betrayal, he kept her portrait up in his bedroom. He has never taken it down, even as she was replaced, one imperial noble consort after the other.”

You didn’t have a response.

“She was special to him; and now you must be special to him. Serve him well, and he will take care of you.”

You ignored her. “Why did Eri betray him?”

“He never said. She was a fool to break his heart. She was already the highest ranking consort in his harem. All she had to do was continue serving him, and she would live out her life in comfort and wealth. Don’t make the same mistake your mother did. Do not betray him — he will find out.”

Oktai kneeled at the throne. “Good morning, Yulkhan,” he said.

Kurama only nodded, a shallow dip of his head. He respected the khan as an enemy — he owed him his loyalty, per their bloodpact, but that did not mean he had to adhere to the etiquette of Xanadu.

If Yul was offended, he did not show it. “I have summoned you both here this morning because you are the two advisors closest to my daughter. The spirit egg will hatch soon.”

“How do you know?” Kurama said. The spirit beast was no longer tied to him.

“I feel it in my very bones,” Yul said. “I recognize its energy. This creature was mine for many years. I feel its power returning under _____’s care. She has done well nurturing it, letting it feed off her strength. In teaching her how to fight, you have awoken its spirit, Kurama. I must thank you for that.”

Kurama stood where he was, unresponsive. It was fine that he made Yul happy — that was not his goal, but training _____ happened to serve them both.

“How very exciting!” Oktai said. “What is your plan, Yulkhan? What will you have us do in the interim?”

“Continue her training.” Yul said, “with one adjustment.” He paused, his silver eyes landing on Kurama. “I want you to train her, not as your fragile human self, but as Yoko Kurama. He is the stronger warrior, the more ruthless one. I want her spirit beast to have exposure to his resolute method of defeating his opponents.”

Kurama stiffened. “Very well,” he said. It was not preferable. He did not wish to utilize Yoko’s strength, especially when there was no imminent danger, but he had little choice. The bloodpact dictated that he serve Yul. Besides, he had no issues returning to his human form, and even Yoko would do anything in his power to protect ____. Kurama was in control, he told himself. ____ would keep him grounded. He had nothing to fear.

“Oktai, you will assist,” Yul said. “You’re the only one here able to challenge Yoko Kurama’s vast powers.”

“Besides you, sire, of course,” Oktai replied with a bow of his head. “We’ll begin immediately. Is that all you have for us?”

“Yes. You are dismissed. And Kurama?” His eyes gleamed. “Learn to embrace Yoko Kurama. He
is your true self, after all. You will be employing him frequently going forward.”

As they exited the throne room, the doors shutting closed, Oktai looked to Kurama and grinned. “You can lose the sour expression now. That wasn’t so bad, was it?” he said.

Kurama was not amused. “You allow yourself to think you have a choice, and you’re grateful for the opportunity to live.”

“It’s sustainable,” Oktai said. “Either that or be crushed underfoot. You know there’s little honor in being so rigid in your principles that you’re destroyed in the process. I know you value your freedom, but Yulkhan seeks peace in his order.”

“Yes, peace in unification,” Kurama said, “under his terms, to his liking, beneath his banner. Otherwise, as you said, be crushed underfoot. That hardly sounds like peace.”

“Even Yoko Kurama may have valued the lawless anarchy, but he had the freedom to oppose Yulkhan. You no longer have that.” Oktai’s expression had darkened. “Things have changed, Kurama. Your time in Living World has made you soft — loving a human has made you soft. That’s the exact mistake my father made.”

Kurama listened. He had brought out the impassioned side of Oktai, the true man beneath his chipper facade.

“If you want my advice,” Oktai continued, “you’ll do exactly what the khan tells you to. Embrace Yoko Kurama, and not just per Yulkhan’s instructions. You’re going to need him.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Chapter Summary

While Kurama searches the palace for you, Arban tells you his history.

Chapter Notes

Ah, I think 100 chapters sounds like a good stopping point, so I suppose that's my new goal. XDDD;;;

Thank you to Kupid, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Mei Mei, and LadyAmazon for the comments! :) I enjoyed reading your speculations! More answers to come! I think this chapter will provide some insight, at least from Arban's perspective.

Hopefully, we can get some fluff in the next chapter, maybe some time with Yoko Kurama.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She made you uncomfortable, this imperial noble consort. You made an excuse about having to meet up with someone, and she released you from her wary gaze. You shuffled out of the garden without looking back.

“She’s not going to bite you,” Arban said.

“You mean she hasn’t yet. Did you see how white her teeth were? They’re not normal.”

“She might have information.”

“They maybe you should pretend to be me,” you said, glaring at the fly on your shoulder. “Besides, I don’t even know what kind of information to ask for. You know more than me, at any rate, and probably even her.”

“Perhaps.”

“Will you tell me?”

“I’m unsure how pertinent this information is.”

“How is it not? Isn’t it normal for me to inquire about my own ancestral mother? How it all started?”

“I can tell you how it all started. Yul is a power-hungry tyrant. He knows nothing but ambition at the cost of others. For hundreds of years, he ruled, expanding his empire. He laid siege to cities and crushed whole villages. He had one condition: If you served him, swore loyalty, he would spare you.”
“How did you know him?”

“I served him.”

“What happened?”

“I come from a tribe of shapeshifters. We honed our talent was great pride and care. We always remained neutral to conflict, despite the oncoming threat — that was our mistake. One day, Yul was at our doorstep, and we were devastated. I was a young warrior, arrogant and ambitious, and I tackled Yul from the back of his spirit beast. We fought, surrounded by war cries on all sides. He was far stronger than me, and he easily overpowered me once he began to reveal his true strength. Little did I know that he was testing me.”

“How terrible.”

“It was a part of his objective. He wanted to expand his territory, but he also wished to find warlords, servants whom he could rely on to assist him in his conquest. Impressed with my skill, he offered me a position of power. He said he would spare my tribe if I served him as one of his generals. Foolishly, I agreed.”

“You can’t say that. You did it to save your tribe.”

“Did I?”

The only sound was your footsteps as you walked through the grass, stepping into the shade of the distant trees. You didn’t know where you were going, but you felt safe enough to wander with Arban at your side. “That’s what I have to believe.”

“No, ____. You are far too trusting,” he said, leaping from your shoulder and shifting into the Akita form you found so comfortably familiar. His feet touched the ground silently as he strolled beside you. “I was greedy as well. I wanted power, to become stronger. And who better to learn from than he who defeats you?”

“Then, did you learn?”

“Oh, yes. I learned everything I could from Yul. I know how he thinks, how he strategizes, how he handles strife. I was promoted to one of his highly regarded master warlords at the height of my power.”

“That implies you fell from power. What happened?”

Arban paused, his eyes closing, as though your question brought back painful memories. “I fell in love.”

Kurama returned to the bedroom after his meeting with Yul and Oktai, only to realize that _____ wasn’t there. “Odd,” he thought. “Where could she have gone to?”

“Can I help you, Master Kurama?”

He turned to see Qara, a neatly folded stack of laundry in her arms as she stepped through the open bedroom door. “Yes, actually. Do you know where _____ went?”

She shook her head. “Lady _____ must have left, if she’s not here. I saw her for breakfast but only briefly.”
“Do you have an idea where she might have gone?”

“No, sir. I thought she might have gone looking for you.”

“I see.” Kurama left the chamber. She wasn’t taken — the spirit egg had been carefully gathered and brought with her in its pack, wherever she went. He had told her before to not wander off for her own safety. While he wasn’t angry, he was concerned. There had to be a good reason why she left the comfort of her own bedroom.

His only consolation was that she was safe in the palace. No one would do her any physical harm while she was under Yul’s careful watch. Emotional duress was another issue entirely, but _____ was strong and had a good head on her shoulders.

He loathed having to constantly keep tabs on her, not because he minded the effort, but because _____ was independent, fierce, and innovative — she thrived when left to her own devices. She must have found his diligent attention smothering. He was not a demanding man, neither dominating nor possessive. He only wanted her safe, and she was out of her element here.

If she were back in the Living World, dealing with harmless Ryohei, no matter how awkward the situation, Kurama would have no qualms letting her handle him. Even someone as toxic as Noboru, despicable as he was, she could manage.

These demons were something else. They were hungry, and she was two of their favorite things — human and female.

He descended the stairs. If she wasn’t in her chambers, surely she was with someone she could trust. Arban, most likely. Hiei, if he decided to warm up to her, though Kurama was doubtful.

As he walked, he noticed a small group of women down the hall. “Why is it that they always move in herds?” he thought. He could brush past one or two of them easily, but the four of them could easily blockade him. If they intended to, he would be delayed in his search for _____.

“Kurama,” Satomi said the moment she saw him. “Where’s your pretty lady?”

“That’s none of your concern,” he said, avoiding eye contact. It did not deter them as he hoped.

“You know, it’s actually kind of romantic how loyal you are to her,” Kimi said, eyelashes fluttering.

“You are as loyal to Yul?” Kurama asked.

They all giggled.

“Of course, our foxy friend,” Aiya said. “Yul is the supreme ruler in all the land. He gives us jewelry and beautiful clothes, our favorite foods, and in return, we show him a good time.”

“And not just in bed,” Michiko added, brandishing her bamboo flute. She played a short line from a popular melody, fingers flying expertly across the open-holed keys. “He loves music and stories. If you’d like, we’d be happy to share our talents with you, too, Kurama.”

“You just want to cuddle that fluffy tail,” Kimi said. “And those ears.”

While the other women went on and on, Satomi crossed her arms, sleeves flowing with every movement. “You’ve lost her, haven’t you?” she said. When Kurama didn’t respond, she continued, stepping toward him. “Young women are so fickle, aren’t they?”
Kurama glanced at Michiko, Kimi, and Aiya, who were busy chattering among themselves about their plans this afternoon, what they would do for their beloved lord, and how each one was superior in her craft or performance. “Those are your words. Not mine,” he said.

“You really should be more careful, Kurama.” She walked past him, beckoning him to follow.

“And why do you say that?”

“Even Yul keeps a close eye on his consorts. He cares not in whose bed we sleep, but we are to remain most loyal to him. We serve him by acting as his eyes and ears, even with each other, if necessary.”

“I neglect to see your point. If you’re offering me information, then say so.”

Satomi grinned, giving him a coy expression, her eyes dark with mischief. “I’m willing to help you, Kurama. Interested?”

“Only if your assistance proves useful.”

“Oh, you can be cold.”

“My patience wears thin.”

She unfurled her fan, revealing a mesmerizing design of flowers and birds. “Then, in the interest of good faith, I’ll tell you I saw your woman in the garden this morning. From there, she made her way northwest and into the forest.”

Kurama was glad for the information. The bordering forest was one of the last places he would search for his beloved. “What is it you want, Satomi?” he said, relenting for the moment.

“Yul is in the process of selecting his next imperial noble consort, the highest ranking lady in his court. The most recent one passed away from illness a few months ago, and we haven’t had anyone fill the role since.”

“I would think that means he finds no one fitting for the position.”

Satomi frowned, eyebrows knitting together as she glared. “The imperial noble consort is a permanent position, and with his recent obsession with his precious daughter, he merely hasn’t had the time for the selection process. He values your opinion; otherwise, he would not have insisted you serve him as an advisor. I ask that you put in a word for me and make my placement happen — in whatever way you think is most prudent, of course.”

“And what exactly are your redeeming qualities?”

“You only have that tone because you don’t know me, Kurama.” She had returned to her charming self. “I can be very useful. I’ve climbed the hierarchy of consorts up until now, surviving the brutal selection process and petty politics. I only have one more rank until I am the imperial noble consort.” She leaned in close enough to whisper in his ear. “I share a bed with Yul. He tells me most everything. I think you’ll find my information quite relevant.”

“I’m very curious,” you admitted, “but I understand if there are secrets you want to keep.”

Arban sighed. “These secrets are a history long gone by. There is no sense in hiding them from you, as this is your history as much as mine.”
“I would certainly appreciate any background on Eri and how her descendants came to be.”

“Very well,” Arban said. “I will tell you. Your ancestral mother was by far Yul’s favorite consort. She was a hallmark of human beauty, gifted in art and song, even dictation and healing; she was intelligent and fared well in a court of political games. She seduced the hearts of many men, including that of the khan. I had never seen him so smitten with a woman. His hall was filled with her portraits, and she remained in his chambers most every night.”

You listened to Arban’s story as you walked through the forest, side by side. In a way, this was not so different from your strolls in Living World, when you would venture through the park on Saturday mornings.

“Eri endured her slavery, scaling the ranks to imperial noble consort, thus making her one of his most trusted advisors, privy to the secrets that even I, as his master warlord, did not know. This was how she kept herself alive, rising to a position in which she could ensure her safety.”

“And what about you?” you asked. “You said you fell in love. How did that happen?”

“The details matter not,” Arban said. “We secretly found time with one another. For me, it was a reprieve from the constant bloodshed; for Eri, I don’t know what she saw in me. She was strong in spirit, but perhaps she found comfort in a companion in whom she could confide.

“One day, Yul heard news from his scouts that a large army was on its way to his kingdom. He had been far too arrogant, thinking that he was invincible, but the death count of his soldiers spoke no lie. He had been betrayed, his tactics divulged to the enemy.”

“Eri,” you whispered.

“I can only assume. She never admitted to it.”

You shuddered. It must have taken immense amounts of courage to betray Yul, knowing what he could do.

“Yul feared that if he were defeated, the mysteries of his immense powers would die with him,” Arban continued. “He would have no legacy, nothing left of his centuries on the throne, and more than anything, he wanted to live forever. He summoned Eri to his chambers. There, he stripped himself of his power. He severed his bond with his spirit beast, forcing it to return to its egg, and because the nearest human being was Eri, a human with no small source of spirit energy, it naturally chose to bond with her.”

“That’s incredible. It all makes sense now.” You touched the egg at your side, noting how warm it was. This was the legacy your ancestral mother left you.

“Nine months later, as the war raged on, a daughter was born in secret. She had inherited Yul’s power — Eri no longer had it. This was his plan all along, to find a way to pass his spirit beast through an unsuspecting heir, someone whom his enemies would never presume.”

It was as Yul said — the spirit beast chose to be passed to the next generation to ensure its partner was the youngest, healthiest, and strongest. Now, it came to you.

Arban looked on, staring ahead, a thinly veiled sadness in his eyes. “At that time, only Eri knew of his intentions. While Yul trusted her, she was the one loose end. If she talked, his daughter, and, by extension, his spirit beast could be located and destroyed. Concerned for her safety, I convinced Eri to come with me. I would lead her to Living World, where we could begin a new life together.
“But she refused to leave without her daughter. I need not tell you that running with both a child and human would vastly complicate matters. I agreed, only because this was her last chance at survival.

“Yul’s men came after us, and we were separated while trying to escape. I tried to return to her side, but Yul had sent his elite warriors after me, and I was occupied. Eri made the ultimate sacrifice, hiding her child in the forest as she lured the demon warriors away. When I found the child, I knew that Eri was no more. Her fate was sealed. I brought Eri’s daughter to Living World, where I found a human mate, not for love, but because I wanted the child to have the best, most normal life possible.”

“And you’ve been watching us ever since,” you finished for him. “You’ve been watching over me.”

“Yes,” he said. “And I’ll remain by your side until my work is done.”

“When would you consider your work done?”

“When you are safe from Yul. Likely and ultimately, when he is destroyed.”

You looked to him, noting his golden fur in the sunlight, how his constant presence made you feel safe. “And how do you plan on doing that?”

“I don’t have a plan,” he said. “Yul is far too strong for me to kill. If I have to watch over you forever, then so be it.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

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Wounded

Chapter Summary

As you continue wandering the forest with Arban, Kurama searches for you. Dangers lie ahead.

Chapter Notes

I totally would have spent this wonderful three-day weekend writing, but it turns out that we have a leaking pipe and water damage! Lots of drywall to repair! Fun! XD PERKS OF HOME OWNERSHIP. We’ll be working on this throughout the whole week, which is more fun. At least we have running water now, even though we won’t have a new water heater until tomorrow. XD I can deal with cold water as long as it’s running and not leaking.

Nevertheless, I like this chapter. A little bit more perspective from both Kurama and Arban. Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoy!

A big thank you to Mei Mei, CrossYourTeez, Yeah_I’m_Crazy_So_What, Kupid, FannibalToast, KatLyn Burianek, TK091, shannonigans, and Queenasunasama for the comments! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You walked with Arban for a while, a comfortable silence falling between you. The forest was different than those you had experienced at home. It seemed far more ancient, wiser, filled with a potent energy that made the trees grow tall. Their trucks were thick — you couldn’t even wrap your arms around them. Just how old were these trees?

Arban seemed to read your mind. “They’re carnivorous,” he said. “That is how they grow so tall and strong. They’ve fed on more than sunlight, water, and nutrients from the earth.”

You made a face. “Are we safe?”

“For now.” He looked toward the canopy. “Xanadu was not always as you know it. It was won in a great battle. Blood soaked the ground, creating pools so deep that it came up to your ankles. It is the blood and bodies of both warriors and civilians that fed these trees. If you were to die, lay still on the ground for mere minutes, their roots would consume you.”

“Well, I suppose it’s best to make sure that we don’t die in here.”

“A agreed. Kurama can probably tell you more about them, if you’re curious. I don’t know what practical knowledge you can glean from them.”

“Probably not much, though I do wonder what he can do with these trees. If can turn a rose into a whip, I’d hate to see what he can turn carnivorous trees into.”
“Kurama is a fierce warrior. We fought many times in years gone by.”

“Really? I assume this was when you served Yul.”

“Yes. He was arguably Yul’s greatest nemesis.”

“Why?”

“Because Yoko Kurama was a thief who raided Yul’s vaults and killed the men assigned to guard them. Many met a grim fate. I was tasked to apprehend him and drew close on several occasions, but each time, Yoko Kurama evaded my grasp.”

“Wow,” you said, “I never thought he’d make an enemy of Yul.”

“I’m sure that wasn’t his purpose. Yoko Kurama was an equal opportunist when it came to theft. Yul just happened to have the best treasures in the land due to his fruitful conquest. Looking back, I am amused by just how angry and frustrated Kurama made Yul.”

You couldn’t help but laugh. “I suppose it is kind of funny.” You glanced at Arban. “Can I ask you something?” you said.

“Mm?”

“What do you know about the human food trade?”

“I know where this is going,” he said, “and I’ll tell you right now that you’re not going to undo thousands of years of demon appetite. That would be like telling humans to not eat chicken.”

“No, it’s not. Chicken is popular in Living World and widely consumed. From what I’ve been told, human meat here is a delicacy. That means very few demons can actually get their hands on it.”

“You’re right, but consuming human is a symbol of status here. That would be like telling the Spanish they can no longer enjoy their Iberian ham or the Russians they can no longer eat their beluga caviar. The wealthy would have an uproar, and it is the wealthy who has the power to forge change.”

“Humans aren’t the same as pigs or fish eggs,” you said. “We are far more sentient, with the ability to share language, innovate, and experience complex emotions. And I know there’s a ranch that supplies humans around here — just imagine what they’re going through. Do you know where it is?”

“And what would knowing the location of such a place do for you?”

You quieted. “I don’t know yet. I guess I just want to see it for myself. Maybe I’ll have some ideas afterward.”

“Be careful,” Arban said. “I know how you are with ideas.”

“Hey, now.”

He chuckled, a deep rumble in his throat. “I remember the holidays with your mischief. When you were a child, you thought that if you could unwrap and eat a piece of chocolate from each package, your parents could no longer regift the candy. They tried keeping the chocolate from your reach by hiding it in the pantry, but you managed to find it anyway.”

“And you, as the family labrador, let me use you as a stepstool to get it. Really, Arban, you’re not
innocent either, especially now knowing you weren’t an oblivious dog. You’re equally guilty and mischievous.”

“I thought chocolate sounded like a well-earned break from kibble, and it seemed better for you to get it than the family dog. Your parents would forgive you.”

“Ah, so it was all a ploy. You encouraged it.”

“In my defense, you didn’t require convincing. In fact, you were far more willing to take risks than I was. I simply benefited from it.”

“When I discovered that chocolate is toxic to dogs, I felt so bad.”

“I was fine.”

“Well, I know now that you’re a shapeshifting demon that won’t die from chocolate poisoning, but I had no idea back then.” You looked to Arban, admiring the way his muscles rippled with each movement of his legs. “You still haven’t answered my question. Do you know where the ranch is?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Will you show me where it is?”

Arban did not respond, his pointed ears flicking forward.

“What’s wrong? I didn’t hear anything.”

“Shhh,” he said, taking a few steps ahead of you. “Stay behind me.”

Your heart beat loudly in your chest as you looked this way and that for the intruder. You couldn’t see anything with your pitiful human eyes, but Arban seemed to be especially tense, his hackles raised and bristling.

“There are at least three demons I smell,” Arban said. “Keep your guard up and stay close.”

It happened so quickly. Something came at you from the canopy, dropping to the ground, a horrific screech sounding in its throat.

Arban acted quickly, flesh warping a fraction of a second. He became a large bear, thick fur like armor. His black lips were pulled back in a snarl, fangs bared, and he leaped above you, deflecting the blow. He caught the intruder in mid-air, letting loose a ferocious roar — it reminded you less of a bear and more like what you imagined a dragon would sound like. You heard the sickening crack of a broken neck just before he handed on the ground on all fours.

The limp body of the demon was like that of a cyclops, a single eye atop its head, green slimy skin glistening in whatever light filtered through the trees.

Arban went after a second demon as it closed in on you — this one looked like a horned and fanged beast, a tangled mane framing its face. He slashed with his bear claws, tearing into his chest cavity with ease. The demon crumpled to the ground with a thud, a deep purple blood spilling from its wounds.

You ducked to the side, trying to stay on your feet as you learned during your training. Just as you were able to find your footing, something collided into you from behind, knocking you onto the
You felt a sharp pain on your shoulder and cried out, to which Arban responded immediately, pulling the attacker off of you in a forceful swing.

“_____, don’t move,” he said to you, as he tackled the third demon.

A horrible screech sounded.

You couldn’t even see what was happening. This was possibly the worst pain you had ever experienced — certainly unique in sensation — and every attempt to pull yourself up led to more anguish. You thought it might be better to not move at all for fear of injuring yourself further.

Arban was by your side in an instant. “You’re all right,” he said. “You’ve been bitten by a low-class demon. Don’t worry — his particular species will result in no side effects. I’m going to apply pressure to stem the bleeding. We can then find you something for the pain.”

Kurama left the palace, finally ridding himself of a persistent Satomi. She seemed to think that her information was valuable enough to exchange for a life of comfort and safety.

Was it?

His natural tendency toward caution led him to think that her offer might be some sort of ambush. Yul was certainly not above testing his own advisors, and with a wildcard like Kurama, forced into servitude, he would have been wise to do so.

Now, this wasn’t the end of the world. In fact, it brought an opportunity. Yul could feed him incorrect information through Satomi, but Kurama could do the same in reverse. Surely, Yul knew that it was a possibility and would be equally suspect.

However, this was all assuming that Satomi was loyal to Yul. She clearly wanted the role of the highest ranking consort. Whether she wanted the honor out of self-preservation or out of adoration for the khan, Kurama was unsure.

If she was loyal to Yul, playing his farce, Kurama could not take her information at face value, and he would have to be wary in what information he gave her. In fact, if this was the case, he would best off not accepting her offer at all — this was what Yul would want.

On the other hand, if she was only interested in furthering her own interests, Kurama would have to rethink his strategy. She might be prioritizing her future, but he could still not tell her everything. After all, since he sought to dethrone and destroy Yul, Satomi’s future would be entirely insecure if the khan died. His legacy would crumble, and her dream role as the noble imperial consort would be no more.

But perhaps there were better opportunities for her.

As Kurama thought, walking toward the forest, he detected a familiar scent. He had only smelled it a few times in his life, most recently during training sessions, but it alarmed him. “_____.” More specifically, _____’s blood.

He dashed off, running as quickly as he could. It wasn’t fast enough for him as the scent of her blood became more and more prevalent. There was more of it than he cared to smell. He dipped into the vast pools of demonic energy, bringing Yoko Kurama into the forefront. He would not take a risk with her life. There was no argument that his demon form was faster, stronger, and far more precise than Shuichi’s human body allowed.
“I’m coming, _______.” he thought as he made his way into the forest, leaving only fallen leaves in his wake.

You grunted as Arban applied pressure to your shoulder, his hands stained in your blood. He had shifted back into the middle-aged servant, covering your wound with a piece of cloth from his shirt. “You’re going to need stitches,” he said.

“Ugh, really? It’s that bad?”

“All in all, you’re fortunate. I didn’t think demons would dare attack you in Xanadu. It seems that these idiots slipped through the cracks.”

“Why did they attack, do you think?”

Arban sighed. “They’re hungry,” he said. “They’re hungry, and they saw a human wandering in the woods.”

The thought of it made you shudder. “You have to understand,” you said. “This is why I can’t let any other humans die like this. We’re not food, and we shouldn’t have to worry about being hunted or slaughtered.”

He didn’t reply, working silently.

You lay there on your stomach, wondering exactly what was going through his head. Was he really considering what you said? Would he help you on your quest to dismantle the human food trade?

You stayed there for several minutes, the pain was constant, even intensifying as the adrenaline wore off. From the corner of your eye, you saw something move. You didn’t know exactly what it was, but it felt abnormal.

Arban must have saw it, too. “Get up,” he said, as he finished wrapping your shoulder in tattered cloth. “We need to get out of here.”

“What’s going on?” You leaned onto him for support, wincing as you stood.

“The trees. They’re waking. The scent of blood and the early stages of decay are bringing them out from their hibernation.” He ducked between your legs when you were on your feet, shifting while he did so. In a fraction of a second, he had changed into a large stag, the same one you saw him as when he revealed himself to you, and you were settled upon his back. “Hang tight.”

He took off, sharp hooves digging into the ground as he propelled himself forward.

The forest seemed to come alive, the trees shaking, leaves falling in the air. You looked behind you, the roots shooting from the earth to grasp the bodies of the demons Arban had slain. They pulled the corpses down, shifting the very ground as soil and debris covered their meal.

It was disturbing. You heard flesh squelching and bones breaking, muffled by the earth. You were so glad that Arban carried you to safety before you were taken hold by these roots.

“They’ll soon be consumed,” Arban said, looking on from a safe distance. “Serves them right.”

“A narrow escape with the rekeika tree, I see.”

You turned to see Yoko Kurama, dressed in white, his marked gold eyes on you. “Kurama,” you said, unable to look away, despite how intimidating he was. He really was beautiful in his demon
He came toward you, lifting you from Arban’s back, supporting both your legs and back — he gave you no time to protest. “You,” he said to Arban. “You’re fortunate she’s still alive.”

“He saved me,” you said, coming to his defense. “If it weren’t for him, I’d be— ow!” You yelped when Yoko Kurama brushed his arm against your shoulder.

“If it weren’t for him, perhaps you wouldn’t be injured,” Yoko Kurama said, studying your wound.

“She requires stitches,” Arban said, ignoring the jab. “Think you can handle that?”

“I’ll be handling much more going forward.”

“What do you mean?” you said, braving his cold eyes.

“This delays your training. Effective now, I, as Yoko Kurama, will be overseeing it, per Yul’s instructions. He will not be pleased to see you’ve been injured. By low-class demons, nonetheless. Have you forgotten your training already?” His voice was distant, tones of condescension in it.

You exhaled — he was right. Arban should not have to protect you, especially not against weaker demons, which consisted of most of the population. You needed to be able to defend yourself.

“You are far too harsh on her,” Arban said, taking pity on you. “She’s human. Very few humans can even contend with low-class demons. She never asked for this, not any of this. She only fell in love. Have you forgotten?”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Yoko Kurama carried you back to the palace, not a word exchanged between you.

It was awkward. You had never experienced such a long drawn-out silence between the both of you — but, then again, you had not spent much time with Yoko Kurama.

Your shoulder throbbed painfully. Arban, who had left you in Yoko Kurama’s care, had disappeared. He said you needed stitches, and you were quite willing to endure a sharp needle and thread running through your skin if it would help heal you quicker.

Yoko Kurama spared you no attention, carrying you silently in his arms. He scaled the stairs of the palace, entered your chambers, and set you on the bed.

“Are you going to stay in your demon form?” you asked, setting the spirit egg on the nightstand. It wasn’t meant to offend — you were legitimately curious. You thought Kurama might be kinder in patching you up than his demon counterpart.

“Why?” he said. “Are you afraid?”
“I… don’t know,” you said, honestly. There was something about the steely gaze in his eyes, the ancient manifestation of thousands of years of wisdom and knowledge, that made you feel small. You didn’t feel the same way with Kurama in his human form.

Yoko Kurama didn’t respond, instead walking toward you. He touched your uninjured shoulder, giving you a push into bed. “Don’t be afraid,” he whispered, a gentle command. “On your stomach.”

You did as he said, laying down, your chest supported by a pillow.

He crouched over you, still standing at the side of the bed. He touched the hem of your shirt, tracing it from your back to your neck. “Unless you can raise your arm, we’re going to have to tear it.”

You nodded. “That’s fine. It’s already damaged anyway.” Your clothing here in Xanadu seemed to appear from nowhere — Qara did your laundry, tailoring, and seemed to bring in new selections every day.

Yoko Kurama began to tear your shirt at the collar, his hands moving effortlessly as though the fabric were nothing more than paper. He pulled the sleeve on your injured shoulder down to reveal the bite wound. It had stopped bleeding, thanks to Arban’s treatment, but it still throbbed.

As the shirt cleared your wound, you winced, feeling the slight tug on your skin.

If Yoko Kurama noticed, he didn’t say anything.

You braced yourself. Normally, the area requiring stitches was numbed before treatment. It didn’t seem that Yoko Kurama was going to do that for you — in fact, you weren’t sure if demons used anesthesia in practice. Perhaps they simply braved the pain because that stoic strength was what they valued. It certainly wouldn’t surprise you.

He leaned closer, resting his knees on the floor, lowering his face toward your shoulder.

You thought he was studying your wound in greater detail, but you felt something warm and wet against your skin. You flinched, turning to look at him. “What are you doing?”

He pulled back, licking his lips — you noticed the blood. “My saliva has healing properties,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone as if licking your wound wasn’t weird at all.

You relaxed, breathing out; you supposed it was all right, then, if it would accelerate your healing. “That’s why you licked your hand when you were fighting Oktai,” you said.

“Mm. Now hold still.”

You did as you were told. “You know, many animals have saliva that is clean compared to that of humans. That’s why animals lick their wounds, too. Their saliva contains enzymes that can break down the cell walls of dangerous bacteria. Antibacterial and antiviral compounds can also be found in it.”

“Are you likening me to an animal?” he said before running his tongue along the bite marks, carefully cleaning each one.

It was such a strange sensation — not quite painful, maybe a little sore, but it certainly made you feel uncomfortable. “No, I’m comparing your licking habits to that of an animal.”
“You’ll thank me later.”

“I know I will,” you said, doing your best to remain still as he tended to you. Strangely enough, the pain was already dissipating. “Do you know how to sew stitches?”

“You may not need them. We’ll see how you heal up tonight. You may be well on your way to recovery by morning.”

“Who would have thought some demon saliva would fix everything? You should bottle it and sell it. It’s a new business venture if finance doesn’t work out for you.” You heard a hum in his throat, almost like a small verbalization of amusement.

“Sit up,” he said, pulling away from just a moment.

You sat up, tucking another pillow behind you to support your back.

Yoko Kurama joined you in bed, sliding up to you in one graceful motion. Without acknowledging you or asking for further consent, he leaned in, tucking his head right alongside yours as he started his ministrations again on your shoulder, this time focusing his efforts on the bitemarks to your front.

He was so close, his head against yours, his long hair flowing along your arm. He smelled of earthy mountain pines and mahogany, fresh lavender and morning dew.

You knew you loved Kurama with all of your heart, but you couldn’t only love him as a human, as Shuichi — that would be conditional love, and the depth of your devotion was beyond that. You had never been more sure about anything in your life.

Maybe that was why Yoko Kurama intimidated you so much. You didn’t know how to love him in a language he understood. Saying “I love you” didn’t seem to be enough for a demon who lived for thousands of years and struck fear in the hearts of his own brethren. Words probably seemed empty.

Yoko Kurama loved you by literally licking your wounds, by rushing to your side when you needed protection, by accepting the terms that would bind him here to Xanadu as a servant. That was how he expressed his affection. Clearly, he wasn’t one for tender words and bouquets of flowers, but such material things didn’t have to matter to you, either.

You needed to love Yoko Kurama in the manner he wanted, needed to be loved. That manner, you wagered, started from a place of understanding and acceptance.

“Kurama,” you said. “Do you still prefer I call you that? Or do you like Yoko better?”

He looked up, making full eye contact with you — you felt lost in the vibrant gold. “Kurama is fine, if it provides consistency for you,” he said, sitting up and wiping the excess blood from his mouth. “Candidly, it was my enemies who knew me as Yoko. Since fusing my demon soul with that of a human, I’ve shed that name, left it behind.”

“I see. You must have had a lot of enemies, then.” Your shoulder was feeling better already, the healing properties in his saliva at work, creating a tingling sensation. “Thank you,” you said. “I think I prefer this to stitches.”

“I imagine you would.” As he sat next do you, one leg tucked beneath his folded knee, he reminded you of your Kurama. They had the same posture, even though Yoko was far taller.
You reached up, deciding to take a leap of faith, to touch his face, fingertips running along his pale skin. Your hand brushed against his silver locks, and if you thought Shuichi’s hair felt like silk, then Yoko’s felt like fine gossamers of spun angel feathers — they were light to the touch, cool, and softer than you could ever imagine.

“May I?” you said, fingers approaching his ears.

His cold eyes softened, if only for a moment, and he nodded.

You touched his ear, gingerly at first, caressing in the direction the fur grew. “It’s like velvet,” you said, letting your hand run along the stiff cartilage. It was not unlike the pointed ears of dogs you have petted in your lifetime, though this one was attached to a very different beast.

He caught your wrist, and you noted how large his hand was compared to yours. “And what,” he said, “might I have in exchange for sating your curiosity?” His eyes never left yours.

“What do you want from me?” you whispered, a shiver running down your spine.

Yoko came close, releasing your wrist, and resting his hand on your hip bone, fingers dipping beneath your waistline. He kissed you, the taste of his lips far more mild than what you were expecting. “I will show you,” he said, his voice low and sultry. “Wounds aren’t the only thing I can tend to.”

You couldn’t find your words, noticing how striking his gaze was. His eyes were not a bright sunny yellow, nor were they a gleaming bronze. They were the true definition of gold, vividly intuitive, molten and auric pools of intensity swirling within them. Though they were so different than Shuichi’s flawless and splendid evergreen, you noticed his spirit within them — and that was the same. Yoko was still your Kurama.

Feeling at ease, you relented, leaning in to return the kiss. You touched him, your hands on his chest. The cloth of his tunic was smooth to the touch, falling in graceful folds over his shoulders. Although he was svelte like Shuichi, he was overall larger in build, his shoulders broader, muscles more defined. This was the body of a demon, raw power rippling in every fiber and sinew.

He wasted no time in tugging off the remainder of your tattered shirt from your arms. His lips were at the base of your jawline, hand on the side of your face, bringing you closer with each kiss to your neck.

You noticed he was not quite as gentle as your Kurama, his touch firm, desirous, perhaps even a bit demanding…

But that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

In fact, you found it arousing.

Your heart beat in your chest as you inhaled sharply, taking him in. There was something wild and risqué about giving yourself to a demon — it seemed almost taboo. You were certain that if your family and friends discovered the existence of demons, they would be concerned for you and what you were about to do.

“Maybe I should be worried, too,” you thought, but your doubts dissipated, little by little, every time he touched you, kissed you, lips and hands running over your skin.

To his credit, Yoko was careful around your wounded shoulder, avoiding that area entirely for his ministrations. His tongue ran along your neck in a particularly sensuous motion, drawn out to
tantalize you, kindling your imagination for what was to come.

He seemed to detect your body’s excitement, nipping at your skin, his canines pressed against your neck. He paused for a moment, as if deep in thought, but pulled away to look at you, your back pressed against the pillows. A small, mischievous smile tugged at his lips, and for the first time, you saw his resemblance to the sly fox.

With a flick of his fingers, he removed your bra to reveal your bare chest. He ran a hand along the contour of your breast — his body temperature was colder than that of a human, and your nipples hardened immediately in response.

“What do we have here?” he said, his thumb grazing one of the nipples in a feather-light touch. “You seem excited to see me.”

You could only stare at him, the saliva collecting in your mouth.

Yoko’s hands wandered lower, fingers dragging along your abdomen as he found your waistline. He started on your pants, undoing the sash and tossing it aside, before removing the clothing entirely, underwear and all. “Let’s see what gems we might find here,” he said as he repositioned himself, pulling away from you. He settled between your legs, spreading them, his silk hair spilling over your thighs as he kissed the sensitive skin, tongue gliding toward your core.

You let out a small cry as he slipped two fingers inside of you, his digits cold compared to the warmth of your inner walls. You were already wet, allowing for an easeful penetration, though his sudden entry surprised you.

He curled his fingers upward as he began to thrust with his hand, ensuring friction along the receptive nerves inside of you.

You tried to suppress another cry, but Yoko stopped, scrutinizing you from between your legs. “No,” he said, firmly. “I want to hear every sound. Am I understood?”

You nodded, his demand not lost on you — it was sexy, the way he stipulated his own enjoyment of your reaction.

Only with your agreement to his terms did he continue, eliciting moan after moan from your throat.

Your head was rolled back against the pillows, relishing his attention, when you felt another sensation, this time on your clit. You saw his face buried in your crotch, his tongue dipping into your folds, rubbing mercilessly against the bundle of nerves that elicited waves of pleasure in your lower region.

He was skillful, teasing and drawing out each and every sound. If it was your moans he wanted to hear, he earned every one.

You were certain this lasted for at least several minutes, the flawless pacing of his thrusting fingers and dexterous tongue enough to send you over the edge. A particularly throaty cry escaped you, and it was at that point when he stopped.

“You enjoy that, don’t you?” he said as he pulled away, kissing your inner thigh, golden eyes meeting yours in a gaze of seduction. “Come undress me, and perhaps I’ll let you come.”

Obediently, you closed your legs, crawling over to him. You were certain your wounds had not yet fully healed, but the pain was long gone — whether from Yoko’s treatment or your own newfound rush of adrenaline, you weren’t sure.
Your hands found the knot in the sash around his waist, and you began to undo it in much the same manner as he had applied to yours. You pulled his long tunic over his head, feeling the smooth skin of his arms, all the while being watched by him as though he were evaluating your every move. Then, the tunic completely gone, you were met with a sculpted chest and abdomen, each muscle pronounced beneath his pale skin.

It was his erection that caught you off guard, already bulging in his pants. It should not have surprised you, given how large his overall frame was, but it intimidated you a little, warmth rushing into your cheeks.

Yoko seemed amused, tilting your chin up to study your reaction. “Are you afraid?” he said in much the same tone he used earlier.

“No,” you said, putting on a brave face. You didn’t want him to think you were frightened; you didn’t want to deter or hurt him.

“I can smell when you’re lying.”

Your blush only deepened. “That’s not even possible.”

“Try me,” he said, his grasp beneath your chin stiffening, his thumb running across your bottom lip. “I know when you’re aroused, when you’re upset, when you’re embarrassed. There’s a pheromone for every classification of emotion. I can precisely identify your apprehension, so there’s little use in denying it. But” — he leaned in close, so close that his nose nearly touched yours — “perhaps a bit of uncertainty will allow you to savor the moment more.”

You swallowed, your desire for him surging — you wanted him inside of you, filling every inch, every space. If his sense of smell really was as sensitive as he claimed, he must have sensed a new swell of pheromones flowing from you.

Yoko grinned, your suspicions confirmed. “Good girl,” he said, voice deep and provocative, guiding your hands back to his waist.

You undid his pants, fully undressing him, his manhood springing as it cleared the waistline. You watched it, noting its length and girth, as you lowered the article of clothing along his thighs. It was then that he caught you by the hips, hands grasping you, the first mark of pure lust as his eyes gleamed. Yoko twisted, settling on the bed, his back against the pillows. He had kicked off his pants and positioned you above him, legs on either side of his body, slowly lowering you onto him.

You were slick with fluids, thanks to his thorough treatment earlier, and there was no resistance as he slid inside, inch by inch. He filled you, stretching your inner walls with his manhood, delving deeper than ever before. Although he was a considerable size, he made you feel perfectly full, any previous apprehension melting away. It was comfortable and tantalizing, the way he fit into you.

You rested on his thighs as he kissed you, his mouth claiming yours. His tongue slid across your lips and into your mouth, beckoning you to join him. He touched you, hands wandering from your waist up to your breasts and to your neck and face. You felt the slight chill of his skin wherever his fingertips ventured, sending a tingle down your spine. A soft, impassioned moan escaped your lips as you tangled your fingers into his hair, brushing against his fox ears.

Yoko’s grasp on you tightened, as he clutched your hips and bottom, giving you a slight lift. He began to thrust into you from below. It seemed effortless for him, the strength in his arms and core obvious. Gravity did most of the work otherwise as he bucked his hips upward, penetrating you
with every deliberate motion.

You cried out as you accepted him with each bounce, allowing him to burrow further inside. He had set a tempo, a pace both quick and precise, stroking your walls with a flawless amount of friction. Each thrust caused you to clench around him, the beginnings of an orgasm building traction with each desperate breath you took.

You felt like you were about to reach a climax, a breaking point, when he ceased his thrusts. Disappointed, you looked to him, nearly falling into his chest, wondering why he had stopped when you were so close.

He leaned forward, pressing against your sternum, gently pushing you backward. He was suddenly on top of you, arms on either side, legs between yours. His long locks drifted down, framing his face elegantly, as he studied you, eyes glistening with wanton desire. He lifted your leg at the knee, twisting your lower half to the opposite side as he penetrated you from behind, filling you once again with his throbbing erection. Your other leg was left between his. In this new position, he lowered himself to you, kissing the side of your temple.

“You’re mine,” he whispered, his possessive declaration eliciting a whimper from you. He then thrusted into you with vigorous abandon as though he was staking his claim.

You felt fuller than you thought possible, your walls engulfing his manhood with each forward motion. His thrusts had a forceful momentum to them, hips bucking against your backside with precision and speed. You felt his raw power, the wild demon coming forth to satisfy his own carnal urges. Still, he tempered it in an obvious attempt to not hurt you — you were sure he could if he did not restrain himself.

Yoko drove into you until he pushed you over the edge, a wave of hot ecstasy washing over you. Your inner walls clenched around him, spasming in a chaotic rhythm, as he continued to thrust.

“That’s right,” he practically purred, squeezing your breast. “Come for me.”

You cried out, his unrelenting pace carrying you onward, until you weren't sure if you could handle the intensity any longer. Finally, he came, quietly spilling into you, slowing his pace. He kissed you on the mouth as he exited, pulling you atop his chest.

You collapsed on top of him, breathlessly, cradled in his arms. This sexual experience was profound and fierce, testing new boundaries, but you were content to continue exploring. You lay there, no words exchanged between you, until you noticed something.

“I can't hear your heartbeat,” you said, looking up at him. Listening to the familiar and comforting pulse of Kurama’s heart was something you found soothing.

The expression on his face was a tender one, as soft as a demon’s could be. “Demon hearts don’t beat,” he said. “Beating hearts are not for the supernatural.”

“Oh. That's a shame.”

“Why is that?”

“Humans associate a beating heart with love and affection.” You realized what you just said — Yoko couldn’t help it if he did not have a beating heart. “It's no big deal, though. Forget I said anything.” You returned to his chest, settling in again.
There was a brief lull in the conversation.

“Then,” Yoko said, breaking the silence, “assume my heart beats in a more figurative nature.”

You could not resist a satisfied sigh. It seemed that all you needed to thaw his demon heart was a steamy session in bed.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

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**Apprehension**

**Chapter Summary**

Despite Kurama's apprehensions, you share a sweet moment together.

And a certain someone finally decides to appear...

**Chapter Notes**

OH YES. I've received my first piece of fanart for this fic: [The Mirage Hourglass by SethSoraSkyie](https://example.com) I love the gorgeous purple sand -- it's just as I imagined! Thank you! You're the best. ^_^

Now, after our last steamy moment with Yoko, I'm reeling it back in. Sorry, I like emotional roller coasters. :D Don't hate me.

As a reminder, my January raffle is closing this Friday, so if you've left me a comment in the month of January, please feel free to enter if you haven't already!

Ah, thank you to those who provided me feedback last time: Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Mei Mei, Inquisitive, FannibalToast, Kupid, TK091, CrossYourTeez, and Queenasunasama. I'm glad ya'll enjoyed it! ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kurama returned, having sojourned through his spiritual subconscious. It had taken a while for Yoko to finally retreat, bringing his human form back to the forefront.

_____ was fast asleep, naked, head resting on his chest. Their sexual exploits left her emotionally drained and physically spent.

He touched her head, tenderly smoothing some hair from her face — her natural beauty never ceased to make him breathless.

Although Kurama was glad that she enjoyed herself with Yoko, there was an apprehension that he couldn’t quite suppress. He wouldn’t hurt her, neither as a human, nor as a demon. His love for her did not wane, not even when he was Yoko Kurama. He was sure of it.

Still, Yoko was wild, his demon heart unable to be tamed. He was the gale, the chill of mist over the mountains, the relentless thunder beneath the shapeless storm. He knew no limits, forging his own path in whatever direction he so chose. He had no weaknesses — he turned everything into strengths.

No, he had one weakness.

_____ was his weakness.
And his strength.

But Yoko was not one to appreciate the strength she would bring him. He valued raw power, tactical brilliance, cognitive tenacity — not this thing called love.

That was what Kurama feared. Of course Yoko loved her, but his understanding of love was flawed — at least, by Kurama’s standards, knowing what he did now, having lived his life as a human. A demon male’s priority was to protect his mate, preserve her physical well being, keep other demons away. If he was generous, he would please her in bed.

However, _____ was not a sheep to be guarded from the wolves. Even cooping her in a pen for the rest of her life under his watchful eye would not fulfill her very human need to be held and cherished. She required more than what Yoko was able to offer her.

This was Yoko’s realm, Demon World. _____ did not belong here. She belonged in Living World with her family and friends, with her fellow humans who could appreciate her kindness and sensibilities. It was dangerous for her here, and even if Yoko could protect her, she would not be happy. Nurturing this side of their relationship was objectively not in her best interest.

Previously, changing between his human and demon forms was easy — now, it was becoming more difficult to revert back to Shuichi.

This was not his first time noticing it. He thought it might have been a side effect of the bloodpact, and as he dreaded, the influence to remain a demon was now stronger. It seemed the more time he spent as Yoko Kurama, the more his spirit tended toward his demon origins. The Makai called to him.

He had no intentions of remaining as Yoko through their recent love-making session. But his demon self was determined, an adamancy that surprised him. He told _____ on many occasions that Kurama, Shuichi, and Yoko Kurama were one and the same. They were a single soul, bound to one body, with the same stream of consciousness — only their perspectives were different.

But Kurama wasn’t so sure anymore. He wanted to have a passionate moment with his beloved, but Yoko Kurama wanted her specifically as a demon. Kurama had never felt such a strong urge from his demon counterpart after having become human. It was foreign, and the uncertainty made him apprehensive.

He would have to manage his personalities more resolutely.

He felt content from their intimacy, his body relaxed, and his affections for her kindled. He held her, relishing the smooth pace of her breathing, the rise and fall of her chest atop his. While Kurama remembered every moment of their love-making, the perspective of this memory was disparate.

He wasn’t sure how to describe it. His personalities were separate — vastly different, in fact — but they never truly opposed each other. There were times when they were conflicted in intention, ambition, and method, but that was why Kurama surfaced to mediate both the ruthless Yoko and the gentle Shuichi.

Just now, Yoko’s insistence in remaining the prevalent identity was an unfounded experience. Kurama accepted himself as who he was — a wise and powerful demon who took refuge in a human body by fusing his soul with that of a boy. When he reverted back to his demon form, even with the demon influence, he was in full control. He made the choices.
When he fought Shigure during the first Demon World Unification Tournament, he suppressed Yoko, not without effort, but any resistance he felt was mutual in that his life was in immediate danger. In the end, he was able to bring his human form to the forefront because he wanted to be Kurama, to live his life in the body in which he had come to learn the virtues of love and devotion. While there was no deserting his demon past, nor the influence of Yoko, he wanted the freedom to choose.

That was why he found Yoko’s persistence in sharing a bed with _____ so concerning.

Was this the bloodpact’s ancient and dark magic at work?

Kurama slowly exhaled. Only time would tell, and until then, he would have to be cautious.

You stirred from a comfortable sleep, giving a small yawn as remembered where you were and the events of this morning before you had drifted off. You peered upward, head still resting on his chest, met with a familiar, tender gaze of deep green.

“Hello, my love,” Kurama said, his thick eyelashes prevalent as he tilted his head to the side innocently.

“Hi,” you said, heat creeping into your cheeks.

“Why are you blushing?” he said, a soft tease in his voice.

“I…” You buried your face in his chest.

“You know.”

He chuckled. “Your shoulder seems to have healed quite nicely. If we let you rest the remainder of the day, you may be ready to train again tomorrow.”

You nodded, snuggling up close, pulling your knee up along his bare thigh. “You said earlier that Yoko Kurama would be taking over with the training.”

“Mm.” He hummed in affirmation. “It’s not ideal, but it’s what Yul wants.”

“It’ll be fine,” you said, sensing his apprehension.

“It seems you enjoyed your time with my demon self. You’re more comfortable around me as Yoko?”

You laughed sheepishly. “Well, that’s one way to put it.”

Kurama gave you a gentle, encouraging squeeze. “How else would you put it?”

“I think the main reason why I found Yoko intimidating was because I didn’t know how to communicate with him. I know that sounds silly because he is you, but you’re so different.” You took a breath. “I feel like I made a connection somehow, even though it wasn’t necessarily with words. I want you to know that your being demon or human is irrelevant — I love all of you.”

“Is that your motivation?” he said, stroking your hair. “I certainly feel it.” He kissed your head, his lips lingering for a few moments.

“Admittedly, I’m glad you’re back to being your human self. Yoko is cold — I mean, temperature-wise. It’s far nicer cuddling you.”

He chuckled, shifting so that he rolled onto his side, moving you onto yours — you were face-to-
face with one another. His hand was on your cheek and neck, fingers warm against your skin; his eyes glimmered in the beautiful shade of evergreen to which you had grown so accustomed. “Years ago, I made the choice to remain in the Living World with my mother — as the human Shuichi,” he said. “That is still my choice, affirmed after having met you. Even after all of this, I know no other truth. I love you, _____. I could marry you.”

His final sentence caught you off-guard, breathless and still. “Kurama…” Finally, you found your words, and you touched the hand on your face. “Maybe we worry about that after we make it home, then?”

“We’ll get there,” he said, leaning his forehead into yours. “I swear to you, _____."

“I know we will; I believe you.”

He kissed you, his lips tenderly brushing against yours. “So tell me something” — he whispered in your ear — “how do you enjoy playing the submissive role in bed?”

“Kurama,” you said, his name coming out as more of a whine than anything.

He had an expression of mischievous amusement that made you think, for a moment, you were ready to engage in another intimate moment with him. However, all that changed when his eyes narrowed, a flash of guarded alarm in them, and he turned around to look at the nightstand. He tossed a sheet at you, covering your naked body as he slipped on a robe in one quick motion.

“Is that the egg?” you said.

“You felt it as well?” Kurama’s gaze was fixed on the spirit beast egg.

It had not moved, glowed, or otherwise changed in any physically observable way, but you felt a pulse of energy swelling from it. You slipped off the bed, pulling the sheet over your shoulders. Your feet touched the floor, and you walked over to the nightstand. “Do you think it’s ready to hatch?” you asked.

“Touch it,” Kurama said. “If anything will prompt it to break out, it would be your energy.”

You nodded, taking a short breath as you reached for the egg. Even as you brought your hand closer, you felt the energy of your spirit beast becoming stronger. It was as though your very presence gave it incentive, acknowledged its purpose. Your fingertips touched the shell of the egg — it was warm, welcoming, and it began to glow. The light grew brighter and brighter until you had to shut your eyes and look away.

When you opened them again, the egg was gone. You looked from the nightstand to the bed, turning around the room. “Where did it go?” you said, half to yourself, half to Kurama.

Kurama nodded at you knowingly. “It’s hiding under your sheet,” he said.

“Don’t tell me — you can smell it.”

He responded with a small smile.

You slowly lifted the cloth to reveal your feet… along with four delicate paws. “Come out,” you said in an encouraging tone of voice. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

It took only a moment, and from the sheet came a creature, both adorable and majestic. The sheen of its fur was a pale blue, not quite white, the content of it soft and plush. Its ears were large and
pointed, seeming far too large for its narrow face, while its expressive eyes were a vivid honey. Four tails, flowing in silken fur touched the ground, their tips a stark white. All in all, it looked like an exotic fox, small enough to fit in your arms.

“Oh, my,” you said, lowering yourself to the ground. “You’re adorable.”

“I wasn’t expecting your spirit beast to hatch so soon,” Kurama said. “This certainly changes your training curriculum.”

“‘The first thing you think about is my training? Do you see how cute she is?”

“She? How do you know her gender?”

“Ah, I finally know something you don’t.”

“Well, if you want to gloat about it.”

“Sorry. I guess you’re never one to rub it in my face when you know something I don’t.” You laughed. “I don’t know how I know, actually. It’s just a feeling.”

“I’d trust your instincts,” Kurama said. “It’s what keeps you alive when your cunning fails you.”

The spirit beast sat down on its haunches, seemingly taking everything in. She finally made eye contact with you, and you saw intelligence flicker within them. You felt a presence probe at you inside your mind, a sensation like none you had ever experienced. “____... ____? Can you hear me, ____?”

The surprise on your face must have given you away.

“What’s wrong?” Kurama said.

“I... I hear her in my head.”

“Telepathy. Your spirit beast is an advanced species. Puu was never able to communicate with us in such a manner.”

“Ah, how rude of me.” This time, it seemed Kurama heard her, too. “My name is Nairu. And you’re right, Kurama. I am further along in my development than a newly born spirit beast. Even though I am new to _____, I have been alive for thousands of years, much like you, even though I took a very different form back then when I belonged to Yul.”

“And how do we know we can trust you?” Kurama said. “You admit to being Yul’s spirit beast for some time. You served him for many years. I saw firsthand what havoc and destruction you wrought upon the land, even whole civilizations. You were a beast by every definition.”

Nairu shut her eyes. “Those days are long behind me. As you know, a spirit beast feeds off of a human’s spirit energy. We may have been separated, but I have been attached to _____ since the moment she was born. _____ is clearly different than Yul, their spirit energies vastly disparate. I am a reflection of the energy I consume, and even if the core of my soul is the same as it always was, my perspective is new and altered. If you consider it, you and I are not so different, Kurama; our journeys are quite similar.”

“I’m just glad you’re finally here, Nairu,” you said. “It’s so good to meet you.” Truthfully, you wanted to reach out and run your hands along her lithe body and in her fur, but you didn’t know if that would be considered disrespectful to a creature so obviously intelligent.
A ripple touched your mind — she was laughing, like the gentle babbling of a brook. “You may touch me, if you’d like,” she said. Nairu stepped toward you, rubbing the side of her body along your leg, much like a cat would.

You were so pleased. “From what I’ve heard you used to be terrifying. How did you choose this form?”

“I did not choose it. You did.”

“Me?” You did not remember having a choice.

“I am a reflection of you, aren’t I? Inadvertently or not, you shaped every piece of me.” She settled on her stomach, licking at her paw as any dog or cat would. “I can think of at least one reason why I would resemble a fox.”

You stole a glance at Kurama, an almost embarrassed expression on your face.

He gave a small, contented sigh, returning the gaze. “I suppose this is the most genuine compliment I’ve ever received.”

“It damn well is, fox,” Nairu said, off-handedly. “Now that I’m here, we can continue _____’s training.”

“You sound like you have an opinion,” Kurama said.

“I do.” She ceased her grooming for a moment. “I’ve been feeding off of every drop of your energy, ____. I know how anxious fighting makes you. It’s simply not something that you’re used to, and I’m not sure what kind of a dent we’re going to make in that feeling over the next two and a half months.”

She was right. Fighting did make you feel nervous. “Then what do you propose?” you said.

“Eliminate offense entirely. Leave that to me. You need to focus on your defenses. You have better potential as a conservative fighter. Hone your spirit energy and use it to build barriers or armor. If you can protect yourself in battle, I can do the rest.”

“You seem confident,” Kurama said, his comment subtly pointed.

“I may be a product of _____’s nonviolent disposition, but, rest assured, I can fight. I’ve had over a thousand years of contemplation in that egg, sifting through the energies of her ancestors. I’ve honed my skills, as well, and I remember what it is to battle — in case you’ve forgotten, I was Yul’s war machine. I toppled whole cities then — I can easily route a few demons in the ring.”

Kurama did not seem to appreciate her response. “Even Yul?”

Nairu quieted. “Yul is a different monster. I doubt many demons can last a minute in the ring with him. Even you, Kurama, at your strongest would be greatly challenged.”

“Oh, I’d be defeated,” he said. “Swiftly, if it pleased him. Perhaps slowly, if he were in the mood.”

“Yes,” Nairu mused, her voice like a gentle purr. “I suppose you already knew that. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be in this situation. Very well, then. We go back to the drawing board. But first” — she hopped onto the vanity, nestling herself among the towel where her egg once rested every night — “a nap.”
Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
You shut the door behind you, leaving Nairu to her afternoon nap. “What do we do now?” you asked, looking to Kurama, as you finished putting on a sweater.

“We wonder just how blessed I am to have you.”

“Oh, stop it.”

“I’m serious.” He pulled you close, hands on your waist. “I wasn’t sure what form Nairu would take, but a fox of all things? I’m touched.”

“You know, I liked foxes before I met you,” you said, giving him a coy glance.

He chuckled, leaning in to kiss your forehead. “Of course you did.”

You rested your head against his chest and took a deep breath, the very scent of him a great comfort to you. “I didn’t know she would take that form either. In fact, I wasn’t aware she would look any different for me than she did for Yul.”

“Spirit beasts are entirely shaped by the spirit energy they feed upon — appearance, personality, ability. That doesn’t mean they are identical to you, merely a reflection of your soul. I imagine you will learn much about yourself from Nairu.”
“Kurama?” you said, glancing at him. “Were you serious when you asked Nairu if we could trust her?”

“It’s hard to say. I doubt she would betray you of her own volition, but Yul may have other forces at work. He is a manipulator, and I wonder if he truly plans on relying on you during the tournament. No doubt, Nairu’s energy has already alerted him to her presence — I’m certain we’ll hear from him soon.”

“I’m not sure I can do anything but trust Nairu,” you admitted. “I know that sounds ridiculous, but in this very short time, she already feels like a part of me. When she speaks, it’s not just words I hear. It’s almost like I feel her emotions, and I know somehow she feels mine.”

“That’s the norm for spirit beasts and their humans,” Kurama said. “There’s no method by which we can hide anything from her. You are bound in spirit. Let us hope Yul won’t go to extreme measures to recover his long-lost spirit beast.”

“How is that even possible?”

“If you recall, when he presented the egg to you, he said that if you die, Nairu dies with you. However, you may voluntarily choose to sever your bond with her. This forces her to return to her egg until she finds another being with enough spirit energy to feed upon.”

“So he wants me to sever my bond with Nairu?”

“Perhaps. But it’s not so simple. She may not choose to bond with him again — in fact, I would imagine it’s far less likely that she would. After spending time with you, I’m not so sure she’d prefer to return to a life beneath an iron fist, as a war machine.”

You pursed your lips as you led Kurama to the sofa, taking a seat. “He’s probably expecting me to comply. I mean, with you here… I don’t think I could do anything but.”

Kurama sighed. “_____, I don’t want you to make any decisions with concern for my safety. I’ll be fine.”

“You say that, and that’s exactly what I’d expect you to say,” you started, “but I don’t believe you.”

“Well, you always were a keen one.”

“Oh, so you admit to lying to me. I thought we were past that?”

“I don’t want you to worry, is all.” He had a slight look of sheepishness on his face.

“I know.” You touched his hand. “But I do. I love you — of course, I’m going to worry about you. I was worried when that awful toad demon dragged you into the water, and I was worried when you fought Oktai. I’m going to be worried. I can’t help it.”

“I understand.” His fingers touched yours, warm against your skin, and he brought your hand to his lips. “I worry, too, ______. When I caught scent of your blood this morning on the way to the forest, Yoko came forth without any hesitation.”

“I’m sorry,” you said. “Arban and I were talking, and I thought the surrounding forests would be safe.”

“Nowhere in Demon World is safe for a human. I’ve no doubt Arban did his best to protect you,
but fighting multiple enemies while protecting someone is challenging at best.”

You nodded slowly.

“What were you discussing that required such privacy?”

“Apparently, Arban and Eri were in love,” you said, still moved by the poignant story of their relationship. “He loved my ancestral mother. That’s why he’s been with me for so long — he’s protected me for her.”

Kurama needed no other details. He wrapped an arm around your shoulders, pulling you close. “He is devoted to you — of that, I’m sure. But take care next time you wander off.”

“You’d prefer it if you came with me instead.”

“Well,” he said with a small exhale of amusement, “I enjoy my time with you. Is it so wrong for a man to wish to be with his love?” He nuzzled his face in your neck.

His gesture tickled your skin, and you giggled, trying to pull away.

“Hm? Trying to escape, are you?” Kurama reached for your sides, fingers adroitly nudging into your waist.

You laughed, your attempts at prying his arms off you pitiful, and you keeled over onto the sofa to create distance. He only followed after you, even fighting and circumventing your legs as you kicked at him to protect yourself from his tickle offensive.

He was on top of you, knees on either side of your hips, mirthful flirtation in his eyes, when he ceased. He leaned close to kiss you, a heartfelt offering of his affections. “I love you,” he said, his hair falling graceful locks past his handsome face.

“I love you, too,” you said, “so I suppose I’ll forgive you for assaulting me.”

“Assaulting you? You kicked me.”

“In self-defense! You were tickling me!”

“You know, ______, you’re rather feisty when you feel threatened. Perhaps I shouldn’t worry about you, after all.”

You rolled your eyes. “You’re ridiculous, Kurama.”

“So she says,” he said, kissing your fingers. “But I’m yours.”

“I do have a question for you.”

“Yes?”

“Can you really smell when I’m lying?”

Kurama gave you a playful tilt of his head. “I don’t need my sense of smell to detect when you’re lying — you’re a terrible liar.”

You glanced to the side. “I didn’t think I was quite that bad.”

“Trust me — it’s no loss,” he said, shifting off the couch and offering you a hand. “I appreciate
how honest you are with me.”

You accepted his hand, pulling yourself into a sitting position again. “It’s the mark of a healthy relationship, isn’t it?”

“Mm.” He stared at the coffee table, a contemplative gaze.

“What are you thinking about?” you asked, leaning against his shoulder.

He sighed gently, a look of mild sadness in his eyes. “Do you remember our conversation when I took you to the Star of Inoji? You asked me what I wanted out of our relationship.”


“I knew you would,” Kurama said. “I only wish I could offer you the same.”

“What are you talking about?” You placed a hand on his knee, giving it a squeeze. “I’ve had the opportunity to learn about the man I love in a way that others can’t even begin to fathom. I get to see a side of you that I don’t think I would have been able to see had we remained as a ‘normal’ couple in Living World. And” — you turned his face to look at you, resting your hand on his cheek — “I now know exactly how much you love me. I understand and appreciate the sacrifices you’ve made to ensure my safety. I can’t ask for more in a relationship.”

He smiled softly. “Remind me: How is it that I’m so blessed to have you?”

“I’ll say what I said before,” you whispered. “Stop it.” You placed your index finger on his lips to quiet him, leaning in for a kiss.

Kurama responded, his hands finding your hips as he pulled you into his lap. He returned your kiss without a word, indulging your request for a peaceful, tender moment.

It didn’t last long, however, as a bold knock sounded at the door.

“Looks like you’re right,” you said, pulling away. “Yul knows.”

Kurama didn’t say anything as he helped you off his lap.

Qara had already dropped whatever she was doing, making her way past the sitting area to open the door. “Master Oktai,” she greeted with bow of her head.

Oktai stepped inside, staff in hand. “Ah, my lady,” he said when he saw you. “Good afternoon. Your spirit beast has hatched from what I hear.”

“Good morning,” you said. “How did Yul know? We certainly haven’t told him.”

“You can’t hide anything from Yulkhan,” Oktai said. “He is familiar with the burst of energy that comes from spirit beast births and sent for me as soon as he felt it. I came straightaway to welcome it. Where is the beast, if I may ask?”

“She’s still in the bedroom. She wanted to take a nap after—” You were cut off when you felt a jolt in your mind.

“Say nothing more about me,” Nairu said. “We have an advantage in confidence.”

“After she hatched,” Kurama finished for you. Clearly, he received her message as well. “She came in a burst of light, and she settled in almost immediately. I assume the burst of energy to release
herself from the egg exhausted her.”

“Shame,” Oktai said. “Yulkhan was wishing to see her.”

“We can wake her,” Kurama said.

“No, no, that won’t be necessary. I’ll report back to Yulkhan and let him know that the spirit beast is resting. He’ll want her to keep her strength. I’ll come back later this evening to bring you to him for an introduction.”

You nodded. “All right. I’ll wait for you.” Until then, you would have to discuss a strategy with Nairu and Kurama.

As Oktai left, you saw Qara shut the door, and you sighed in relief, returning to your chambers, Kurama following close behind.

Nairu stretched, paws in front, her four tails flourishing in the air as she yawned, revealing a row of sharp canines. “I’m surprised he was able to detect my energy,” she said. “It’s different than how it once was.”

“Likely, it’s because he detected a burst of energy that he didn’t recognize,” Kurama explained. “You caused quite a disturbance when you arrived.”

“You’re right.” Nairu sat up in a lady-like manner, paws poised gracefully in front. “Well, it doesn’t look like I’m getting my afternoon nap, but that’s fine. This gives us time for some much-needed discussion.”

You sat yourself on the bed, facing her. “I would hope so, especially if I’m the one who has to disclose everything. Kurama just confirmed that I’m a terrible liar, so we’re going to need an airtight explanation.”

“That’s easily done.”

“What do you have in mind?” Kurama said.

“We play dumb.”

“What?” you said. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s a good strategy,” he said, “if only we can keep up the charade. Yul seems to be under the impression that Nairu is still tied to him in some way. Whether she is or not is to be determined, but if she bears no memory of him and acts like an adolescent spirit beast, perhaps he’ll begin to realize that she is quite different than how she used to be — she’s no longer a weapon to be used in the upcoming tournament.”

“You would like that idea, Kurama. You don’t even want me to participate in the tournament.”

“Why wouldn’t I? You kick like a fiend.”

“Are you still sore about that?”

“If by sore, you mean literally sore from you kicking me, then yes.”

You laughed, despite the gravity of the situation. When you saw Nairu’s unimpressed expression, you covered your mouth and apologized, letting out the last of your giggles. “Sorry, ignore him. He’s being ridiculous and absolutely worthy of that look on your face.”
Nairu didn’t smile, but her eyes were curious. “You have an interesting relationship,” she said. “I know there is a lot of love between you two — that is what inspired me to finally come out of my egg. But you express your feelings for each other in such an interesting way. I’ve never seen lovers interact as you do.”

“Ah,” Kurama said, “I assume you’re referring to how she kicks me.”

“You know what, Kurama?” you started. “I really kind of do want to kick you now.”

He was holding back his laughter, like a child who had just been half-heartedly scolded. “I’m sorry,” he said to Nairu. “I enjoy teasing her. As I was saying, your thoughts are grounded. As far as Yul is concerned, these conversations never happened. You are reborn, having no memory of your previous life.”

“Very good.” She looked to you. “All you have to do, _____, is tell Yul that I was born. I’m still napping. I do not know how to communicate with you, and you’ve learned nothing about me.”

“Okay,” you said, “and what do we do behind closed doors?”

“We train. If I remember correctly, Yul wishes Yoko Kurama to train you. You must keep up the facade. Become stronger, but with a focus on your defenses.”

“There is one hurdle,” Kurama said.

“And what is that, fox?”

“Yul has also requested that Oktai join us.”

“Oh my. That does complicate matters.” She hopped from the vanity onto the floor, pacing toward the bed. “He is Yul’s advisor?”

“That’s right,” you said. “His most trusted one. Oktai is loyal to him.”

Kurama took a breath. “He is… but I’ve learned a few important details about him that may shift his loyalties.” His eyes rested on you. “In this delicate situation, you of all people, _____, may be able to tip the scales.”

“What do you mean?”

He explained to you his conversation with Oktai this morning, how he was a victim of Yul’s conquest, forced into servitude at a young age. “He wouldn’t divulge any specifics. He doesn’t trust me.”

“You want me to find that information?”

“I doubt anyone else can.”

You nodded. “I can do that. I don’t know how receptive he’ll be, but I’ll try.”

“Out of curiosity, what do you plan on doing assuming you manage Oktai’s cooperation?” Nairu asked as she hopped up on the bed next to you. “Do you think he’ll have the courage to turn against Yul?”

“Possibly,” Kurama said. “Best case, we have an ally; worst case, we don’t have another enemy.”

“Does Yul have any weaknesses you may know of, Nairu?” you said.
“Yes. He may be powerful, but he is not immortal. Yul is prideful, perhaps to the point of delusion. Yet, he doesn’t truly trust anyone. He lies awake at night, mumbling tales of paranoia and a million hypothetical scenarios.”

“That makes his consorts the best sources of information.” Kurama looked pensive.

“That’s right. You can learn much from a man through his mistress. In this case, find the favorites among Yul’s harem, but be careful — I doubt loosening their tongues is an easy task. Yul does not take kindly to traitors.”

“I mean, to be fair, I wouldn’t either,” you said.

“But you don’t torture and kill those who betray you.” Nairu settled next to you, her body parallel with your thighs. She glanced at Kurama. “Him, I’m not so sure about.”

“Threats must be eradicated quickly in Demon World,” Kurama said. “You have to know whom you can trust — betrayal never comes from your enemies.”

It was fascinating hearing Kurama talk, the demon influence clear in his words now. And somehow, despite the coldness in his words, you weren’t afraid of him. “We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst,” you said, initiating the game reserved only for the both of you.

“C. S. Lewis,” he said, “a worthy citation.”

You looked to Kurama, giving him a small smile. This was the man you loved — he was intelligent, affectionate, and mischievous, all facets of him that perhaps only you had the unique opportunity to explore.

It was true that you were in a sticky situation, risks abound, but you weren’t going to let him face Yul alone. Now that Nairu was here, you would have the strength to fight, too.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

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**Wager**

Chapter Summary

Yul meets your spirit beast, and you have an interesting conversation with Oktai.

Chapter Notes

Wow, I had so many comments last chapter! :D I am so giddy! <3 Ya'll are the absolute best! Seriously, though, if ya'll have questions about this fic or my writing process in general, feel free to ask. ^_^ I like questions!

Thank you to Shara_Ookami92, LadyAmazon, Perfect-to-stay, Janky_Zipper, CrossYourTeez, Kupid, FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, AyaneMiharu, and Anne_frederick for your kind comments! You give me so much inspiration to write!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How are you feeling?”

You looked to your boyfriend, managing a small smile. “I’m all right. I think I should be fine. I mean, what could go wrong?”

Kurama opened his mouth to say something.

“Wait,” you interrupted, holding up a hand. “Don’t answer that. You’ll be there with me, won’t you?”

“I don’t know, _____. I’ll come, if Yul allows it. If not, I’m afraid you’ll have to go with Oktai.”

You sighed — while Oktai was friendly enough, you would rather not be in that cold throne room with Yul.

“You won’t be alone.” Her voice echoed in your mind, and it brought you a sense of comfort and serenity. “As long as I’m here, you won’t ever be alone again, _____.

You had nearly forgotten about Nairu. Of course she was coming with you, and even if she played the role of the oblivious spirit beast, she was still there. She would be listening and watching, and you would not have to feel afraid when answering Yul’s summon. She was here to guide you, after all.

“I won’t be able to communicate with you while we’re in his presence,” Nairu said. “I’m afraid Yul may be able to intercept a telepathic message, but I will certainly be by your side.”

“That reminds me,” Kurama said, peering beneath the bed for the rucksack. He set it on the bed, adroitly undoing the knot — there was a very specific sequence to the way he unraveled the cord, his fingers flying. When he lifted open the top, he pulled out the Slightful Dagger, a plain weapon
hidden within its whimsical sheath.

“And what is that supposed to do?”

“It is an artifact,” he explained. “It prevents the detection of magic, particularly that of the ancient type. Telepathy has roots dating back thousands of years — I’m certain it may keep our conversations in this room confidential.”

“You don’t think Yul might be listening already?” you said, filled with dread.

“While it’s possible, we’ve given him no reason for suspicion. He thinks he has the upper hand. Nairu was only just born, and detecting the use of ancient magic or energy is no easy feat — it’s done deliberately and with effort. Utilizing the Slightful Dagger going forward should suffice.”

“Very good. Go right ahead.” Nairu looked on as Kurama removed the dagger from its sheath, thrusting it into the floor behind one of the back legs of the bed where it would not be easily found.

You saw a faint glow from beneath the bed, pulsing in gentle light before fading away.

“Now telepathy and any other ancient magic in this room will be shielded from detection,” Kurama said. “But take care how you communicate outside of this room. Someone could be listening.”

“Of course,” Nairu said, waving him off with a paw. “I have a feeling your friend Oktai will be here any moment now. Be ready, _____.”

When Oktai arrived, he was charmed by Nairu, even squatting down to say hello.

Nairu did exactly what she said she would, behaving like a lively spirit beast, a young fox with little interest in communicating beyond wishing to cuddle and play. She smiled, eyes bright, bowing as if inviting him for a romp.

You were wondering how he might comment on her behavior, but Oktai only seemed amused by her antics.

“Are you ready, my lady?” he asked, turning to you.

“Whenever you are.” You stood, gesturing for Nairu to follow you. “Can Kurama come?”

“Yulkhan specifically asked for you and your spirit beast, and with such a young one, let’s minimize the distractions — I think it best if Kurama sat this one out.” Oktai looked to your boyfriend. “Sorry, old boy.”

Kurama didn’t respond to Oktai. Instead, he turned to you, his hand sweeping across your jawline. “Be brave, my love,” he said, a calmness in his disposition.

“I will,” you said. “Don’t worry about me.” You followed Oktai out of your chambers, Nairu trotting along behind you, her nails clipping the floor with each step.

“It seems that nap did wonders,” Oktai said.

“That’s right. She was so sleepy when she came out of that egg, and now she’s practically bouncing off the walls.”

“Hm. I wonder how Yulkhan will like her. She looks far different than his spirit beast.”
“Really? What did his spirit beast look like?”

“There are portraits of her around the palace. I’ll have to show you sometime.” He brushed his blond bangs from his eyes as he gave you a perceptive glance. “I assume you’ve spent your afternoon with Yoko Kurama.”

You turned away, trying to hide the warmth creeping to your cheeks. “How did you know?” you said — you kept your voice as even as possible.

“I felt his energy this morning when Kurama undoubtedly went searching for you. There’s only one reason why he’d resort to Yoko Kurama’s power, aside from the beckoning of our master. Just what were you doing out there in the forest, my lady?”

“I needed some fresh air.”

“Does the garden not suffice? Surely you know better than to wander off. Demon World is unkind to humans.”

“Well, I made a mistake.”

“Are you hurt, my lady?”

“No, I’m fine.” You weren’t lying — your shoulder was healing well, thanks to Yoko Kurama’s treatment. It wasn’t entirely recovered, but the bite wounds were quickly mending, your flesh melding itself back together.

Your response seemed to appease Oktai, as he dropped the subject. “He is quite protective of you.”

“Kurama? I suppose he is.”

“As he should be. He treats you well?”

You weren’t entirely sure where this conversation was going, but you figured you’d indulge him. The more he trusted you, the more information you’d be able to obtain about his past, per Kurama’s suggestion. “He does,” you said. “He’s the best I’ve ever had.”

“That’s a bold statement.”

“I mean, he followed me here to Demon World after we had an awful argument — it was so bad I wasn’t sure that he would want to see me again. He didn’t have to put himself in danger, but he did, and I feel so lucky to have him here with me.”

“He is no doubt faithful to you. But, if I may, I think he’s the lucky one.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because he has you.” His eyes, blue as the Living World sky, crinkled as he grinned. “Kurama has such a dark past, I’m sure he’s told you, and you love him in spite of it all.”

“I actually don’t know a whole lot about his past,” you admitted. “He’s only told me general themes, not specific details.”

“Really? I thought he would have told you more.”

You shrugged. “I’m not so sure I care. If he told me everything about his thousands of years of existence, I’d be too focused on who he was — I really only care about who he is.”
“I rest my case.”

You arrived at the throne room, the doors shut tight. Nairu was right behind you, her tails flicking in curiosity. Your heart beat in anticipation, the idea of seeing your ancestral father, especially without Kurama besides you, intimidating.

Nevertheless, you put on a brave face, as Kurama requested. Thoughts of him filled you with courage.

The stone on Oktai’s staff glowed, and the doors opened, halting just before they struck the walls. “After you, my lady.”

“Come in, Daughter,” Yul said, his voice echoing within the chamber. “Oktai, you will wait outside.”

Oktai nodded toward you, gesturing for you to continue.

You stepped inside, walking up to the throne. When you arrived, you knelt, as Oktai instructed you to do the first time you met Yul. It didn't sit well with you, showing him this level of reverence, but you saw no logical benefit in angering him either. You knew Kurama barely toed that line — surely you didn’t have to be so defiant.

“As you were,” Yul said, pleased at your gesture. “Welcome, _____ Welcome, spirit beast.” His eyes were on Nairu.

“Good evening, Yulkhan,” you said.

“So this is the great beast. What have you learned about her?”

“Very little, actually. She hatched and went to sleep almost immediately. She only just woke up.”

Yul grunted, elbows on his knees as he leaned forward, studying Nairu. “There is a familiarity about her.”

Nairu sat next to you at first, but after a few moments of being under his gaze, she stepped toward him. She paced to the throne, eyes alight, despite the dimness of the throne room. She sniffed at him, nose pressed against his leg at first. When he offered her the back of his hand, she licked him.

You watched from where you were standing, wondering what she was doing. Was this some sort of clever ruse? Was she luring him into a false sense of security? Was she gathering information? If animals could learn through scent, perhaps she could, too?

“She has much to experience and understand,” Yul said, his deep voice a rumble. “Her time in the egg has made her young again, but she will learn.” He looked to you, his silver eyes gleaming in nostalgia. “When she was mine, she was a fierce warrior, able to tear through our enemies with ease. With her at my side, we brought about order. We founded Xanadu, my paradise, together. She is now yours, Daughter. You will both train together. When you begin to see notable progress in her, come to me.”

“What do you mean by ‘notable progress?’” you said.

“You’ll know. It’s in her history, written in blood. She will show you when she is ready, even if she doesn’t know it yet.”

“Are you referring to some sort of hidden power?”
Yul grinned, revealing sharp canines. “You’ll know. And when you do, Daughter, bring her to me. I will show you how to wield her strength, your strength.”

Nairu lay down, much like any animal would, yawning, jaws parting wide as if the rest of the world didn’t at all matter. She was really selling her adolescent innocence.

You bowed your head. “I’ll do that, Yulkhan,” you said. “I’ll take my leave. Come along, then.” You gestured for Nairu to follow you.

She did as you beckoned, trotting at your heels as you left the throne room in a hurry. This place gave you the chills.

Oktai met you just outside the doors, greeting you with a warm smile. “How did it go?” he asked.

“It was fine. Quicker than expected.”

“Meetings with Yulkhan usually are. He is a believer of brevity, believe it or not. It’s interesting — he’s a man of great patience and restlessness. He greatly values efficiency and oftentimes expresses an unwillingness to wait, not for personal satisfaction, but because he wishes to utilize the time at his fingertips.”

“I think you just described someone who, despite your assurances, is actually impatient.”

“Have you lost your pair of rose-tinted glasses, my lady? Perhaps you’d like to borrow mine?”

You laughed at the levity of the situation — you appreciated his sense of humor. “Why is it that you’re so loyal to Yul?” you asked as you made your way back to your chambers. “You mentioned that he was your mentor. What about your mother and father?”

“My father is dead. My mother… well, I’m not sure where she is.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, it is what it is.”

“Do you really mean that, though?”

“Hm?”

“If I didn’t know where my mom was, I’d do everything I could to find her.”

“Ah, you must have a good relationship, then.”

“Good enough for me to wish for her safety and happiness. Do you with your mother?”

Oktai paused for a moment, the only sound your footsteps and the patter of Nairu’s feet echoing through the halls. “Yes, I suppose,” he said, finally. “When she was here, I had a wonderful relationship with her.”

You quieted, realizing that something was amiss. Kurama told you that his village was destroyed, all men slaughtered. It would follow logic that Oktai’s father was killed. But if his mother were allowed to live, and he made the choice to serve Yul, you would think that he would still be in contact with her. Would Yul begrudge him that?

“How old are you?” you said. “If you don’t mind me asking?”
“My, you are full of questions today.”

“Well?”

“Nosy ones, too.”

“I wouldn’t be so nosy if you were more transparent.”

“Would it surprise you to know that most demons aren’t too concerned with age?” Oktai looked at you, a charming expression on his face.

“No, because eventually you lose track of the years. Age only means something to a species like humans who rarely live to one hundred, but counting to one hundred is easy.”

“Right. I bet if you asked Kurama, he wouldn’t know exactly how old he is.”

“I bet he would.”

“Do you gamble?”

“Depends on if there’s something worth gambling for.”

“Ask Kurama exactly how old he is, down to the year. If he promptly provides a response, then consider your bet won, and I’ll do something for you.”

“And if he doesn’t provide a response?”

“Then I win the bet, and you’ll have to do something for me.”

“I feel like there’s a lot of grey area in ‘do something.’ Perhaps we should be more specific.”

“Ah, but where’s the fun in that?”

You tilted your head to the side, amused at how cavalier he was about all of this. “Fine,” you said, figuring whatever Oktai wanted was probably harmless. “I accept.”

“Shake on it?” He offered his hand.

“Sure.” You took his hand, sealing the deal.

Later that evening, when you were in bed next to Kurama, you asked the question: “Kurama, how old are you exactly?”

“I’m assuming you’re not referring to my human age. Why the sudden interest?”

“No reason.” You didn’t suppose your bet would be a fair one if Kurama knew about the stakes.

“She made a wager with Oktai,” Nairu said. “One thinks you know your age down to the year; the other doubts it.”

You craned you head toward the vanity where she was settled. “Are you sure you’re a fox? Because you’re sounding awfully like a rat to me.”

You heard a ripple, almost like a giggle, in response. You found it funny just how childish your spirit beast could be.
“Is that so?” Kurama said. “What did you wager?”

“That’s not important.”

“Not enough for the wager to matter, I presume.”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I am curious.”

“We wagered ‘something.’ Literally ‘something.’ A future favor. It’s not that exciting.”

“Hm.” He seemed pensive, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling in thought.

“Come on, Kurama. Give me an answer, will you?” You snuggled up to him, laying your head on his chest. “Please? I have to know now.”

“Very well. 3,242.”

“Really?” You looked at him, squinting as if you could see through him. “Clearly, you feel I’m the one naive enough to think you’d know your age.”

“That’s right.”

“So does that mean you actually know you’re 3,242 years old? Or are you just giving me an answer so I don’t have to owe Oktai ‘something’ down the line?”

His eyes seemed to glimmer in delight at your mild frustration. “I suppose you’ll never know, hm?”

“I bet you made it up.”

“Are you confident enough to wager on that?”

“Oh, shush. I’m done with any wager involving you.”

Chapter End Notes

Btw, I'm following this logic for ball-parking Kurama's age.

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Manifestation

Chapter Summary

You train under Yoko Kurama’s critical gaze. When it comes to spirit energy, however, Oktai seems to be the expert.

Chapter Notes

Not much to say here! Just chugging along. ^_^ Hopefully, the next few chapters write themselves a little more easily!

Thank you to LadyAmazon, AyaneMiharu, Queenasunasama, Shara_Ookami92, Kupid, Anne_frederick, Shaquana M Jones, FannibalToast, Yeah_I’m_Crazy_So_What, CrossYourTeez, Mei Mei, and xostephxo101 for the comments! <3 I very much appreciate it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Chin down, shoulders back, fists in.”

He was always direct with you, sometimes sternly so. Your time spent with him yesterday had calmed your nerves, but Yoko was still vastly different in temperament than your Kurama. The gentle human catered better to your emotional needs.

Your shoulder healed up well last night. You were in awe at how a little bit of demon saliva could convince your body to repair itself. There was barely a scar, though you could see a paler tone where the bite marks were.

“They’ll fade in time,” Kurama said when he checked on your shoulder this morning.

You weren’t too concerned about the scars, but you were grateful that Yoko’s treatment was so effective — otherwise, you might have to explain to others why you had scars in the shape of bite wounds on your shoulder whenever you wore a sleeveless top or dress.

Nairu watched your interactions with Kurama silently. She didn’t comment often, never outside the privacy of your chambers, though she was ever aware. You already felt her connection with you growing stronger — it was an emotional one that allowed feelings to travel freely between you. You would never be able to hide anything from her. She would always, not only feel, but understand your emotional state of mind.

You followed Yoko’s instructions, lowering your head, pulling your shoulders back, and picking up your fists. You tried again, lifting your leg to kick the heavy bag — it barely budged. Martial arts looked so much easier when you weren’t the one who practiced it.

“You need to leverage your strength,” Yoko said. “At this rate, you’ll hardly knock a child off his feet.”
“I know,” you said, hands on your knees as you focused on your breathing. “It’s just so much all at once.” There were a million variables to consider — strength, balance, accuracy, state of mind, etc. — and your opponent was only a heavy bag.

“Might I suggest something?” Oktai said as he stepped toward you, handing you a flask of water. “Why don’t you take a break, my lady? Afterward, we can work on mastering your spirit energy instead?”

You nodded, trying to catch your breath. You were sore, you knees shaking. This morning was a rough one, and you were exhausted. The physical training was harsh on your body, and you had no doubt any spiritual training would make you mentally exhausted.

Nairu was at your side in a second, rubbing her slender body against your leg to encourage you.

“Hey,” you greeted, sitting down on the ground and petting her.

There would be no telepathic communication outside of your chambers, but she remained a steady presence for you all the same, someone whom you could count on for support, even when Kurama was occupied as Yoko.

“Why don’t I take over the spirit energy training?” Oktai suggested to Yoko Kurama. “Surely, you’d have good insight, but demon energy is vastly different than spirit energy.”

“And go against Yul’s wishes?” Yoko said. “I didn’t expect you to have the nerve to oppose your master.”

Oktai smiled, tilting his head to the side. “Not oppose. I simply understand what he wants. He wishes for his daughter to have the best education and training.”

Yoko’s cold eyes were unrelenting, but you could see the thoughts and logic racing through his visage. From what Kurama had told you before, he was not a frequent user of spirit energy, as it was far more efficient and practical for him to utilize his bountiful demon energy. Oktai, however, being half-human was well-versed in applying his spirit energy in battle.

“What do you mean?” you asked as Nairu leapt out of your arms, gracefully landing on her feet and pacing over to greet Oktai.

He reached out to pet Nairu. “Energy manifests in different ways for different people. I specialize in creating barriers and shields, able to use them offensively. Kurama manipulates plants, feeling them with his demon energy, allowing them to grow in an accelerated manner and do his bidding. Your friend, Kuwabara, has a sword made from his spirit energy that he may maneuver in all shapes and sizes, and Yusuke’s technique relies upon sheer power, bursts of his energy in both blasts and blows. You have to find what works for you.”

“How is my energy supposed to work?” You realized it was a dumb question, but you didn’t have any opinion or awareness otherwise.

“You won’t know until it happens. That means that while you’re working on getting yourself into physical shape, you also temper your spirit energy as much as you can. You’ve learned some basics
from Kurama and Kuwabara, but you need to advance yourself further.”

You saw Yoko from the corner of your eye, a neutral expression on his face, arms crossed, as he watched, only a short distance away.

Oktai stood and tapped his staff against the ground, and a burst of energy came from him, weaving around his body. “Let’s assume for a moment that you need to get through my defenses. How would you go about doing that?”

“I don’t know,” you said as you picked yourself up. “I think you’re asking the wrong person.”

“No, no, you are exactly the right person. What do you think?”

It was kind of exciting, learning how your spirit energy would manifest. Since you started training, you had been doing meditation exercises, identifying your own energy, talking with your friends about what manipulating it would be like. When Kuwabara showed you his spirit sword, your jaw dropped. In a way, it was believable that Kurama could command plants as he wished or that Yusuke could shoot spirit energy from the tip of his finger. It was far less imaginable that Kuwabara could turn it into something so physical. He even let you touch the handle of his sword — it was warm and pulsing, a sensation that you had never experienced. It felt alive.

You wondered what you would hope to be able to accomplish. If your energy manifested into a weapon, like a gun or a sword, that meant you would have to learn how to wield it. That seemed like a lot to ask of yourself in two and a half months. Manipulating plants didn’t seem any easier, either, unless they were cognizant enough for you to tell them what to do.

You returned to the task at hand. You could feel Oktai’s spirit energy around him. It was potent, oscillating in waves, creating a phenomenally tight barrier. “Well,” you started. “There are two ways to deal with a barrier, right? You either go around it or go through it.”

“Those are the two most obvious options.”

“Are there more options?”

At that moment, the ground beneath your feet shook as a plant burst from under Oktai, the vines thorny, leaves sharp. You were caught off balance and fell harmlessly, but Oktai dodged out of the way, landing on his feet.

The plant ceased its attack, wavering in the gentle wind, beautiful bell-like blossoms growing from its thick stems.

“You can compromise the source of the barrier,” Yoko Kurama said, standing behind you. “Succeed, and you have an opportunity to attack.”

Oktai had a pleasant look on his face. “Ah, yes. There is that. A worthy opponent would likely choose that option, unless they were well-equipped to shatter my defenses. No one has yet to circumvent my barriers.”

You took a deep breath, picking yourself up. “All right. I’m going to have to figure this out.”

The remainder of the afternoon consisted of you attempting to bring your spirit energy out. No matter what Oktai or Yoko Kurama suggested, you were unable to do it. It was a source of frustration for you. Your spirit energy would not manifest into something physical.

You felt a comforting brush against your consciousness. “Nairu,” you thought, and you yearned to
finish your session so you could return to your chambers and talk with her. She would probably have advice for you that neither Kurama nor Oktai could give.

“Let’s try again tomorrow,” Oktai said, noting your disappointment. “There’s no sense in pushing yourself to exhaustion, at least not now. Perhaps in the future when we hone these skills, we’ll devote more time to training.”

You looked to Yoko, his expression stoic, eyes cold. He did not approve, but he didn’t disagree with Oktai’s assessment either.

“I’d like that,” you said with a sigh. “I’ll have to come back to this tomorrow when I’m feeling fresher.”

As soon as you spoke, Kurama returned to his human self, the disparity between him and Yoko obvious to you. Even the energy he gave off was different, the very character of his presence. He was back to his beautiful red hair, long eyelashes, and vivid eyes.

You were so happy to see him, nearly falling into his arms. “I’m sorry,” you said, your words muffled in his shoulder. “I’m sweaty and gross.”

“Fortunately for you, I’m not too bothered by sweaty and gross,” he said, hand smoothing the hair out of your face. “But since you’re so self-conscious, perhaps we should get you cleaned up.”

You were beyond reason, your legs and arms shaking as you stepped into the hot water. Kurama escorted you to your chambers, even helping you up the stairs along the way, where you undressed, a hot bath already waiting for you — clearly, Qara was aware of your schedule.

She had not spoken to you since yesterday, aside from her usual “Yes, my lady,” and you worried you had frightened her with your request. You certainly didn’t want to make her feel pressured. It was a huge risk defying Yul and any demon who wished to continue the human food trade. You didn’t want her involved unless she was ready to take the risks required.

The hot water was a blessing on your sore muscles as you sank into the bath. You sat on the ledge inside the in-ground tub, letting the heat soak through your skin.

Nairu licked herself, comfortable atop your clean, folded robe. “Better?” she said.

“You did well today, _____.“

You craned your head to look at her. “Did I? I’m beginning to wonder if I even have any spirit energy.”

“You’re not ready yet. And that’s okay.”

You shrugged off her encouragement. “What do you think Yul was saying yesterday about knowing when you’ve shown notable progress?”

“Usually at some point, spirit beasts evolve. You’ve seen Yusuke’s Puu, haven’t you? When he first
hatched, he was far smaller, probably quite awkward. He became the great phoenix you saw when the time was right, likely when his strength was needed to protect Yusuke and his friends.”

“Does that mean you won’t become stronger until you need to protect me?”

“Unlike Puu, I’ve been biding my time. I’ve been in that egg, conscious and growing for centuries. I know how to access my strength and energy whenever I choose. However, the moment I do, Yul will surely be aware. We must choose my time to act carefully, unless we wish to draw his attention.”

“That is a predicament, then,” you said, beginning to soap and shampoo yourself. “Maybe we shouldn’t reveal anything until the day of the tournament. But that also means I won’t have any time to work with you.”

“Correct. I imagine Kurama won’t be happy about that.”

“Probably not.” Kurama didn’t like surprises — he expected them, of course, but he was always inevitably prepared for them, three steps ahead of his opponents. Not knowing Nairu’s abilities before the tournament would not sit well with him, especially if there was an opportunity. It left too much up to chance.

Truthfully, as much as you trusted Nairu, you agreed with him. You didn’t really want to walk into a ring with no idea how your spirit beast would navigate the challenges ahead.

“I see you have reservations. We can discuss that later.” She stretched and yawned. “For you, however, don’t get frustrated. You have time. I think you’ll find that switching perspectives will help.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t really want to fight. You probably never will, and I doubt you’ll ever truly enjoy the physical challenge, like many of your friends do. It’s just not in your disposition. You’re far too concerned about others to really slam your fist into their skulls or blast them with energy.”

She wasn’t wrong. As you bathed, you listened to her.

“Eventually, you’re going to have to focus on your defenses and leave the fighting to me. If you’re not aiming to hurt your opponent, there’s no point in even trying.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe we’ve all been thinking about this the wrong way.” Nairu mentioned this strategy yesterday, but you hadn’t put it into practice during your training this morning. You figured tapping into your spirit energy was far more important.

“What I’m saying is with regard to your spirit energy manifestation. You still need to be in peak physical condition if you want to survive the tournament. Demons by nature and genetics are far stronger in body than the average human is. You’re going to have to be quick and capable to defend yourself.”

When you were taken from the Living World, snatched up by demons against whom you stood no chance, you feared for your life. Batu, who was clearly stronger, assaulted you, his dirty hands groping your body — you were only saved by Okati. The demon toads in the forest would have eaten you, if not for Kurama’s transformation into Yoko at the last moment. Yesterday, you were attacked by low-class demons, and even then, you couldn’t defend yourself.

You didn’t want to be in that position ever again.
“Yes, _____ Be upset. You have every right to be,” she said. “It’s not your fault that these things happened, but you can use your experiences to improve yourself going forward. You certainly don’t have to be vulnerable anymore. Together, we can be strong.”

“Thanks, Nairu,” you said, giving her a small smile. Her words stirred your confidence, and despite how sore you felt right now, you would have to bite the bullet these next two months. With your spirit beast’s help, you would overcome it all.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Types of Love

Chapter Summary

Kurama ponders the perfect proposal before he is interrupted by Satomi.

Chapter Notes

Oh. My. God. :'D My husband was sick for the past seven days, and I've been living in a cesspool of gross infection. On Wednesday, I woke up with a sore throat. I told my body it could fuck right off because I have waaaay too much stuff to do at work, and while I have PTO, in my line of work, it's really just pushing it off till later. SO I REFUSED. I chugged vitamin C, Dayquil, ate congee with ginger, drank tea, and gargled salt water all day. On Thursday, I was worse in the morning, but by the end of the day, after some more Dayquil, tea and congee, I was feeling better. Today, I feel just fine. I ain't taking my body's shit. :P

ANYWAY. Because I've been taking care of my husband, the dogs, and myself, I haven't had as much time to write, but HERE IS THE NEXT CHAPTER FINALLY.

Per my friend, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, she has issued a challenge she'd like me to share: A New Challenge

And finally, shout out to those who commented on my last chapter: xostephxo101, Shara_Ookami92, Kupid, Anne_frederick, and CrossYourTeez! Thank you all for your wonderful feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kurama roamed through the palace with no particular agenda in mind. A sedentary lifestyle could not satisfy his yearning for adventure and challenge. He needed the opportunity to explore, to test his limits, set his sights on the horizon and race toward it.

In his previous life, he was always on the move. He had no permanent home, no place to call his own. His band of demons and brothers followed him wherever he went, leaving emptied vaults and stolen artifacts in their wake. That was how he wanted it. As a thief, he had no need for a home — his success hinged on secrecy, and as such, a fixed dwelling would leave him vulnerable. Instead, he was nomadic, wandering from place to place in search of his next heist.

Years in Living World with his human mother tempered his desire for excitement. He felt content with his family, but he still heard the call of the wild Makai, the satisfaction of a fulfilling battle in which he could use his wits and strength. It was something he felt had been absent in his life.

That was, until she walked into it.

She wasn’t exactly what he thought was missing, but she certainly filled the sliver of emptiness inside.
He smiled, his lips curving into that rare, genuine grin. The very image of her conjured in his mind was enough to bring him a momentary flutter of joy.

Kurama told her yesterday that he could marry her.

He meant it.

She didn’t say no.

In fact, under different circumstances, she might have said yes.

He chuckled to himself. Surely, if she was so flattered by his half-hearted attempt, she would be far more receptive if he actually presented to her a ring when he asked for her hand.

Yes, when they returned to Living World together, he would have to learn about her jewelry preferences. What kind of a stone would she like? The setting? The shape? The material? He would have to curate the perfect proposal — the location, the ambiance, the meaning behind it all would need to be precise and deliberate. He planned on it because she deserved no less.

“So tell me, Kurama,” a familiar someone said. “What has you so giddy?”

“Satomi,” he said, recognizing her voice. Deep in his thoughts, her presence caught him off-guard.

By his standards, this was foolish, but he had never been so elated to be lost in the recesses of his own mind. “I don’t appreciate being followed.”

“Of course not. I only happened to pass by and saw you wandering.”

“I’ve never seen you without your friends.”

“‘Friends’ is a loose term,” she said. “They’d throw me to the wolves if they thought it’d help advance their own interests. We’re all in a cutthroat competition here for the imperial noble consort title.”

“And why do you desire the position?”

“It’s survival, Kurama. You serve the khan well, and you are allowed the finer things in life. In fact, you have life.”

“Would it bring you happiness?”

She sighed, twirling a folded fan through her fingers. “Happiness isn’t a priority here. We consorts are lucky to be alive, selected from the human ranch to serve Yul as opposed to being killed for meat. We survived where others died, and we can’t forsake that.”

Kurama looked at her with pitying eyes. He had found purpose in his human life, in his mother, in his friends, in his _____. It took several thousand years, but he did it. He felt like one of the lucky ones — so many demons and humans lived day by day without understanding what happiness was.

How was he so fortunate to have such an opportunity?

He lived a life of crime, caring not for the plights of others, slaughtering all those who stood in his way. He had little regard for life, thieving and pillaging as he saw fit. He was selfish and ruthless, content in a myriad of material and carnal pleasures.

How was it that karma saw it fit to bestow upon him such happiness now? After he had done such terrible things? Did someone in such a desperate situation, like Satomi, not deserve it better?
“Don’t look at me like that,” Satomi said, crossing her arms. “Spare me your pity. I’d rather have your help. Are you interested or not? My information for your assistance in securing me the position of imperial noble consort?”

She had no other aspirations. She knew no alternatives. This was her life, and this was how she wanted to survive it. It was a meager end with hardly a future, but, in her eyes, it was the only chance she had.

Kurama understood the risks, and as much compassion he felt for Satomi’s plight, he would not compromise _____ and their life together.

“Forgive me,” he said. “Our arrangement doesn’t exactly inspire confidence.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“No.”

Satomi frowned. “What do you want, then? I’m taking a risk as well, you know. If Yul finds out, I’m as good as dead.”

“Then, perhaps, I’m doing you a favor.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Even if I secure for you the position of imperial noble consort, the moment Yul finds out you’ve been leaking information, he’ll kill you. You will have made your own grave.”

“He won’t find out.”

“You said it yourself — Yul’s consorts are his eyes and ears. I would assume he has spies everywhere. For all we know, our conversation is hardly private.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“It’s not, for me,” Kurama said as he turned, ready to walk away.

“You must really love her, don’t you?”

He stopped, hands in his pockets, not bothering to look back.

Satomi shook her head, shutting her eyes. “I’ve never felt devotion like that. I’ve never even seen devotion like that. It doesn’t exist here. Here, it’s a race to survive — there are only enemies. The Living World must be a wonderful place if you can find love there.”

Kurama sighed softly. “It can be. While I don’t envy your position, I have something to protect. I’m sorry.”

“So you’re just going to walk away from perfectly good information?” She clicked her tongue. “I’m disappointed in you, Kurama. I thought you’d be more resourceful than that.”

“That would depend on the nature of your information. I am doubtful of its benefit.”

“Here’s the thing,” Satomi said. “If your goal is to protect your woman, then I can only assume you plan on defeating Yul in the tournament.”

“Poor assumption. The tournament is of little consequence to me,” Kurama said. “Nor am I
interested in this fantasy you devise. Yul is far too strong. There is no use in plans to overcome him— he is invincible.” He was careful not to reveal his intentions.

“Then what is your endgame? I can’t imagine you’ve accepted your fate. You’re tied to the khan by bloodpact. Yoko Kurama was legendary for his wild spirit— he would not be tamed, quashed under the thumb of Yul. Surely, you have some sort of strategy.”

“And if such a strategy did exist, you seem eager to learn of it.”

“Because no one has ever stood up to Yul before.”

“And, yet, you wish to serve him as an advisor, his imperial noble consort.”

“Don’t take it so personally. As I said, it’s a matter of life and death. I have no choice but to serve Yul.”

“You always have a choice.”

“Never mind my choices, Kurama. You have a choice.” She walked ahead of him, spinning around so they were facing each other, mere inches apart. She pointed her fan at him. “Yul is withholding information from you and your precious _____ that can make a difference between victory and defeat in your battle against him. Assure me my position as the imperial noble consort, and the information is yours.”

“Clearly, this information is less valuable than you want me to believe, Satomi. Let’s assume for a moment you are correct, that defeating Yul is my endgame, as you so say. If you give me this information, and I use it wisely, you would likely be left without a master. The title of imperial noble consort will mean nothing.” His eyes glistened dangerously, a flicker of gold among the green. “Are you sure this is an arrangement in your favor?”

Satomi stared back at him, uncertainty wavering in her eyes. “You really mean to kill him.”

“I said nothing of the sort.” Truthfully, Kurama was very interested in what information Satomi had to offer, but he was reluctant to relinquish his own advantage. He feared she was working on behalf of Yul, testing his loyalty, and in accepting her arrangement, he’d be participating in an act of rebellion. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t be concerned, but with _____ here in the palace, he could not be too careful.

Satomi stepped away hurriedly. “Fine,” she said. “I’m sure your woman is waiting for you. You’d better get going.”

You finished your bath, feeling quite content from the warmth of the water. You dried yourself, put on a fresh set of clothes and settled on the couch, ready for a relaxing evening by the fireplace. It was unpleasantly chilly outside — it was still cold, despite Oktai’s reassurances that it was spring in Demon World. Perhaps this was a cold spell.

For a moment, you thought of autumn in the Living World and what you were missing. Falling leaves of varying colors, the fall fashion, the pumpkin spice and hot chocolate. Halloween was around the corner. Thanksgiving was coming. If you were still at home, how would you be spending the holidays?

You wondered where Kurama went.

“I’m sure he’ll return soon,” Nairu assured. “He never leaves your side for too long.”
“How did you know I was thinking about him?”

“I can’t read minds, but I sensed a wave of longing and fondness, and I figured the subject of your thoughts had to be him.” Her tails flicked to the side as though she were punctuating her statement.

“Well, you figured right.” You smoothed a blanket over your lap. “Ever since we’ve been together, the longest I’ve been without him was during the few days when I was brought here. I never thought I could miss another person so much.”

“He makes you feel whole.”

You nodded, the mere thought of Kurama bringing a small smile to your face. “He does.”

“Then that’s why I’m here — to help you.” Nairu hopped on the couch with you, laying next to you, stretching across the cushions. “Your love for him inspired me to come out of my egg.”

“Why?” you asked. “You’ve been following my ancestral line for a long time. Has no one else been in love before?”

“Many have. But there are different degrees, different types of love. I think your circumstances have made your relationship especially strong.”

“But from what Yul said, you reacted to me even while I was in Living World, before Kurama and I started dating. He said you moved inside the egg for the first time in a thousand years.”

“I suppose I did. I liked you.”

“Why?”

“I sensed a strength in you that hadn’t been present in your line since Eri. It’s not the physical kind. It was something in the heart, the courage to love and be kind to others, even when it is clearly not in your immediate benefit.”

“I see.”

Nairu pressed up against your thigh, much like a kitten would, asking to be pet. “You have your doubts, but you’ll see what I mean eventually.”

You heard the door open, and you turned your head to see Kurama step inside. “Hey, handsome,” you greeted. “I was wondering where you went off to.”

“You knew I’d return soon, _____.” He sat down next to you.

“Find anything interesting?”

“Yes,” he said, leaning in for a kiss. “Right here.”

You returned the quick kiss before leaning into his shoulder. “Really, where did you go?”

“Just went for a walk, is all. How are you doing?”

“I’m sure this doesn’t come as a surprise to you, but I’m going to whine for a moment. I’m soooooore, Kurama. I feel every muscle in my body. This is going to last for days. In fact, it’s probably going to be worse tomorrow.”

“I hope the bath helped,” he said, his hand finding your shoulders, fingers pressing into the very
soreness in your neck. “Perhaps a massage would as well.”

“Mmm…” you hummed. “Don’t think this makes up for the laps you had me run this morning.”

“No, of course not.” He stood, slipping around to the back of the couch, where he began working at the knots in your upper back.

Each touch of his adroit hands brought forth a small gasp of pain — the good kind of pain, if that made any sense.

“Relax,” he whispered into your ear, his red hair falling to your shoulders. “You’re far too tense.”

You tried to do as he suggested, taking a deep breath and breathing out the stress from today’s training. Each press of his hand felt warm and accentuated each ache. However, it was also rejuvenating, as though the increase in circulation improved the overall sensation.

After a few minutes, Kurama leaned forward to kiss the top of your head. “Would you like me to continue or have you had enough?”

You tilted your head to meet his gaze. “How is that even a question?”

He chuckled. “Very well.”

Nairu looked up at Kurama, her eyes glowing in the color of mild honey, sweet and charming. “And after you take care of her,” she said to him, “you can do the same for me?”

Kurama smiled. “Ah, I see I’ve found my place in the pecking order.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
The Imperial Consorts

Chapter Summary

You rarely go anywhere in the palace without Kurama. But on the rare occasion you do, you come across an entourage of Yul's imperial consorts.

Chapter Notes

Remember how I said I have all the remaining chapters outlined? Well, this chapter was most certainly not in the outline. :P It just kind of happened as does a lot of my writing, but I really liked this one. I hope you enjoy it, too!

All of my thanks to those who commented:
HikarinoYamingan13/Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Kouryuu, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), Shara_Ookami92, Kupid, and CrossYourTeez! I love hearing from you all, so thank you from the bottom of my heart. ^_^

Please consider participating in my Happy International Fanworks Day 2020 Raffle! This will close on Thursday, February 20th at 11:59 p.m. AZ time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oktai invited you for breakfast the next morning in the garden — his request came through Qara, who played the role as the messenger. At first, you wanted Kurama to come along, too, but you decided you would be able to speak more openly with Oktai without him there. After sharing your logic with him, he agreed.

“While you’ll certainly be missed here,” Kurama said, kissing you on the temple, “I think you’re right.”

Nairu yawned from her perch atop the vanity. “I’ll come with you, ____,” she said. “I’ll be an extra set of eyes and ears.”

“I’d appreciate that,” you said. “I can use all the help I can get. We’ll put that adorable face to work.”

She gave you a smug, foxy glance as she hopped to the ground and began walking toward the bedroom door.

“Do what you can, but be mindful,” Kurama said. “We don’t know whom we can trust here.” He graced your hand with a kiss.

It was endearing how much he wished to protect you. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

“I expect you to keep that promise.” He gave your hand one last squeeze as he led you to the door. “Would you like me to walk you downstairs?”
“I think I can manage. I’ll have Nairu with me.”

“Very well.”

You opened the door, giving Kurama a reassuring smile. “Please don’t worry about me. I’ll meet you at the training grounds?”

He nodded. “Good luck, my love.”

Nairu slipped through first, leading you down the winding staircase. Her tiny paws carried her effortlessly, four luscious tails flowing behind her. She looked behind the center pillar of the tower, her bright eyes beckoning you to chase her through the halls.

You knew she was an age-old spirit beast with wisdom far beyond your years, but there was something about her that reminded you of a child in an animal’s body. She wanted to be pet, engaged you in play, and even giggled while she did so.

What an interesting phenomenon. How a soul so old could be so young. She behaved like a puppy or kitten, several weeks old, intelligent and curious about the world around her. She knew things, of course, but that sophistication was tempered with innocence. In some ways, you felt bad that she had been born into a world, to a person, who needed her to mature so quickly.

Nairu dropped to your side, weaving through your legs, and you couldn’t help but laugh at her childlike antics.

“What are you doing?” you said. “We’re going to be late, you silly girl.”

She bowed, her rump in the air, all four tails lifted, as though she were bantering with you. She then ran off, inviting you to chase her.

“Oh, get back here!” You ran after her, accepting her invitation.

The setting seemed so inappropriate — these gorgeous halls, polished floors, hand-carved walls, and spacious pillars. It was not a place for play, but you couldn’t deny the mischievous look in Nairu’s eyes. She needed a break from the dreary chambers, from your intense training.

A distance away, you saw several women walking across the halls, traveling in a group of three. They were all dressed elegantly in bright colors, layers of silks and embroidered cloth, skirts flowing to the ground. Jewels and beads, flowers and ribbons adorned their hair and necks. Their faces were painted in makeup — lipstick, eyeliner, blush, everything.

You recognized them as women in Yul’s harem, the same style of clothing you saw the first night you were here. And, really, they were dressed as though their lives depended upon their beauty. You considered your options. Would it be awkward to say hello? Or should you keep on walking?

It didn’t seem to matter. They saw you first, and after a few hushed whispers among the group, they headed toward you.

Nairu settled at your feet, sitting quietly as she watched.

“You must be _____,” one of the women said. “Yulkhan’s pretty daughter. We were wondering when we’d get to meet you.”

“Oh,” you said, feeling awkward already. “Good to meet you all. What are your names?”
“Kimi,” she said, gesturing toward herself. She wore flowers in her hair, braided into her stylized updo. “And here’s Aiya and Michiko. We’re among Yulkahn’s favorite imperial consorts. You might have heard of us.”

“That’s right,” Aiya said. She wore the heaviest makeup of the three, her face pale with powder, eyes dark. Her jewelry was also the most ostentatious — polished golds and bright gems among them. “We entertain our khan through story and song, and whisk away his worries in the privacy of his chambers. It’s stressful running a kingdom.”

“I’m sure it is,” you said.

“But you know that already, my dear,” Aiya continued. “You are the khan’s descendant daughter. He has plans for you. He worked so hard to find you, after all.”

Michiko kneeled down to visit with Nairu, her pink sasha falling to the floor. “Oh, my goodness. Have you ever seen anything so cute? Just look at those eyes!”

Nairu’s tails flicked to the side, and you could see her puff up with pride. She sure enjoyed her praise.

“She is adorable,” Kimi said. “A fox! Just like Kurama.” She looked at you. “Does your lover know just how much you care for him? It’s a compliment, if there ever was one. To have your spirit beast reflect his truest form is flattering.”

“I’m sure it’s not lost on him,” you said.

“I do wonder,” Aiya said, “if Kurama appreciates it as much as he should.”

You were taken aback by her comment. “What do you mean?” You barely knew her — why would she say something like that?

“You don’t know?” Kimi said.

“Know what?”

Michiko stood, smoothing her dress before giving you a coy glance. “It’s hard to imagine the legendary bandit Yoko Kurama settling down with a woman, is all. He’s such a wild soul, always on the move, always looking for his next treasure.”

“And not just treasure,” Aiya said as she stepped closer, lowering her voice. “He’s stolen the hearts of so many women.”

You weren’t entirely speechless. It would make sense — he was well over three thousand years old. To think he was celibate throughout that entire time was ludicrous.

“Oh, didn’t you know?” Michiko said, interpreting your silence as surprise. “There are stories of how skilled Yoko Kurama was in bed. He could please women like no other, all night long, and bring them to climax, playing them like a violin. Sometimes more than once!”

You knew that. You were intimate with Kurama. You knew how well he read your body, able to pleasure you in ways you never even knew you could feel. But, even though you were well aware, this conversation made you uncomfortable. The details of your sex life weren’t public, but assuming these tales were true, you felt like this was a violation of your privacy nonetheless.

“Isn’t that how it is, _____?” Kimi said. “I suppose you would know. Kurama hasn’t lost his touch
after all these years, has he? Or maybe it’s turning human that affects his performance?”

You weren’t sure how to respond without potentially offending all these women. Was it really that important that you didn’t? Would Yul’s consorts be able to help you at some point? Was it worth staying in their good graces?

It turned out that you didn’t have to make a decision.

You heard clapping — not applause, but an interrupter, in the conversation.

“That’s enough, ladies. Are you really bothering the khan’s daughter?” An older woman stepped into the hall, making her way toward the group. She walked with an air of confidence, her hair spun into a tight bun, eyes lined with the perfect amount of kohl. She wore a necklace of jade, accompanied with jade earrings.

“Satomi,” Aiya greeted. “Where have you been? We’ve been looking for you all morning.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Satomi said, pointing a folded fan at her fellow consorts. “Do you really think harassing Yulkahn’s daughter is going to do you any favors? And potentially offending Kurama as well? You could anger either of them and be killed — or worse, turned out of the palace! Do you want to be sent back to the ranch? You are all idiots, the lot of you.”

The women seemed startled by Satomi’s outburst, though their reactions turned to ones of distress.

“We’re so sorry,” Michiko said, bowing her head toward you. “We didn’t mean to offend!”

“That’s right,” Aiya said. “We were only teasing, my lady.”

“Please accept our apologies!” Kimi said. “It won’t happen again.”

You sighed, feeling weary about this whole conversation. They were only apologizing because of Satomi’s clear realization, not because they really felt any remorse. But, going back to your last train of thought, there was no reason to antagonize these women.

“It’s fine,” you said. “Apology accepted.”

“You are most gracious, my lady,” Kimi said. “We’ll be going now. Please enjoy your day.” She, Aiya, and Michiko hurried away without another glance.

You were left with Satomi, who looked after them with an agitated expression. “Idiots,” she said. “Every last one of them. For all their talents, they’ve been spoiled here. Recent events have caused Yul to become lax with them. They need discipline.”

“I appreciate you stepping in,” you said. “I’m sorry you felt you had to.”

“It wasn’t for your sake. They need to learn some manners or those girls won’t survive. Offend the wrong person, and you’ll have your tongue cut out, if you’re lucky.”

How awful. “I wouldn’t have said anything to Yul.”

“Perhaps not to the khan. But to Kurama?”

“Kurama wouldn’t be so cruel.”

She exhaled in a short laugh. “There’s a lot about your lover you don’t know.”

You didn’t want to go down that rabbit hole. You weren’t so petty as to judge Kurama for the
things he did in the past. All that mattered was that you loved who he was now — being Shuichi among the human race had changed him. “Satomi, is it?” you said, avoiding the subject entirely.

“That’s right.”

“Thank you for your help, Satomi. It’s really good to meet you.”

She glanced at you, from your head down to Nairu. “Yulkhan speaks of you and your spirit beast as great warriors who will assist him in the upcoming tournament.”

“I’m a work in progress, I’m afraid.”

“I see.” She unfurled her fan, revealing a painted canvas of birds and flowers. “What’s the hold up?”

“I don’t know,” you said. “I guess I’m having a hard time connecting with my spirit energy.”

“Do you love Kurama?”

“What?”

“Do you love Kurama?” she said, a stern look in her eyes.

“Of course I do.”

“Then use that.”

“Use what? You make it sound so simple.”

“Isn’t it?” She fanned herself slowly. “Isn’t that what manipulating spirit energy is all about? Aiding you in your quest for your heart’s greatest desire?”

“I never thought about it that way,” you said, though the more you contemplated it, the more sense it made.

She paced around you. “Why do you think humans learn how to use it? They use it to fight — they fight because they have no other choice. It’s a matter of survival. You know Kurama will fight for you. Your spirit beast will fight for you. You don’t need to fight. Your spirit energy serves a different purpose.”

“Like defense, I assume?”

“Think more broadly,” she said. “Men are imbeciles. They think of only the most obvious options. If you’re not fighting, you’re defending — no. You could be scheming, healing, supporting, summoning, escaping, trapping, etcetera. The alternatives are endless. Don’t narrow yourself to two options when you can have so many more. Women have to keep their options open.”

You tilted your head to the side, exchanging a glance with Nairu. She seemed fascinated by Satomi. “Are you a fighter, too, Satomi?” you asked.

She smiled, her red lipstick especially prevalent. “Every day is a battle for consorts here in Demon World. We only have one shot at a better life. That means we have to play to our strengths. We may not fight as demons do, but we are warriors nonetheless.”

“I really admire that.”
“There’s nothing to admire, _____. You’re in a far better position than I am to pursue what you want most in life. At least, you have someone who loves you deeply.”

You quieted for a moment, feeling sad for her, the way she made that last comment. “What do you want out of life?” you asked.

She seemed surprised that you would direct such a question at her. “I don’t know.”

“A little happiness is a good place to start for anyone.”

“Happiness is a luxury here,” she said. “I just need to survive.”

“For now, maybe. We’re not so different, Satomi. I need to survive, too, and in order to do that, I need to produce results for the khan. I know what he wants, but I don’t quite know how to do it. But I’ll figure it out. I have to. If I want to move past all of this, I have to.”

“Is there really a way to move past this?”

“I can only hope, right? Maybe you have a way to move past this as well. Maybe someday you can leave Xanadu behind and pursue what you want most in life.”

She clicked her tongue. “That’s nice, but I’d rather be realistic.”

“Is being realistic accepting your misery?”

“Let me put it this way: It’s hard to have dreams. Because when they fail, you’re disappointed.”

“Isn’t it harder to not have dreams?”

“It is what it is. When your dreams have been crushed, you’re reluctant to give yourself hope again. Perhaps you’ll know what that feels like before the end.”

You shook your head. “I won’t let that happen. There’s too much at stake.”

“For you?”

“For everyone.”

“What exactly is it that you’re hoping to accomplish?”

“Something good, I hope,” you said. Although you weren’t sure what the future would hold, you were certain you couldn’t sit around, waiting for fate to show its hand. You had to play your cards. “Something that can help us all.”

“Then you’d better get to it,” Satomi said, closing her fan as she stepped away, an expression of doubt on her face. “Because, by god, you have a lot of work.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.
Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
You were left with Nairu, watching as Satomi walked away. What an interesting encounter. You wondered what would happen to the imperial consorts if Yul was defeated in the tournament. Would they be left without a home? Would they have the opportunity to escape Demon World and forge happy lives of their own?

You certainly hoped so.

“Come on,” you said to your spirit beast. “I’m sure Oktai is waiting for us.”

As you arrived in the garden, you saw a beautiful spread of pastries, both savory and sweet, fruits of all kinds, and a variety of teas. The table was set for three.

“Well, since Kurama isn’t here, it looks like you get a chair all to yourself,” you said to Nairu.

“Who says that the seat wasn’t for her in the first place?” Oktai said as he stepped into view, his usual staff in hand. He grinned.

Nairu was pleased by his comment, hopping into a chair without hesitation.

“She gets enough compliments already,” you said, stroking her ears. “All that attention will go to her head.” You seated yourself next to her.

“As it should. Not many are as noble as the great spirit beast.” Oktai gestured toward the spread. “Please,” he said. “Help yourselves.”

“Thank you for having us.” You first served Nairu, who looked at you with hungry eyes — you didn’t realize that hunger was a facial expression, but it was for her. You gave her a little bit of everything, which she nibbled at in a lady-like manner.

“So Kurama has decided to stay in?”
“You know Kurama,” you said, sipping at your tea. “He’s an introvert. He doesn’t always like the company of others. Please don’t take it personally.”

“Of course not. In fact, I rather enjoy our conversations.”

You waited, starting on some fruit, knowing exactly what he was about to ask next.

“Any news on the results of our wager?”

“3,242.”

“Really? Kurama knew his age down to the year?”

“It’s what he told me.” You spoke no lie, even though you suspected Kurama of manipulation. Oktai didn’t need to know that. As far as you were concerned, he gave you a response, and you had just as much reason to accept it than not.

“I see. He is an old chap, isn’t he? I suppose if any ancient demon would know his exact age, it would be him. Well, a deal’s a deal. What can I do for you, my lady?” There was not a hint of disappointment in his voice. In fact, he seemed rather chipper about losing the wager.

“Tell me about you,” you said. “I’ve been curious since I’ve arrived. You said you were a half-demon, mentored by Yul, that he took you under his wing. Why?”

Oktai looked at you, his eyes softening. “Yulkhan is a great leader,” he said. “He is powerful and wise. His lifelong goal is to unite Demon World. I’ve told you this before. What I haven’t told you is that in order to amass his thousands of years of power and armies, he chose the route of conquest. I was only a boy when his armies came to my village twenty-five years ago. All the men over the height of an umagi’s shoulder were slaughtered for their resistance. The women and children were permitted to live.”

“You and your mother,” you said, quietly.

“My mother and I, yes.”

“Your mother was the human, I assume?”

“Correct. My parents had a taboo relationship. In the eyes of demons, humans make a good meal; human women are often the agents of brothels. But humans and demons don’t mate, not in a union sense. They’re far too different in lifespan and nature. That didn’t seem to matter to my parents, though. My father even marked my mother so she would be protected in their village. No other demon would touch her.”

“Marked her? What does that mean?”

“It’s a common practice here to protect women. Male demons will often mark their mates — he creates a small wound that injects his demon energy beneath her skin. Its purpose is to warn other demons to stay away.”

“Oh,” you said, making a face. “That sounds painful.”

“I suppose it can be. Admittedly, I don’t know much about it, but the alternative seems far worse.”

You nodded slowly. “I guess if the alternative is sexual assault or being a demon’s next meal, maybe, but please continue.”
“Yulkhan took a liking to me. He said that I had potential, and he made me an offer. I was given a choice. I could serve Yulkhan and learn how to utilize my energy for his purposes. I would be able to fight on his behalf and manage affairs.”

“What was the other option?”

“I could continue living among the demons in the village. Once under Yulkhan’s dominion, village life returns to its relative normalcy, at least after a while. As long as the conquered agree to serve him and accept him as their lord, he leaves them alone to do as they please. He offers the protection of his armies and provides infrastructure.”

“Well, there are worse things, I suppose.”

Oktai tilted his head to the side with a small smile. “Yes, there are. Ultimately, Yulkhan desires peace. He’s not out to kill everyone or make their lives miserable. He only wishes to unify Demon World under a common banner.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“It’s the truth.”

“His truth? Or your truth?”

“I think we’re getting rather off topic, my lady. I thought you wanted to learn about my history?”

“Sorry,” you said with a sheepish smile. He was right. “Please continue. Why did you choose to serve him when you could go back home to your mother?”

“Well,” Oktai said, “there was a problem. Without my father around, no one was going to protect her. So I appealed to Yulkhan. He would shield her from other demons on the condition that I served him, and I agreed. Eventually, I became strong under his tutelage. I learned how to manipulate both my demon and spirit energy with incredible precision and power. Eventually, I got to a point where Yulkhan took my mother away from me.”

“That’s why you don’t know where she is.”

“No,” he said. He tried to hide the sadness, even looking away. You saw right through him. “That’s awful. I can’t believe he would do such a thing.”

“It was for her own protection, he said. I had made a lot of enemies in the palace because of how strong I was, how I rose through the ranks of his soldiers. I was only a boy at the time, and he had me engage in a bloodpact to ensure I would never go looking for her. In return, he promised to see to it that my mother was in good hands. She would live out her days in peace.”

“You must wonder where she is every day.”

“Some days.” Oktai gave you a gentle smile. “It’s been so long since I last saw her.”

“Do you want to see her again?”

“Oh, if only I could. I am bound to Yulkhan, and per our agreement, I may never search for her.”

You gave him a sympathetic glance. “That doesn’t mean anyone else can’t.”

“I suppose no one else is bound to those exact terms via bloodpact.”
“I’m certainly not.”

His expression darkened, his blue eyes losing their light. “Just what are you planning, ____?”

In your time here, you had never seen his usual chipper demeanor devolve to solemnity. Your training was done in good spirits, every task treated as an opportunity. This time, he even addressed you by your first name. This was the real Oktai talking.

You had finally brought him out. “You’ve been so kind to me since I’ve been here,” you said. “I want to help you find your mother.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.”

“Why not? Are you afraid of Yul?”

“Everyone should fear Yulkhan,” Oktai said. He didn’t continue, staring at his plate.

You reached out to touch his arm, first with the tip of your fingers, and when he didn’t shy away, your hand. “I’m sorry about what happened. He was wrong to separate you from your mother.”

“Are you not afraid?” he said, his eyes meeting yours. They were demanding an answer, as if your response could give him purpose.

“I am afraid,” you said. “But we can’t let fear control us. Being brave isn’t the absence of fear — it’s recognizing the fear and pushing past it.” You glanced at Nairu, who gave you an encouraging tug of her black lips. “You have to let me do this for you, Oktai. I don’t want you to feel tied down here, just because of this bloodpact.”

“It’s more complicated than that. You have to understand, _____. Yulkhan made me who I am today. In some ways, I think he saved me. I doubt I or my mother would have lasted long in that village under the protection of even my father. There was too much animosity towards us. Life was hard for me — it was even harder for my mother. She couldn’t go anywhere without being harassed or threatened. Even if my father’s mark warded away most demons and spared her from physical harm, words still stung.

“Yulkhan may have conquered the village and killed all the men and warriors, but he let the women and children live. He took someone like me, who had effectively no chance at a fulfilling life, destined to be killed at an early age, and gave me purpose.”

You watched him talk, and you felt the conflict in his words. He could not consolidate his feelings of betrayal with his gratitude for Yul. It made you angry — it was clear that Yul did this intentionally, manipulating his emotions.

“You’re right,” you said. “He took you in. He gave you the tools and guidance to make you strong. He protected you and your mother when you were vulnerable. But that doesn’t make him unilaterally a good person. He may have moments of kindness, but look at what he’s doing. He’s slaughtering innocent people if they don’t bow down to him. He’s forcing people into bloodpacts to do his bidding. He’s exploiting the human population, humans like your mother, for food and labor. You can’t possibly think that’s all right.”

“Like I said, it’s more complicated than that.” Oktai sighed as he stood, pushing his chair back. He grasped his staff and began walking toward the pond.

You followed, Nairu hopping down from her seat to trail behind you. “What do you mean? Help me understand.”
“Are we really the sum of our actions?” He stared at the koi-like fish as they gathered near the edge, waiting to be fed. “Is someone inherently evil because of their actions? Or is there some redemption in their intentions as well?”

“I think it’s a bit of both. People should be evaluated based off of both their motivation and their actions. You can have the best of intentions, but if on your quest for salvation, you perform malicious deeds, sacrifice the freedoms of others for your purpose, and act without empathy or regard for the world, I would argue that you’re evil.”

Oktai was quiet for a moment. “You may be right,” he finally said, giving you a sad smile. “But for your sake, I don’t want you to go looking for my mother.”

“I can be discreet—”

“No. Please don’t.” He stepped toward you, and touched your face, his fingers lingering on your cheek for only a moment. “You have a kind heart, my lady. I wouldn’t want to burden it.”

Later that morning, Oktai and Yoko Kurama had an intense workout for you. Activities included: laps, pushups, crab walks, lunges, squats, jumping jacks, and crunches, to name a few. You were shaking when the afternoon rolled around, drenched in a layer of sweat. Your muscles were still sore from yesterday, and even the day before that, but they felt numb now.

It was time to test your spirit energy.

You sat down on the edge of the ring, where Nairu waited for you. She greeted you by brushing up against your leg before stretching and settling on the ground. She gave you a knowing glance, and you were reminded of your interaction with Satomi today.

Yoko Kurama stood in front of you, stoic and rigid, eyes cold as usual. Just days before, that gaze would have intimidated you. Now, not so much.

You accepted him. Yoko Kurama was just another facet of Kurama. Your Kurama.

Behind those molten gold eyes, there he was. He was the same man in a different body. It was foreign to you, this concept of Kurama being able to shift so effortlessly between his human and demon forms.

But he was there. All of him, the thousands of years of wisdom and experience woven into his very soul.

Human or demon — it didn’t matter to you.

You loved him.

Satomi’s words rang true, and you felt a warmth well up inside of you, pressing to come forth from your very body.

Both Yoko and Oktai could sense it. You could tell by the deviations in their expressions and body language.

“Something’s happening,” you said, lifting your hand as close to your face as you dared. You felt a tingling in your fingertips, sparks alight as you studied the phenomenon. They flickered and
glowed, collected in the palm of your hand, swelling like drops of water. For a moment, you were breathless, the intensity of the moment stirring. You felt alive, the weariness of today’s exercises melting away.

This was your spirit energy.

It pooled, the trickle giving way to a cascade until it spilled from your hands and onto the ground. Your stepped away instinctively, experience telling you to not get your feet wet, but your spirit energy wasn’t quite like liquid. It surrounded you with fervor, with a comforting power that seemed to pulsate within each ebb and flow.

It was a pale orange, almost like a sunset, a palette of warm blush. You were brought back to that night in Inoji when Kurama first asked you out, the splendid sun sinking below the horizon. It wasn’t so long ago, but you felt a wave of nostalgia all the same — you felt so serene.

“My lady, look!” Oktai said, pointing at your hands.

It evolved. The energy pouring from your fingertips changed, blending and melting into a deeper orange, darkening into reds and browns. It was like the autumn, the world you left behind when you were brought here. The warmth began to dissipate, replaced by a lively force as you felt the first tingle of chill.

Then, it was opaque, a color reminding you of frost on a lake in the winter months. The feathery snowflakes drifted slowly toward the edge of the pool, making their way toward Oktai and Yoko.

Meanwhile, Nairu, was ankle deep. She picked up a paw, flicking your energy away, and it dissolved into the air. Even she seemed surprised, watching the calm coolness spilling from your hands. She even tried licking her paw, but she made a face.

Yoko Kurama stepped forward and into your energy, the pool growing larger by the second. With a brush behind his head, he removed a seed from his hair. He reached for your hand, supporting it in his own, as he placed the seed in your palm. At first, it did nothing, but you could feel him start it with just a touch of his demon energy.

And spring came. Your spirit energy seemed to react to Yoko’s nudging, turning from white to a fond yellow and verdant glow. The seed began to sprout into a stem, thickening into a stalk as it fed on your energy. Leaves came forth, bright and tender, shaped like teardrops, building upon one another. Flowers began to bloom, pops of rich color — pinks and lavenders — consuming your visage.

“You should stop now,” Yoko said.

“I don’t know how,” you said, still fixated on the plant in your hand. It was difficult to believe that this was you.

“You better figure it out.”

“Why?”

“I can sense your spirit energy is nearly depleted.”

“Is that bad?”

“Well,” Oktai said, coming closer, “it’s generally not best practice as it can leave you feeling weak and in need of recuperation.”
You nodded. “All right. How do I do it?”

“Turn it off,” Yoko said. “Just like a faucet.”

“What faucet? There is no faucet,” you said, feeling a little uneasy. You certainly didn’t want to hurt yourself — you had just learned how to use your spirit energy!

“Ah, don’t worry too much, my lady. Worst case scenario, you deplete your energy and lose consciousness—”

You felt lightheaded already. The last thing you remembered was falling forward into Yoko’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

Fainting can be such a bad plot device. I originally didn't want the RC to faint, but it actually worked out really well. :'D lol.

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Silver Tongue

Chapter Summary

While you're unconscious, Kurama and Nairu have a moment to chat. Then, when you finally come to, you and Kurama have some alone time... until you don't.

Chapter Notes

I have to show you all this gorgeous fanart of Nairu from Anne_frederick: Click here for adorable Nairu! Thank you so much! I LOVE IT. <3 <3 <3

Now, I am looking for a manga artist. I have a few artists in mind I can reach out to, but I thought I'd post this here first to see if any EtS readers have any anime or manga-style experience who'd be willing to take up a project with me! I'm looking to hire someone to draw a few scenes from EtS. I am particularly interested in someone who is familiar with the original YYH manga style, though I am open to other styles of art. I will pay you or even trade or do a hybrid of the two. If you are interested, please reach out to me to discuss my vision and payment! You can PM me via FB or Tumblr (information in the end notes), or even email me at paradiseislandyoshi[at]gmail[dot]com.

As always, I'd like to thank those who've left comments for me:
Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, FannibalToast, Shara_Ookami92, TK091, CrossYourTeez, Anne_frederick, Kupid, and WittyKins! I feel really repetitive saying this, but it's your thoughts and comments that keep me going! I appreciate every one of you for crafting me your feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He felt desperate whenever she was in danger.

It was a gut reaction, a reflex he could not control. He took far more care with her life than he did his own.

She was so fragile, so small compared to him, and as she fell forward, he caught her, gently hoisting her over his shoulder. He destroyed the plant that sprouted from the seed, just in case it would somehow tap into her life reserves — it shriveled and turned brown, falling to the ground.

Oktai clicked his tongue. “It seems that your ‘like a faucet’ example didn’t quite resonate with her. We’ll have to do better when providing instructions.”

Yoko gave him a cold stare.

“See how she feels tomorrow,” Oktai said, unaffected by his aloof reaction. “Training may have to wait an extra day if she needs the rest.”
He didn’t respond. He was already on his way back to the palace, Nairu at his heels.

When they returned to their chambers, Yoko laid _____ down on the bed. The moment she was settled, he returned to his human form, the far more nurturing side of him. He adjusted her pillow and laid a blanket across her.

“Interesting day, hm?” Nairu hummed.

“Indeed,” Kurama said, tucking hair from her face. “Let’s hope she recovers quickly.”

“You worry too much. She’s far more resilient than you give her credit for. Her heartbeat is strong, her consciousness is right below the surface of sleep. She’s fine. She just needs a little rest, is all.”

“You’re right.” He looked at the spirit beast, her confident expression. Even now, he could hardly believe she was the manifestation of _____’s love for him. “What do you make of her spirit energy?”

“It’s nothing like I’ve ever seen before.”

“I share that sentiment.”

“Her energy mimics the four seasons of the living world. I wonder what that constitutes and means for her. She’s able to grow flowers when she channels spring?”

“No, not at all,” Kurama said, a pensive look on his face as he watched his beloved sleep. “As unique as it was, her energy is not the type that can manipulate plants. We waited for a few moments before I placed that seed in her hand. I had to feed it a small amount of my demon energy for it to sprout. Instead, I propose that her energy magnified my own.”

“I see. I recognized the energy from the plant as yours. I wasn’t sure if she was able to mimic it or if there was another explanation.”

“Which begs the question: If her spring energy, so to speak, can magnify my energy, what do the other representations of the seasons do?”

“I don’t know,” Nairu said as she began grooming herself. “But they sure don’t taste good.” As she licked her paw, her eyes rolled over to Kurama. “Oh, by the way, _____ was able to glean some information from Oktai this morning. You both are far more alike than you realize.”

“How so?”

“Well, you both love your mothers, for one.”

“I’m not sure that’s so unique.”

“Maybe not unique, but that’s why Oktai is here. He wished to protect his mother. You’re both engaged in a bloodpact with Yul, arms twisted because of someone you each love. You’re going to both have to fight your way out.”

“Mm. That doesn’t surprise me.” Kurama sat on the edge of the bed. “Do you think Oktai can be trusted?”

“That’s not really for me to decide. I’ll go with however _____ feels. I trust her.”

“While I can appreciate the loyalty, I fear she may act out of compassion to her detriment.”
“You could be right.”

He shook his head, amused at Nairu’s deliberate ambiguity. “What did she do?”

“She offered to look for Oktai’s mother on his behalf since the conditions of his bloodpact prevent him from doing so.”

“And how does she plan on doing that?”

Nairu shrugged her shoulders. “You’ll have to ask her.”

“I see.”

“You don’t seem so concerned.”

“No,” he said. “The idea is a good one. If it can logistically be arranged, knowing the location of his mother actually gives us leverage. Oktai is Yul’s most capable servant. He suppressed his powers considerably during our duel at the banquet.”

“How do you know this?”

“Subtle cues during our fight. I could tell by the way he paced himself, the amount of energy he revealed, the way he withheld information. Oktai is talented, but he lacks insight and finesse, something that comes with experience and time.”

“He’s young,” Nairu said. “He has a lot to learn in the ring. You think he would help us?”

“With the right motivation.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I doubt _____ had such intentions. She wanted to help Oktai from the goodness of her heart.”

“Unfortunately, compassion is rarely rewarded in Demon World.”

“You wish her to learn this? Be more like you?”

Kurama sighed. “I only wish she will realize it while we’re here. I certainly don’t want her to be more like me — she has many redeeming qualities, all of which I admire, naiveté included. Less than three months, Nairu, and we’ll return to Living World. She’ll never have to step foot in Demon World again, if I can help it.”

“Very well,” Nairu said with a dip of her head. “I’ll hold you to it.”

You stirred, letting out a small groan as you opened your eyes. You were in your bed, Nairu nestled against your side. She was so warm.

“You’re awake,” she said, stretching and then sitting up. “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” you said, trying to remember how you ended up here. “I… I figured out my spirit energy, didn’t I? Oh, that’s what happened. I depleted it.”

“You’ve been asleep for about eighteen hours, ____. That’s how depleted you were. We’re going to have to address that.” She hopped from the bed, landing gracefully on all four paws. “But first, I’m going to find Kurama. He’ll want to know you’ve come to.”
“Oh, Kurama,” you thought fondly. He was probably worried about you.

It seemed that Nairu didn’t need to go too far. In a moment, Kurama was at the door — apparently, he heard your whispers from the den. “______,” he said as he rushed to your side, eyes alight with relief. “How are you feeling, my love?”

“Really good, actually.” You let him study you, gently brushing the hair from your face. “How are you? Nairu says I was out for eighteen hours.”

“That’s not usual for someone who depleted her spirit energy. The human body needs time to recover, and sleeping facilitates that.”

“How are you doing? What have you been up to since I’ve been out?”

“I’m well,” he said, kissing your temple as he sat next to you in bed. “Nairu and I have been discussing your spirit energy.”

“Oh, that’s exciting,” you said, your fingers weaving through his. “Tell me about that? Because I don’t even know where to begin.”

“We have a few theories. Truthfully, your energy is unique. Until we run a few more experiments, we won’t know for certain how it works.”

You pulled the covers aside, ready to slip out of bed. “Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go—”

Kurama gently pushed you back into bed. “Hold on, _____. I think it would behoove you to rest for at least another day. Your body was under a lot of strain yesterday when you depleted your energy. Best give it time to recover.”

“But I feel fine.” You would have argued more, if not for the sternness in Kurama’s eyes — it was well-hidden beneath his tender gaze, but you saw it nonetheless. “All right, fine. What do you propose I do, then? I’m not sleepy anymore. Am I supposed to just sit here all day?”

“No, you may walk around, but keep physical exertion to a minimum.”

You thought about what there was to do in the palace, and your pre-training encounters came to mind. “I need to find Arban.”

“What for?”

“I need to talk to him. I assume Nairu filled you in on the details of our conversation?”

“I did.” She arrived, her tails flicking as she jumped onto the bed.

“I knew you would.” You reached out to pet her, and she rubbed her head against your hand. “I wanted to ask Arban for a favor. The rest of us are tied up here and under close surveillance, but no one knows Arban is here.”

“Actually,” Kurama said, “Oktai knows he’s here somewhere. By extension, I would assume Yul does as well.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“He said so during our first meeting on the edge of Xanadu. I doubt they’ve been able to find Arban beyond the first detection. He is competent and a skilled shapeshifter — his very forte is to disguise himself among enemies and strangers. His previous experience in Xanadu is, no doubt, an
advantage to him as well.”

You breathed a sigh of relief. “Is it still morning?”

“It’s very early morning,” Nairu said. “You have all day to find him.”

“No, finding him is too difficult, especially if he doesn’t want to be found. He seems to have taken on the task of replacing the flowers in the den every day. If I can get him a message, he can come find me.”

“What do you have in mind? A note?”

“That’s too obvious. I wouldn’t want to risk someone else finding it first — oh!” You slipped out of bed, retrieving the small backpack that Botan brought from Living World for you. You rummaged through it, finding a hair tie. “These are clearly mine. Can you hang one of these from a flower, Nairu? He’s sure to recognize it, and I’m sure it’ll be subtle enough that no one else will notice.”

She accepted the hair tie from you, grasping it between her tiny teeth, and ran off to the den.

“I’m impressed,” Kurama said as he watched her disappear through the cracked door.

“With what?”

“Your thought process. You’re clever, my love. Modest, perhaps, but clever.”

You shrugged with a small smile. “I learn from the best. First, Shuichi Minamino, and now Kurama.”

His eyes softened, and he tilted his head to the side. “How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Release your spirit energy. You were having trouble with it before.”

“I guess Nairu hasn’t told you yet.”

“Mm?”

“I bumped into a woman named Satomi—”

“Satomi? Yul’s consort?” Kurama rarely interrupted you, but there was concern in his expression.

“Yes, I think so. Why? Do you know her?”

“We’ve met. What did she say to you?”

“She helped me.” You wondered how much you should share with Kurama about your encounter with the women yesterday. It wasn’t that you wanted to keep secrets from him, but you didn’t want to worry him either. “On our way to meeting Oktai yesterday, I ran into a group of consorts. Satomi showed up and shooed them away, and we started talking about my training. She suggested that instead of trying to narrow down my options and forcing my spirit energy to do something specific, I should just think about you. And, well, it worked.”

Kurama nodded slowly. “I see. I wonder what role she plays in all of this.”
“You don’t think we can trust her?”

“I wouldn’t trust anyone here. It’s wise to be cautious. I am glad her advice worked for you, however. It serves both us and her master.”

He was right. You discovering your spirit energy was not just beneficial to you — it was what Yul wanted as well. Perhaps Satomi really was just serving him.

“What did those woman say to you?” Kurama asked, suddenly.

“Oh, it’s really nothing.”

He reached out to touch your hand, his fingers warm against your skin. “They said something about me, didn’t they?”

You looked at him, the sincerity in his eyes. He always made you feel comfortable around him, sometimes even going out of his way. You decided it was better for him to explain his perspective than keep that conversation silent in your heart. “Long story short, they described to me your… penchant for women in your Yoko Kurama days.”

“Ah, that.” He looked away from you for a moment, apparently deep in thought. “_____, that was a long time ago. It’s not an excuse for my behavior, but—”

“It’s okay,” you said, lifting a hand to his lips to shush him. “I’m not really interested in your past, Kurama. It’s who you were, not who you are, and I love who you are today.”

“I know,” he said, grasping your hand to kiss it. “And I am incredibly blessed for that. But I’m sure that conversation must have been uncomfortable for you, and I want to answer any questions you might have. I’d rather you hear it from me than Yul’s consorts should you come across them again.”

“You make it sound like I should be jealous,” you said, giving him a coy glance. You were glad he was willing to be so open with you, and since he insisted on talking about it, you had no qualms about teasing him.

“Of course not. I’ve never loved anyone before you.”

His words caught you off guard. How was that even possible? He was over three thousand years old. Did he really love no one during that period of time?

“It’s true,” Kurama continued as he scooted closer to you, hand brushing against your cheek. “All previous relationships with women were strictly physical in nature, quid pro quo arrangements. In my line of work, I couldn’t afford to trust. I couldn’t afford to love.”

“No love for over three thousand years?”

He chuckled, nuzzling his face into your neck. “I loved my treasures, my stolen artifacts. I admit they’re poor substitutes for a fulfilling relationship, but they were all I thought I wanted. I know better now. I wouldn’t trade you for all the wealth and artifacts in the world.”

Oh, what a silver tongue he had. You weren’t upset, but even if you were, you probably wouldn’t be anymore.

“I love you, _____,” he said.
You leaned toward him for a slow and tender kiss. “I love you, too, Kurama,” you said as you pulled away. “I’m glad we had this conversation.”

“You’re not unsettled by any of this information?”

“No. I’m all right. I understand where your experience comes from now, and I think I’ve more than benefited from that.”

“That’s certainly one way to look at it,” he said, giving you an affectionate squeeze.

“I do have a question, though.”

“Mm?”

“You’ve obviously been with a lot of women. Surely, you have expectations for what good sex is. Am I... Um... I guess... I’m wondering if I’m—”

Before you could finish, Kurama pushed you into the pillows, leaning over you. “You are stunning,” he whispered in your ear. “I could not be more aroused by the sight of you, and believe me — you do not disappoint.” He kissed you, his lips soft against yours, a touch of passion in his gesture.

You reached for him, tangling your fingers in his hair as you returned his kiss. These occasions brought about a sense of excitement and poignance that made your heart flutter for him. Your hands slid to his shoulders and then to his chest where you began to undo his shirt—

“Ahem.”

Surprised, you both sat up.

“Don’t forget I’m still here,” Nairu said, laying on the vanity, her tails twitching. “I came back minutes ago. Really, if you want some time alone, you should let me know before you start with the kissy stuff.”

Neither you nor Kurama said anything.

“You want me to leave now?”

You sighed and grinned at her. “No, that’s all right, Nairu. I think the moment’s gone.”

She giggled, burying her nose under one of her tails.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Half of His Heart

Chapter Summary

You summon Arban and ask him for a huge favor.

Chapter Notes

OH MY GOSH. It feels LIKE FOREVER since I last updated.

I've been working on that Hiei one-shot that I posted yesterday -- it took longer than I originally intended, but I think it was worthwhile!

Anyway, loving how this chapter turned out! We get to explore Arban a bit.

Thank you to those who commented: Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Shara_Ookami92, Kupid, CrossYourTeez, FannibalToast, Anne_frederick, and PseudoHuman. ^_^ I love reading your thoughts, especially on the RC's newfound powers. There will be more revealed in the next couple of chapters!

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You stayed in bed the remainder of the day, resting per Kurama’s instructions. Qara brought you your meals and refills of tea, while Nairu kept you warm. Kurama provided intellectual stimulation.

That was one thing you loved about him. He had a beautiful mind. You could banter and converse with him all day. No topics were off limits. All questions received an answer. One moment, you would be discussing the complexities of global warming; the next, you would both be trying to name at least ten body parts that are three letters long. You could debate the merits of the death penalty, which would eventually devolve into you giving a lecture on animal behavior theory and force-free dog training.

You had something special. Kurama wasn’t only your lover or your boyfriend — he was your friend, your confidant, your strength, your support. His smile, coupled with a coy glance of evergreen, brought you immense joy.

He said the other day that he could marry you.

You could marry him.

You didn’t even need to spend time thinking about it. The response rang true and sincere.

He was your soulmate — you could not be more sure. In your heart, you knew he was the one you were meant to spend the rest of your life with. It seemed naive to give your heart away after so little time, but you didn’t care. It was perfection, the way you loved one another.
Nairu was generally quiet, content to listen to your conversations, napping away the morning.

At about 9 a.m., you heard the obnoxious wings of a fly, buzzing around the room. Immediately, Kurama was suspicious, and your discussion on spirituality was cut short as he left the bed.

“Wait,” you said, remembering the last time you encountered a fly. “I think it’s Arban.”

In a moment, the wingbeats stopped, and a figure seemed to materialize in the room. It was the indication of a gifted shapeshifter. Arban appeared in his Akita mix form, the one you were most familiar with. “I saw your hair tie,” he said. “Not bad for a subtle cue.”

You crawled out of bed to greet him, sitting down on the floor so you were at eye level. “Thank you for coming.”

He nodded. “It’s nice to see you healed up. Amazing what a little fox demon saliva can do.”

“It’s a little known skill,” Kurama said.

“I’m certainly feeling a lot better,” you said. “And I’m sure you’ve been watching, but Nairu’s here with us, too. My spirit beast.”

“This one is Arban?” she said, watching from the bed, head tilting in curiosity. “Oh my, you do have an affinity for canines.”

“Just a coincidence,” Arban said. “I take many forms. This just happens to be one of them.” He looked at you. “It’s good you don’t have to carry that egg around anymore.”

“This egg’s got legs.”

“And a mouth.”

“And teeth.”

He looked amused. “So it seems. She’s just like you, ______.”

“I’m very glad I have legs and mouth and teeth,” you said, enjoying the exchange. But time was of the essence. “I need a favor, Arban.”

“Mm?”

“I’ve been talking with Oktai.”

“Just another lackey,” Arban said. “He is not to be trusted.”

“Agreed,” Kurama said.

This was probably the first time they had ever agreed on anything.

“Well,” you said, “I haven’t decided whether or not I want to trust him, but there is something we can do for him that might help our situation.”

“And what is that?” Arban asked.

You explained to him what you discovered about Oktai’s mother, how she was sent away when he was only a boy. “I know you’re familiar with Demon World, and you’re able to go anywhere you please. Can you find her? Not for Oktai, but for me?”
There was a moment of silence as he contemplated your request. “If I know Yul,” he began, “then she was sent far away from here, but not too far. He would want updates on her condition, and any valuable asset, even hostages, are to be kept under lock and key. But…”

“But what?” you said.

“She may be dead.” Kurama finished. “I would be surprised if she were still alive after all these years. Humans are not treated kindly here.”

“You don’t know whether or not that’s true.”

“Perhaps not, but those seem to be the odds.”

“I’d still like to try,” you said, quietly. “I can’t not know. Oktai can’t not know what happened to his mother.”

“You’d do the same for yours, wouldn’t you, Kurama?” Nairu said, clearly siding with you. “You love your human mother, too.”

“I would,” Kurama said, without hesitation. “And I do believe this information could prove to be useful. If Arban is willing, I think this is an opportunity.”

You looked toward Arban with pleading eyes.

He sighed. “Very well. I’ll have to do some digging first for some sort of direction.”

“Do you need help with that?” you said, feeling grateful beyond words.

“We’ll see,” he said, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “I’ll need a place to begin my search, but I have a few ideas.”

Arban succeeded where everyone else had failed.

He betrayed the dictator Yul and lived to tell the tale. He was still on the run, figuratively speaking, but even now, he defied the khan. He would not bow; he would not surrender. He would do his utmost to assist _____, no matter what she asked. It was, after all, in part his fault that she was not better hidden in Living World.

Eri was one half of his heart. It seemed that _____ was the other.

It wasn’t right to play favorites with the dozens of descendents that came from Eri, but if he was being honest, he liked _____ the best.

They were all similar in many ways, but she reminded him most of her ancestral mother. They had the same face, the same eyes, the same laugh. They were both idealistic, _____ more so than Eri. Eri had accepted her fate as Yul’s consort, but she found happiness and leverage in other ways. Ultimately, she wanted a better life for her child and the many that would come after.

Arban would honor that wish until his final heartbeat.

So he watched over _____ like a hawk. He cared not what she did in her free time. She was an inspirational woman, clever and generous. People loved her, from her classmates to her family, from her coworkers to those whom she served in the community.

He behaved himself. When she started dating in high school, he did not chase away her boyfriends,
though he certainly had his opinions — too dim, too arrogant, too boring. He watched her from many different eyes, content to let her live out her life as she saw fit. She made mistakes, but Arban knew this was a part of the learning process.

He was there for her when she needed him the most, in whatever form she required. When she was young and had nightmares, he hopped into her bed and curled his labrador body around her; when she had her first break-up, he comforted her as a fortune teller, claiming she had much more to look forward to in the future; when she was lost late at night on campus, he posed as a kind, old gentleman to guide her way.

Arban knew devotion like no other. He hid himself well, knowing fully that if he was discovered by Yul, he would no longer be as useful to _____.

When he first arrived in Xanadu, he thought the best course of action was to have her leave, to whisk her away to safety. But it seemed that her love for Kurama was strong, and she could not abandon him after he made such a sacrifice for her.

And a sacrifice, it was. Bloodpacts were a terrible ancient magic. Nothing good came of them. Arban was unsure of Kurama, another demon in her life. But after he sold his freedom to Yul to protect _____, Arban was convinced that he could be trusted.

It was fine. If _____ felt compelled to stay for Kurama, he would, too. He would never desert her.

This was her life to live. Perhaps he would have been more insistent, but every time he looked at her, he was reminded of Eri — her perseverance, her compassion, her strength. He knew he could not deny _____ her destiny. This was Eri’s child, and after her bloodline survived for over a thousand years, through thirty-two generations, _____’s fate was something Arban could no longer control.

He could only help her.

Arban searched for clues. Yul had to know where he sent Oktai’s mother, but he would never merely speak that information. He was not the source Arban needed to be targeting.

Instead, there were other avenues. Yul kept a harem of human women, not only for his lust of both power and carnal pleasures, but because he needed those whom he could keep in confidence. Most of the consorts did not fall into this category, but there was one person who did — the imperial noble consort.

From the whispers he heard, working from day to day, he knew the most recent imperial noble consort had died from illness and had yet to be replaced.

But there was one before her who was still alive.

_____ had met her in the garden. She was elderly now, having served Yul for many years, but she was still cognizant. If anyone knew Yul’s secrets, it would be her.

Arban would have to devise a plan to retrieve that information.

It was a good thing he could become anyone he wished.

After a day of rest, Kurama brought you back to the training grounds in the early morning.
You had never been so excited to train. Having discovered your spirit energy, you felt revitalized, like you were actually making progress.

“We’ll be doing a lot of trial and error,” Kurama said. “I’m afraid it’s not so exciting, but we need to understand how your spirit energy functions. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Well, I think it’s interesting. I’m legitimately looking forward to it.”

“Good.” he said. “Your spring energy has something to do with growth. We at least know that much.”

“Do you really think the other seasons are different?”

“I don’t know. We’ll just have to find out.”

Kurama sat down with you on the edge of the ring. “Now,” he said, handing you a seed. “You can’t do anything with this. You don’t have the ability to manipulate plants. Go ahead and try.”

You focused on the seed in your palm, willing your energy to come forth. It did, spilling into your hand, so much more easily than it did before. It seemed that you had broken some sort of seal inside of you, and now that your spirit energy was free to roam.

Color washed forth, a bright symbol of green and yellow, the warmth engulfing your hand. It made you feel cheerful, hopeful.

Nothing happened with the seed.

“Now,” Kurama started. “If I add my energy, even just a few drops not normally enough to stimulate plant growth” — the seed began to sprout — “look at what happens.” The sprout grew into a plant, and even as you dropped it onto the ground, it continued to grow, blossoming and reaching toward the sky with tender leaves.

“It’s amazing,” you said. “I never thought I’d be able to do this.”

“You can do more. Try stopping your flow of energy.”

“How?”

“Well, if your love for me released your energy, perhaps you should think about how much you loathe my bad jokes.”

“Kurama.”

He chuckled. “Sorry.” The plant continued to grow, and he stood, pulling you aside as to avoid its advance. “Your energy magnifies mine. Perhaps you don’t feel it yet as this is all new to you, but our energies are intertwined. Try to sense it. Imagine severing that relationship, ceasing it completely.”

“All right,” you said. “I’ll give it a shot.” You closed your eyes to better focus. It was like fumbling through the darkness, trying to find the particulars of your energy. Kurama was right — your own energy felt foreign to you. It was too fresh, too new. But it was comforting, and you continued to grope around with your consciousness, attempting to find something even more unfamiliar.

Then, it occurred to you. There was a part of your energy that you thought was yours, but it wasn’t
quite you. It was all Kurama, the demon whom you loved and accepted. You had never even fathomed the concept of spirit energy until you met him — no doubt, he would influence the manifestation of yours. And having been exposed to his demon energy long before you discovered your spirit energy, you must have thought it was your own.

You found it, the connection between your energies, and you cut through it cleanly with your very will.

The plant stopped growing, its leaves rustling in the wind. It had matured while you were thinking, trying to curb your spirit energy, and it was about your height. Blossoms of blue, the color of the Living World sky, greeted you.

“You did it.” Kurama touched your waist, bringing you close. He gestured toward the flowers.

“Actually, you did that. I just helped.”

“It was more you than me,” he said. “I barely used any of my energy. The plant would not normally grow with so little sustenance.”

You shrugged. “I guess when we go back home, we can grow a garden together?”

“I’d like that.” He leaned in, kissing your temple. “But first, we have some work to do. How do you feel about exploring the other facets of your energy?”

“Well,” you started, “I’ve always really liked autumn.”

“Let’s start there, then, my love.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Serendipity

Chapter Summary

Your training continues, and Arban makes a discovery.

Chapter Notes

WAAAAAH. I'm so sorry for how long this chapter has taken. ^_^;; This week has been absolutely insane. My father-in-law will be going into open-heart surgery tomorrow, so we've been preparing for that. With the coronavirus, work has been crazy with the markets fluctuating in response to the pandemonium. I finally dropped my primary ballot at the post office today -- VOTE, AMERICANS, VOTE, I SAY! I made a huge breakfast for my coworkers Friday morning, so Wednesday and Thursday nights were spent prepping for that. I'm hoping things will calm down after this week.

I've been trying to write Friday and Saturday night, but I just fell asleep with my laptop in my lap. :DDD

Thank you to everyone who has been so patient! And a special thank you to those who left comments: Hana (Scarlet_Hana), flyinginstinct, Shara_Ookami92, CrossYourTeez, Kupid, FannibalToast, Anne_frederick, Kilana, and Rachsteph27! <3 Your feedback is most appreciated and gratifying!

Please enjoy this chapter! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Nothing’s happening, Kurama.”

“It’s all right,” he said, removing the seed from your hand. The last half an hour was not fruitful. “Your autumn energy may not function with the energies of others. There are a number of possibilities. Why don’t we move onto something else for right now?”

“All right,” you said. You had practiced manipulating your energy between the seasons, and you could change them on a whim now. The transition wasn’t perfect, but you were getting there. You reached inside, trying to find the cold, the sullen, the lapse of time in which the world was encased in a frozen wonderland.

“Try again,” Kurama said, returning the seed.

You held it in your palm, surrounding it with your energy.

“Ready?”

You nodded.
Kurama began to feed it with his energy. He paused, tilting his head to the side as he stared at the seed. “Strange,” he said.

“What?” you asked, wondering just what had him so interested.

“___, I want you to try something.”

“Sure.”

“Instead of focusing on the seed, try using your winter energy on me.”

“Why? What do you think it’ll do?”

“We’ll find out,” he said.

You placed your hands on your hips. “You know, you being so secretive about this doesn’t inspire confidence. Am I about to do something I’m going to regret?”

Kurama’s eyes softened. “My love, if I tell you, you might not want to do it. Please trust me. I have a theory I’d like to test.”

“That’s right,” you said. “Kuwabara was telling me how much you enjoy sustaining injuries.”

“‘Enjoy’ is a strong word. I generally don’t mind a few flesh wounds if it helps me gain greater realization.”

You studied him. At first glance, he didn’t look like a warrior. His vivid eyes and gracefully wayward hair didn’t lend themselves to that image, but you knew that underneath his very human appearance, there was an ancient demon inside who craved combat. He could brawl with the best of them, bringing challengers to their knees. It was hard to believe that gentle Kurama had a warrior’s heart, that the spirit of fighting was an integral piece of him.

Whatever your energy did, he could withstand it. You had to trust him.

You took a deep breath, dropping the seed, and instead reached for Kurama’s hand. “Are you sure?” you said.

“Of course, my love.” He gave you a reassuring smile. “I’ll be fine, I promise.”

You squeezed his hand. “All right. Here it goes.” You began to channel winter, bringing forth a vision of ice and sleet, a storm on snow-capped mountains. Your energy engulfed Kurama, and you looked on, anxious at the thought that you might hurt him.

He seemed unaffected at first, and he revealed a rose to you, pulling it out from underneath his hair. With a flick of his wrist, he summoned his whip — well, he tried to summon his whip. He stared at the rose and tried again. And again. The third time, his rose whip appeared, thorns sharp, as its length fell to the ground.

Kurama looked at you. “___, your spring energy magnifies the energy of others, and your winter energy diminishes the energy of others.”

You stopped, cutting off your spirit energy. “How can you tell?”

“I tried to bring forth my rose whip with the usual amount of energy required. It didn’t work. I doubled it with no success. I then increased it several fold, and I was finally able to manipulate this rose. Your winter must have the power to weaken demon energy, and it’s strong.”
“Really?”

“Yes. I imagine you’ll become quite formidable with a little training.”

“Well, that’s what I have you for.”

“So that’s why you keep me around.”

Your expression softened, and you smiled at him. “I keep you around for so much more than that, you doofus.”

“I hope I may continue to exhibit whatever traits you find so endearing.”

“You have a lot to live up to, then.”

Kurama laughed, eyes crinkling in sincere amusement. “You are charming.”

“Really? I thought we were talking about you.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but you looked past his shoulder at a new arrival in the distance. Even the smallest diversion in your eyes was obvious to him, and he turned around. “Ah,” he said. “Oktai.”

You saw the figure, but he was still too far for you to identify him. “How can you tell from here?”

“I can smell him.”

“Oh.” You had to suppress a giggle. “What does he smell like?”

The question seemed to catch Kurama off guard, and he looked at you with a rare blank expression.

“It’s okay if you don’t have a description,” you said. “Dogs use their sense of smell to perceive the world in ways that humans can’t even fathom. There’s evidence that they can even smell the passing of time. And if every living thing has its unique scent, I can imagine it might be difficult to put into words how they differ.”

“I’m not sure my sense of smell is as good as that of a dog,” he said, “but it is helpful when sight is not so effective.”

“What do I smell like?”

“Like you, of course.”

“That hardly answers my question.”

Kurama paused for a few moments of contemplation. “Serendipity,” he finally said. “The wonder of encountering a paradise long lost, something I never thought I’d find. That’s what your scent is like.”

The response was good enough for you, and you leaned your head against his shoulder as you waited for Oktai to arrive.

Arban, disguised as a rodent, followed the retired imperial noble consort. He spent the day studying her.
Ichika was her name, and she lived in regal splendor, all the luxuries she wanted at her disposal. She was provided with the best food, the finest clothing, and servants to answer her beck and call. Her days were short as she spent a good part of it napping between walks in the garden and meals.

It was no wonder all women in the harem pursued the position of imperial noble consort. This was truly paradise for a human in Demon World, protected within the walls of the palace, shielded by the supreme ruler in all of the lands.

But, despite all of her luxuries, Arban noticed something about Ichika. She was lonely. She stared at Yul’s portraits and idolized the gifts of jewelry he had once bestowed upon her. She would tell stories about her time as the imperial noble consort, when she advised Yul, to whomever would listen — mostly the servant girls.

While Yul spent his days and nights with the harem, he ignored her, the woman who had been at his side for decades. She was only human, after all, subject to the cruel turn of time, and her body would one day deteriorate — in fact, the decay had already begun. She was no longer the object of his affections and never would be again.

Arban pitied her.

But he didn’t pity her enough to relent — she would be useful, likely to have the information he needed.

During his days serving Yul as a master warlord, he came to understand the tyrant well. He had even shaken his hand several times before, a grave mistake on Yul’s part, allowing a shapeshifter of Arban’s caliber to touch him. Arban knew his mannerisms, his speech patterns, and his overall thought process — as such, he was in an excellent position to leverage the situation for _____’s benefit.

When Ichika was alone, having dismissed her servants for the night, he shifted into Yul’s likeness and entered her chambers.

It was manipulative, callous, even, what he was about to do. She was vulnerable, after having been neglected for so many years, and she never thought to suspect. This old woman knew only loyalty to her khan, and Arban forced her to betray him.

But it worked, and as soon as Arban ascertained the location of Oktai’s mother, he left.

He wanted to tell _____ where he was going, but time was short. If Oktai’s mother was to have any chance, Arban had to find her soon.

He shifted into the form of a stag, legs graceful and lithe, his chest cavity able to house lungs that could withstand travel over long distances. He bounded off into the sunset, each leap bringing him closer and closer to his destination.

Once Oktai arrived, Kurama changed into his demon form.

After a summary of what you discovered earlier in the morning, Oktai offered to try to coax out your summer and fall energies eventually by running a series of structured experiments.

First, of course, you had to hone your body, quite literally keeping yourself on your toes. You were hoping to avoid the laps around the palace, and the endless strength and endurance exercises, but your mentors insisted.
It would be a grueling day.

Your legs were strained, your lungs crying for air, and you collapsed onto your knees. “I think…” you said, “we’re done… for the day.”

Yoko Kurama stepped toward you, calm and composed, as if he exerted no effort at all. “No. Keep going,” he said. “The more you push, the stronger you’ll become. The power of your spirit energy is immense, its possibilities endless. It is vital that you keep your body in top condition. Your spirit energy cannot grow properly if its vessel does not advance with it.”

“He’s right,” Oktai added. “We can explore your summer and fall energy at any time — in fact, they may even surface when we least expect it. And even if they take a while to mature, there are a myriad of other things we can work on in the meantime.”

You sighed. They were right, as always. You braced yourself for the intense workout that was to come.

In the afternoon, you were sore and shaking, but you persevered. You didn’t want to disappoint Kurama, and you certainly didn’t want to disappoint Nairu. But most of all, you didn’t want to cheat yourself of a future in which you had control.

You wanted happiness, a fulfilling life with the ones you loved. You wanted to be in a position where you could achieve and grow as an individual. For the longest time, you were content with how things were. When Kurama entered your life, you were elated — it was like you had found your other half, your soulmate.

And you were willing to fight to keep it.

Violence never suited you. You still weren’t sure it did, but in these recent weeks, you discovered that sometimes you would have to do things you didn’t want to do. This was the hand you were dealt, and you would have to play your cards — there was nothing to be gained by hoarding them in your hand. You had to act on them so you could reveal new cards, new strategies.

“I know you’re tired, my lady,” Oktai said, “but that is no excuse for poor form.” He touched your knee (Yoko Kurama may have glared at him) as you tucked in your leg for another kick. “Your knee should be closer to your body. This maximizes the strength of your kick when you strike.”

The leg you were standing on was shaking, and you felt the muscles burning every second you remained in this position. “Fine,” you said through gritted teeth as you tried again.

“Good.” Oktai smiled at you. “I think you’ve deserved a well-earned rest. Wouldn’t you agree, Kurama?”

Yoko Kurama didn’t respond, instead staring at you with cold eyes. He finally gave a single nod, stepping backward as Nairu rushed forward to greet you.

You collapsed on the ground, feeling as though you had no strength left in your body.

Nairu looked giddy, her honey eyes doing the smiling for her as she placed her paws on your thigh. Her ears perked forward, listening to your every word, and her four tails gently glided from side to side.

You reached out to scratch her behind the ears. “You’re ready to be done, too, huh?” you said. “It must be painful watching me train.”
She seemed to chirp in response, a childish bark coming from her throat.

“I think I’m ready for a bath. You want to join me?”

She made a face.

“All right,” you said with a laugh. “No bath for you, but we can cuddle afterward.” You picked yourself up and thanked your mentors for their help today.

Oktai waved at you, a grin on his face. “Tomorrow, then, my lady,” he said. “I’ll have some exercises prepared for you.”

Yoko Kurama followed after you as you started back toward the palace. He was quiet, watching you carefully.

“What do you think of my progress?” you asked, feeling a little unnerved by the silence. Normally, you wouldn’t mind, but Kurama had yet to return to his human form as he usually did. You wondered why.

“You’re learning,” he said, “but you’ll need to learn faster in these upcoming months.”

You looked to the side, figuring Kurama would say the same thing in either his demon or human form. Except Yoko Kurama probably said it more bluntly. “I know,” you said. “Maybe Nairu will have some ideas after today, hm?”

She trotted at your side with a neutral expression.

Yoko Kurama had to slow his gait significantly so you could keep up. His long legs and your exhausted condition simply weren’t compatible. “I promise I’ll try harder,” you said, “but will you answer something for me?”

“Mm?”

“I’m legitimately curious about this. Does your sense of smell become better when you’re in your demon body? Or do you still perceive the world in the same way?”

To your surprise, Yoko Kurama chuckled, his eyes closing for just a moment as he thought. “You still smell like serendipity, if that’s what you’re asking. Only, in this paradise, you would value my strength as much as you value Shuichi’s tender disposition.”

His admission was startling. “What are you saying, Kurama?”

Before he could respond, you felt a supernatural shift in the air, a brief crack of electricity, and the ancient demon personality inside your lover retreated. Your Kurama returned, an apologetic expression on his face. “Please pay that comment no mind,” he said.

“But I heard it. I can’t ignore it.”

Kurama shook his head gently. “It’s not worth pursuing an answer, ______. These are key differences between human and demon attitudes, principles, and gender roles. At any rate, when we go home, it will no longer be of any consequence.”

You would have pressed more, but Kurama seemed to be done with the topic. Clearly, he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Maybe later,” you decided.
I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Kurama's Human

Chapter Summary

You tackle Kurama's inner turmoil with words as gently as you can. Too bad you're not so good at tackling. Meanwhile, Arban continues his search for Oktai's lost mother.

Chapter Notes

Oh wow. I was not expecting this update to take so long! My apologies! For those who don't know, I work in finance, so with the coronavirus outbreak and its impact on the markets, I've been working long, exhausting hours -- longer and more exhausting than usual, anyway. :P

With that said, I hope you and yours are well and healthy. <3

AND AHHHH. I was provided with the most gorgeous fanart of Oktai from the most talented Anne_frederick: Click here! My original (clearly inferior, lol) reference is here: Click here!

I'd also like to share my very first headcanon I've posted to Tumblr: The Kurama Duality" I was very surprised and humbled by how many likes I got in less than 48 hours. o_____O

So not a whole lot happens during this chapter, but it sets up the next chapter well, I think. RC tries to start a serious conversation, Kurama is a goober, and Arban meets up with an ally. Enjoy! ^_^

And of course, thank you to those who are reading! Thank you for your comments: CrossYourTeez, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, Kilana, Shara_Ookami92, FannibalToast, Kupid, and Anne_frederick! I enjoy your insights and thoughts immensely! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kurama didn't mean to be so terse with her.

He felt badly about it.

His predicament was not her burden to bear, and he didn’t want it to be. He glanced at her from the side, watching her as she spoke with her spirit beast. She had a tender heart, and he loved her for it.

His time spent as Yoko Kurama was changing him. He felt a tug toward his demon nature at the cost of the progress he made as a human. He was not yet certain to what degree this occurred, but it disturbed him.
“Only, in this paradise, you would value my strength as much as you value Shuichi’s tender disposition.”

He said that. It came out of Yoko Kurama’s mouth — he could hardly believe it.

He never spoke without choosing his words carefully. It was as if Yoko Kurama was taking on a consciousness of his own, one far less bridled, and all other facets of his identity would eventually be swallowed up by the demon inside.

Kurama could not afford that. He wondered if this was Yul’s plan all along, his reasoning for wanting to collect Yoko’s bones to sacrifice to the bloodpact magic. Was there something about bloodpacts of which he was not aware? Yul explicitly wanted Yoko to serve him. Was this his way of protecting that investment?

It had crossed his mind before, but he thought his resolve would be stronger, that he would have more restraint over the ancient demon of his past. He thought he had mastered Yoko Kurama.

It unnerved him.

What Yoko spoke earlier sounded like jealousy. Yoko Kurama was never jealous. There was nothing to be jealous over — and even if there were, he would not waste a moment on mere emotion and instead pursue the object of his desire.

He already had ______. The fact that Yoko would insist upon her affections was evidence of some sort of divergence. There was a dark magic at work here.

He needed more time to think, explore the possibilities. If this was a threat, he would need to quash it. He hoped it wasn’t.

For the moment, he had asked _____ to disregard the comment. He would be the one to manage this situation.

They arrived at her chambers, opening the door and entering.

“_____,” he said, ending his quiet reflection as he shut the door behind him. Her name felt like a song to him, a familiar melody that pulled at his heartstrings.

She looked at him, tilting her head to the side. She really was beautiful, inside and out. “Kurama?” The way she responded, spoke his name, warmed him.

“I love you.”

She knew that already, but he wanted her to hear it again.

“I love you, too,” she said.

Oh, how those words made his heart full, and he reached for her, hands tracing the contour of her shoulders down to her elbows. “You are my wonder,” Kurama said, stealing a kiss before releasing her.

Arban ran and ran, leaping across chasms and racing across deserts. For the most part, he was alone in his journey.

For a short while, a group of hunters followed him, tracking his movement. They hungered for flesh, and they pursued him for quite some time. Little did they know, he was no ordinary stag, no
dumb beast, and he eluded them easily. They soon gave up the chase.

He knew exactly where he was going. As a master warlord to the khan at one point, he studied the geography of the Makai in great detail. He knew every forest, every river, every canyon.

As was the nature of time, things had changed since he had arrived in Demon World with Kurama, but the overall lay of the land was still the same. New borders had been drawn, territories contended and reclaimed — it was no surprise to him.

He neared a bed of lava, and shifted effortlessly into a bat, taking flight on the sulfurous air of the Makai. It was sweltering, but this was the quickest road to his destination, and he could withstand the heat. He gained altitude to avoid the spurts of lava and steam.

As he flew, he thought. Yul had lost a lot of ground, literal ground, when he fell from power. Lands he obtained through conquest were reallocated. Most recently, the three demon kings were at war with one another. It wasn’t until Yusuke, Raizen’s descendant, arrived that this matter was settled with a tournament. Every three years, there would be a battle for a new king.

While this ceased the power struggle, it was not a permanent solution. Enki was strong enough to hold the throne in the past tournaments, but there was no assurance that the next king would be so even-tempered. If a chaotically minded demon won the tournament, the Demon World environment would change drastically, likely for the worse.

Arban had no love for the human race. He tolerated them. He preferred them to his demon kind, but, really, he only cared for Eri and her descendants. If push came to shove and demons invaded Living World, he would have to be convinced to protect the humans.

_____’s safety was his first priority. He would defend her at all costs.

Yusuke’s foolhardy strategy worked for the time being, but Arban’s cynical nature insisted that there would have to be changes for better stability in Demon World, should this tenuous peace last.

That would mean, at least for this tournament, ensuring that Yul was not the victor.

Arban thought long and hard about whether or not he wished to partake. Originally, he was opposed to the idea, wanting to whisk _____ to safety. He had no time to brawl with his fellow demons. But as long as Yul held power in the Makai, she would be in danger. He would have to compete to ensure her freedom.

But he was not strong enough. In a fair match, Arban would lose to Yul.

However, the tournament was not entirely fair — it was a test of both strength and stamina, with an element of luck. It was completed in a series of matches, and the order in which a fighter was assigned to engage could very well determine the nature of his victory or defeat. In other words, if Yul was matched with several fierce fighters, each of them depleting his strength round after round, there was a possibility of him losing in the finals.

Even if Arban was not strong enough to win against Yul, perhaps he could manipulate the tournament bracket in their favor.

There was enough corruption among the ranks as it was. How else could Enki win three tournaments in a row? What was that likelihood? Enki was strong, but to have luck on his side for three whole tournaments? That was highly improbable.

With the Demon World sun high in the sky, Arban continued on. He would travel for at least three
more days, whether by wing, foot, or fin.

Time ticked on.

You sat in bed with Kurama at your side. You had bathed and dressed, and you were intent on not moving for the remainder of the day, considering how sore you were.

“Are you all right?” you asked, reaching out to touch Kurama on the shoulder.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he said, giving you a smile.

It was a fake smile, a facade to give you a sense of false reassurance. You recognized it immediately, and you raised a suspicious eyebrow.

Kurama chuckled sheepishly, shaking his head. “I should know better than to hide anything from you, hm?”

“You certainly don’t have to. I don’t want you to.” You touched his hand. “This is about Yoko Kurama, isn’t it?”

He paused for a brief moment before he spoke. “Yes. It’s complicated. I’ve told you before that Yoko Kurama and I are the same. We share a soul.”

“That’s right. I remember that conversation.”

“We have varying perspectives, however, and I may behave differently when I take my demon form,” he continued. “I have recently felt... discord as Yoko Kurama.”

“Why do you feel that way?”

“_____, please understand that my feelings for you have never changed. Whether human or demon, I hold you in the highest regard.”

“I know that. That’s not what I’m concerned about.”

“Then what are your concerns?”

“Do you think of our relationship differently as Yoko Kurama? I mean, what you said today — it made me wonder if I should be doing something different.”

“Don’t. You are doing everything you can and should. I could not ask more of you. This is my dilemma, not yours. Yoko Kurama’s influence will not be a hardship once I break free of Yul’s bloodpact.”

You stared at him, noting the solemnity in his eyes “Kurama, this is absolutely my problem as much as it is yours. We’re in this together. I’ve told you this before — you could have walked away from all of this. You didn’t have to sell your soul to a tyrant for me. But you did, and I’m so grateful that you’re here with me. I’m just sorry it had to be like this.” You turned away, feeling guilty that he was in such a predicament because of you. It was a burden you carried with you, and it fluctuated in intensity each day — whenever you saw Kurama struggle, it seemed to flare up.

“_____, look at me,” he said, and he gently tipped your chin up so your eyes met. “I would do anything for you. Anything. And you’re right — this is something we must do together.”

“But——”
Kurama cut you off with a kiss, and you were caught in the moment, enjoying the tender gesture.

You felt calm, the guilt subsiding, if only temporarily. When you broke away, you saw the love in his gaze, the sincere assurance that everything would be okay. “You can’t cut me off with a kiss every time I’m about to say something you don’t agree with,” you said.

“Whyever not?” he said, a mischievous expression on his face.

“Because—”

His lips were on yours again, and you pushed him away this time.

“No! You had to try hard to contain your laughter. “Really, Kurama? You are impossible.”

He smiled softly, leaning toward you, his hands on either side of your face. “I’ll tell you what’s impossible — how did I ever get you to love a rogue like me?”

“You must be charming or something.”

“When you put it that way, I must.”

“Either that, or you’re a thief who ran away with my heart.”

Kurama kissed you again. “I’ve been told I’m a skilled thief.”

“You’ve also been avoiding the topic of conversation, Kurama,” you said as you snuggled up to him. “What can I do to help you through all of this?”

“Give me your patience,” he said, nuzzling your neck. “Understand that my inner unrest is mine to bear — it has been so since I was reborn as Shuichi. As I’ve said before, Yoko’s strength is necessary in these tumultuous times.”

“I don’t doubt that.” You sighed, leaning into him. “I just couldn’t help but wonder if there was anything I could do to make being Yoko easier for you. He seemed to have… a grievance about my preferences.”

“There is no need to cater to my demon personality, my love. I promise.”

He sounded so confident.

And, still, you had your doubts.

Arban arrived at his destination. It had been three days, and he was here.

This was Mukuro’s territory. She had lost in the last three unification tournaments, but she still had her title, and many who were in her service remained loyal to her while attending Enki.

He reverted to his familiar Akita mix form, stepping toward the city. If Ichika was right, Oktai’s mother was here somewhere, assuming she was alive, of course.

Years ago, Yul had asked a request of Mukuro while she was in power. Mukuro accepted gracefully, likely because she feared his retribution if she refused. Holding onto a hostage was easy enough — she had the manpower and resources to do it, and no one would ever think that Oktai’s mother would be hidden out here, so far from Xanadu.
Where in Mukuro’s territory was the real question. Ichika didn’t know that information — why would she? Even Yul probably didn’t know the exact location.

Arban would have to ask questions, twist a few arms, if needed. But he would have to do so subtly. There was no sense in drawing attention to himself, especially if news would travel back to Xanadu.

Unfortunately, he had no allies here. Arban was on his own. Or so he thought.

“I see Kurama sent you on mission.”

He looked over his shoulder, noticing a familiar, unfriendly face. “Hiei,” he greeted. “I don’t answer to Kurama. I’m here on behalf of _____.”

“Fine. Kurama’s human, then.”

Arban ignored the condescending tone. “You are far from Enki’s stronghold,” he said. “What brings you to Mukuro’s territory, this undeveloped wasteland?”

“I have business here,” Hiei said. “No one questions mine. But yours, however, is suspicious. What are you doing here?”

“I’m looking for someone.” Arban figured that if Kurama trusted this Hiei character, it was worth a chance. He had no better ideas.

“You’re looking for someone? You mean _____ is looking for someone. What the hell does a human want with a demon out here?”

“Not a demon.” Arban lowered his voice. “A human.”

“The only humans here are for food or pleasure. Look elsewhere.”

“No. There is one here, if still alive.”

“Who?”

“Her name is Sarnai, mother of Oktai. Mukuro would know of her existence here. I understand you’re friends.”

Hiei’s expression remained unchanged. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Arban makes his discovery and heads home. Over the week he is gone, you train hard in an effort to understand your newfound spirit energy.

Hi all! I hope you all are doing well during these stressful times! Before we get started, I'd like to inform you all of a giveaway that I'm hosting on Tumblr. It involves crochet and Puu: Click here for details! Details are all in my blog post. If you are interested in entering, please do! <3 Creating a Tumblr account is easy, if you don't have one already!

This chapter, again, is a little slow, but it includes some good RC introspection and some information from Arban.

Thank you to Yeah_I'm _Crazy_So_What, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), CrossYourTeez, Shara_Ookami92, Kara, Rachsteph27, Kupid, Anne_frederick , and Kilana for your most wonderful comments! <3 Please enjoy this chapter! It was written specially for you! <3

Everyone, stay safe, calm, and healthy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s confirmed. Sarnai died years ago,” Hiei said.

Arban watched the expression on his face, an unchanged scowl even as he delivered the news of Oktai’s mother. “How did she die?” he asked.

“She was not mistreated. She lost the will to live.”

“So, heartache,” Arban said. “Despair and grief after having lost her mate and only child.”

“You are sentimental.”

“I am honest. Denying that emotions can play a role in your personal life and health is just that — denial. You say she was not mistreated, but she was. Torn from the only person she loved and, in return, loved her, she died of anguish, and I can guarantee that her final moments were filled with unnecessary sorrow and regret.”

Hiei’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve become like them, your sentimental humans, and as such, you’ve become weak.”

“That is all subjective. What you see as weakness, I perceive as strength. I’ve had well over a thousand years to contemplate. I know my mind and heart.”
Hiei did not respond.

“_____ appreciates your efforts.” Arban was about to leave, but something caught his eye. “That sword,” he said, recognizing the plating on the scabbard, the design on the hilt. “That craftsmanship is of Xanadu.”

“You say that like I’m a thief.”

“You are friends with a thief, one of the most skilled who has ever lived. Is that such a farfetched assumption?”

Hiei scoffed at the word “friend,” but he did not argue. “Call it a gift. It’s from Oktai for shattering my sword.”

“The weapons of Xanadu are known for their superior quality. It is a kingly gift. In fact, Yul wields a sword of a similar caliber and has for many years. Generally, only warlords and the elite are permitted to use such weapons. I’m surprised Oktai parted with it so easily.”

“I asked him if he was sure. I may yet someday kill him with it.”

“Forget Oktai. Would it not be ironic if Yul died to a blade so similar to his own?” Arban glanced at Hiei one more time before departing, a smile curving along his black lips. Perhaps something would come of sharing this information.

Over the next week, you trained hard. You understood the stakes now better than ever.

Kurama promised no more secrets. But you knew in your heart of hearts you could never fully unlock the complexities, the layers of thought and cognitive reflection behind eyes of forest green, the scape of ancient wisdom and volatile storm. He was beautiful, the epitome of wit and artifice, the king of stratagem and enigma.

Before recent events, you saw only rays of his countenance, like light filtering through the canopy of the trees; you did not think to rise above the thicket and peer into the skies, for you realized staring directly into the sun was a peril.

You loved him so wholly and truly, and you accepted that you would never be able to fully explore the vast corridors of his mind. Once the cogs were set in motion, the multitudes of theories and speculations were like shifting sands in the desert, sweeping away familiar realities for fresh perspectives. And still, he forgot nothing — he left the footprints in the sand, memories etched out in a language only he could understand, collected and stored for later reference.

What was it like to have someone in your life who was so much brighter than you? You would never be able to stand up to him in a game of chess, figurative or not. You could be two steps ahead of him — he would be three, four, five steps ahead of you.

Kurama knew you well. He safeguarded you from danger as best as he could, and given the abysmal hand he was dealt, he made an astonishing effort. He shielded you from the most brutal truths of them all, and that was how you realized he was hiding something.

He didn’t mean to be deceitful — you understood that. You would not hold his secrets against him.

Yoko Kurama concerned you. He loved you, just as Kurama did. He rescued you from danger and literally licked your wounds to heal them. You appreciated him, loved him for everything he did, for who he was. As much as you wished to show him your love, too, he was not the same as your
tender Kurama, the man who comforted you when you felt you lost everything, who kissed away your tears when you were in pain, who came after you when you were caught between the jaws of a monster, even after your cruel dismissal. You could not see a future with Yoko Kurama — he was an ancient demon who thrived on savage instinct and carnage. There was simply no place for that in Living World.

You wanted to marry Kurama, potentially start a family, and grow old together. You accepted and loved all of him, but you needed certain facets of him more than others.

Was Yoko Kurama feeling insecure about that?

That didn’t make sense. You were already in a relationship. If Yoko and Kurama were one and the same, why would it matter whom you needed more?

Something was happening, something you did not fully understand.

But you trusted Kurama. If he did not want you to be involved in such a delicate situation, a battle between his identities, that was fine. It was a personal, private matter, and you respected that.

Still, the moment he needed you, you would be there for him. You had to be ready.

That was why you trained harder than ever before.

Nairu lounged under the red sun a short distance away from the ring. She spared you a glance as you juggled the four seasons, fanning them out in the palm of your hand like playing cards.

Between the experiments Oktai and Kurama devised, you learned what each seasonal energy was capable of, at least at a high level. During the week, you discovered and improved your knowledge of the following:

Your spring energy magnified the energies of others. It worked well with both demon and spirit energy. In summoning and applying spring, you were able to allow allies to use far less energy when performing their techniques. The more spring you utilized, the greater the magnification.

Your winter energy diminished the energies of others. It functioned like the exact opposite of your spring energy. If applied to enemies, you could force them to use greater amounts of energy to accomplish feats. The more winter you utilized, the greater the diminishment.

Your fall energy created shields. This was something you only discovered with Oktai’s expertise. You were able to manifest your fall energy as a tangible material, bending it and shaping it to your will. Nairu seemed particularly pleased with this. She said this was ideal — if you could defend yourself from enemy attacks, she would be able to fight on your behalf.

Your summer energy blazed. It was hot in your hands, weaving through your fingers, though it would leave no burns on your skin. When you first discovered it, you had punched Oktai square in the chest as an exercise, and summer erupted. It came forth like a burst of fire and force, mixed into a potent package. You felt awful, rushing over to Oktai, who had been knocked clear out of the ring. When you found him, he was laughing, wishing to give it a try again.

The more you explored your potential, the less training felt like a strenuous physical activity. You became legitimately interested in your progress. It was fascinating to see what you could do with the energy at your very fingertips.

One evening, you hunkered down in the bath with Nairu, washing away the sweat and grime of the day.
“You’re doing well,” she said. “This is exactly what I wanted to see. I am pleased.”

“Is this the progress you were expecting?” you said. “I know the stakes are high. I’m working as hard as I can, but—”

“We’re still not strong enough to stand up to Yul.” She stretched, bottom up, her tails flicking in the air. “I don’t know if we ever will be.”

You sighed, staring at the steaming water for a moment. “No? It doesn’t mean we can’t try, but what chance do we really have?”

“Well, you can’t win if you don’t play,” Nairu said casually, shrugging her shoulders. “I don’t know what you’re destined for, _____, but I’m here to help you.”

“You do realize Yul only came after me because you responded to me in that egg, right?” you said, poking fun at her.

“I couldn’t help it. There was something that set you apart from your ancestors.” She nuzzled your arm with her nose, not sounding the least bit apologetic. “Besides, if you were never brought here, we never would have met.”

“Ah, I suppose you have a point.”

She grinned with her fox eyes, her ears turning toward you to collect your response. “_____?”

“Mm?”

“I will protect you.”

“I know you will, but I want to protect myself, too.”

“I realize that.” She sat up in a ladylike position, her tails tucked and resting along her side. “I just want you to know you can rely on me. You don’t have to carry this burden alone. You’ve been worried about Kurama — and if he’s a priority for you, then he’s a priority for me, too. I’ll do whatever necessary to ensure you both get your happy ending.”

You smiled at her, the connection between you overwhelmingly warm. You loved Nairu. She was a piece of your heart. You loved her in a different way than you loved Kurama or your friends and family. She wasn’t quite like a sister or companion — she was you, and if there were ever an opportunity for self-love, she was it.

“I appreciate it so much, Nairu,” you said. “I’m glad you’re here. And for the record, I don’t regret anything. This experience, while sometimes painful and terrifying, has given me so much perspective.”

“So, assuming we get out of this, will you take me back to Living World?”

“Of course,” you said, almost scoffing at the ridiculous question. You finished soaking and left the tub, grabbing a towel. You began to dry your hair. “There’s no way I’d leave you behind. I mean, I’m sure you’d pass as a mutated, purple dog or something.”

Nairu stuck her tongue out at you.

Arban approached Xanadu with a heavy heart. While he did not care for Oktai or Sarnai, he knew _____ would be disappointed. She was far too compassionate, and she would easily mourn a
woman she had never met.

He did not wish to deliver the news, but he had made a promise. Truthfully, he owed her no service — only her safety — but he had a tender spot for _____.

His flesh contorted as he shifted into a fly, wings beating rapidly against the air as he flew toward the palace. He navigated the halls, spiralling up the stairs until he came to her chambers; he slipped beneath the doors.

Kurama sat in the den, studying a small collection of seeds laid out on the coffee table.

Arban buzzed toward him.

The moment he was within earshot, Kurama lifted his eyes from his hand. “Show yourself,” he said, his voice lowered.

“It’s me,” Arban said as he changed again, this time into his familiar middle-aged servant. His clothes were pressed, sandals cleaned, hair slicked back. “I have news for _____.”

“She’s bathing. I’m sure she’ll be out soon.”

“I see. How is the training?”

“Well. _____ is a fast learner.”

“She is. She is a clever girl.”

Kurama’s eyes softened, if only a little. “You speak as if you were her guardian, a father figure who takes pride in her accomplishments.”

“All of Eri’s descendants have had my protection. They’ve never needed it until now. _____ is unfortunate in that regard.”

“Have you nurtured all of them in the same way you care for _____?”

Arban stiffened, his gaze falling to the floor. “She is different from the rest,” he said. “She reminds me most of her ancestral mother. She is certainly her daughter.”

“You’ll have an opportunity to meet Eri again, should you choose to take it.”

“The Mirage Hourglass, hm? _____ told me about it. I’ve only heard of its magic in stories.”

“In about a week’s time, with the ebbing of the moon, its magic will be restored. _____ will be able to summon Eri again. We’ll have questions for her, and no doubt, you’re interested in being present.”

“The duration of the summon is short, is it not?”

Kurama nodded. “Five minutes. We’ll gather what information we can, but any time left, if any, is yours.”

“We shall see, then.”

You stepped out of the room and into the den, a towel draped around your shoulders to collect the remaining moisture in your hair. Nairu was at your heels, prancing behind you playfully.
“Oh?” You noticed Arban as the servant, and you gestured for both him and Kurama to follow you into the bedroom. “You’re back!” you said as soon as you shut the door. “Were you able to find anything?”

“Oktai’s mother is named Sarnai,” Arban said. “I was able to confirm that she is deceased.”

Your throat clenched. “At least we know now,” you said, quietly.

“I’m sorry, _____,” Kurama said. “I know you wanted better news.”

“It’s just so awful. I can’t believe Yul didn’t keep his end of the bargain.”

“Yul did not hurt her,” Arban said. “Sarnai died of heartbreak, and as such, Yul did not undermine the terms of the bloodpact.”

“Does that mean Oktai’s freed from serving him?”

“Perhaps. Assuming those were the exact terms. But I caution you against telling Oktai. We don’t know fully whether or not we can trust him, and if news somehow returns to Yul that you’ve been acting behind his back, you could be in grave danger as well.”

“If his mother were alive, I may feel differently,” Kurama added, “but given the circumstances, I agree with Arban.”

“So do I.”

“You too, Nairu?” you said with a sigh.

“Yes. You are easy to trust, _____ I don’t hold that against you.” Nairu hopped into the bed, settling down beside you. “However, even if Oktai is well-meaning, there could be other agreements that bind him to Yul. Revealing a truth like this would only anger Oktai, which doesn’t necessarily help us if he is unable to divert his loyalties. And to Arban’s point, if Yul realizes you sent him on a search, you’re not only putting yourself in danger — you’re putting his life on the line, too.”

“My life has been forfeit since the day I betrayed him,” Arban said, eyes on you. “Don’t worry about me. I recommend safeguarding yourself.”

You bit your lip, clearly outnumbered. Your companions spoke logic, and while you understood their rationale, you felt you had a connection with Oktai better than any of them did. You thought he would want to know his mother’s fate — it was unfair to keep it from him.

Kurama saw your inner turmoil, and he touched your shoulder, giving you a small smile. “You may tell him eventually. Now is not the time.”

You disagreed, but you would relent for the time being.

Chapter End Notes

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it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Chapter Summary

Yul tests your skills, while Kurama has yet another conversation with Satomi.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dears! <3 I hope everyone is doing well during these difficult times. Hang in there!

I want you to all know that one-shot requests are now OPEN. You can make a request through my "A Single Word" movement. Anyone is welcome! My goal is to bring a little happiness into the world while I can! Please feel free to make a request. <3 My fandom list, I think, is fairly broad.

Also, if you're an Oktai fan, please check out my AU Oktai one-shot, a gift for FannibalToast for winning my February raffle: "A Leap of Faith"

I am so sorry this chapter took so long to get out. I’ve been fulfilling a few requests, and I’ve written probably the most critical upcoming chapter of EtS. No spoilers from me, but it will be exciting and heartbreaking. :’D I apologize that things have been kind of slow, but I promise things will pick up quite soon! Everything is building up to the action!

And finally, some pretty fanart from @Janishacolors of Kurama: Click to make your day waaaaay better <3 Thank you!

Thank you to Shara_Ookami92, CrossYourTeez, Anne_frederick, GinaLiz, FannibalToast, and Kami for your comments on my last chapter! <3

I hope you all enjoy this. Please be well! <3 If there is anything I can do for you at all, please don't hesitate to reach out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It haunted you, the thought that Oktai’s mother was dead. He had sacrificed everything for her protection, and now that end of the bargain was empty.

It was difficult living with this truth. Every time you looked at him, you were reminded of his futile efforts, and it took everything you had to not look at him with pitying eyes. Unfortunately, your poker face was not good.

“My lady, is something the matter?” Oktai asked one day when you thought you were only with Nairu in the garden. He scratched his head. “You’ve been acting… strange, if I may.”

Kurama warned you about this. He urged you not to be caught alone with Oktai because, as he so
kindly reminded you, you were a terrible liar.

“It’s nothing,” you said, staring at the water. “I’m just… tired, I suppose. All of this training is wearing on me.”

“Yet, you seem to be enjoying it.”

You were glad he dropped the topic. “It’s… new,” you said. “I’ve never done anything like this before. I’ve never punched anyone in my life before this. I’ve never tried to hurt anyone. Truthfully, I’ve never had to.”

“Ah, well, as you’ve probably surmised, things are a little different here than in Living World.”

“Have you ever been to Living World?”

“No. I’ve only heard of it, perhaps caught a few glimpses of it from afar.”

“Would you want to go?”

Oktai appeared pensive. “It would be nice to see that side of my human heritage.”

His comment resonated with you. You hadn’t thought about his human heritage, really, aside from his mother. “Can I ask what your mother was doing in Demon World when she met your father?” you said. It was dangerous, going down this rabbit hole, but you were far too curious for your own good.

He paused for a moment, studying you. “She was a slave,” he said, “quite a skilled seamstress, in fact. My father sold everything he had so he could buy her freedom.”

Your heart ached for him even more. “It’s such a sad story of star-crossed lovers. I’m sorry it had to end the way it did.”

“They had their time,” Oktai said with a sigh. “Honestly, I’ve learned from their mistakes. The strong are the ones with the power here. They rule with an iron first, a steel blade, and if I can’t hone my strength, I may lose everything I have, too.”

“What do you have left to lose?”

He gave you a small, sad smile, about to respond, but his eyes darted past you instead. “My lord is walking in the garden today.”

You turned around.

Yul was there, pacing toward you, his long strides graceful, despite his heavy boots. “Daughter,” he greeted. “Oktai.” He gave a nod in his advisor’s direction.

“My lord,” Oktai said, hand on his chest, bowing. “What brings you here this lovely afternoon?”

“I thought I would ascertain ______’s progress,” he said, eyes falling from you to Nairu, who sat quietly at your feet. “Daughter, reports from Oktai indicate immense improvements in your spirit energy manipulation.”

You nodded, dipping your head toward him — more out of fear than respect. “I’ve learned a lot. Oktai is a wonderful teacher.”

His silver eyes gleamed. “Show me,” he said.
You took a step back to create space between you and the two men who stood before you. Nairu stayed with you. You lifted your hand to your eye level, channeling your summer energy. If Yul wanted to see progress, perhaps this would be most obvious. It burned hot in your hand, like a searing sensation, but without the pain. You brought memories of a scorching sun at the beach to the front of your mind, and the blaze ignited, flames erupting from your now curled fist.

“Very good,” Yul said, his voice almost a low taunt. “Now come at me.”

Under no circumstances would you have attacked him otherwise. Given the order, however, you had no qualms — it would speak to Kurama’s efforts for you to perform well. You gave a short cry of focus, and dashed at your ancestral father, throwing as hard of a punch as you could.

Yul caught your fist with no effort at all.

You did not relent, and your other fist caught fire as you threw another punch.

He blocked this blow as well.

You dashed backward, spinning in a tight hook kick, just the way Kurama taught you. Your summer energy consumed your leg as you propelled yourself forward and around, twisting on the ball of your foot.

Yul would block this attack as well — you were far too slow for him — but you had other ideas.

You changed your energy, having already channeled summer into your blow. You summoned fall, the energy of foresight. Autumn was the time for harvest, strategic planning to prepare for the cruel chill of winter, and as such, you would use it as just that. You created a barrier — it was not particularly strong, but it certainly surprised Yul. He was unable to move his arm in time to obstruct your kick, and your foot struck him on the side of his face.

You landed, spinning around from the momentum, only to watch your ancestral father’s reaction.

Yul had only turned his cheek, a small indent in his skin from where you had made contact — the blow would have knocked over any average human. While you were acquiring skill and strength, you would be foolish to assume you could physically move a demon of his caliber with your limited experience. No doubt, he understood this as well. He touched his face with the tips of his fingers, eyes following you. “Impressive,” he said, lips tugging into a grin. “I am pleased. In such short a time, you’ve made good progress.”

“It’s just as I’ve said, sire,” Oktai started. “My lady is making great strides.”

“Of course, there is room for improvement.” He looked toward Nairu. “Is it not time that your spirit beast assists you in combat?”

Nairu stepped out from behind your legs, trotting over to the khan. She sat a short distance away from his feet, her four tails settling gracefully behind her. She opened her mouth and let out a mew-like cry, far more befitting of a cat than a fox.

You thought for a moment Yul might think she was pathetic, but you were wrong.

He kneeled down and pet her under the chin with a finger. It seemed that her protest endeared her to him — she was once his spirit beast, after all, so it was to be expected. “Two months,” he said. “You have time. Once you awaken your power, the floodgates will open.” He stood, turning his attention back to you. “Train with your spirit beast, Daughter. Make her strong. I take my leave.”
You watched as Yul walked away, cloak fluttering in the wind. You breathed a heavy sigh, letting the anxiety of your encounter melt away.

“It seems that the khan is happy with your progress,” Oktai said.

“I suppose so,” you said, “but I know I have a long way to go. What does he mean when he wants me to train with my spirit beast?”

“I’ve never trained a spirit beast before, but I have a few ideas. We can begin tomorrow and see how she’s feeling.” Oktai winked at Nairu. “Allow me to escort you to your chambers, my lady.”

“I met your pretty lady, Kurama. Where is she now?”

“Satomi,” he greeted. She was not the last person he wanted to see. Since _____’s encounter with her, he had thought long and hard about Satomi’s role here. Regardless of whether she was loyal to Yul or not, she did _____ a favor by chasing away Yul’s vexatious harem. “I try not to smother her.”

“How very gracious of you,” Satomi said, sauntering toward him, her shoes clipping the marble floor. “She’s interesting, this woman of yours. Her heart really does belong to you. I hear her training is going well.”

“You heard right,” Kurama said as he kept walking. “Is her progress of particular importance to you?”

“I thought about what you said.”

“What did I say?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Kurama. You remember.” She pursed her lips. “And, really, it’s not so much what you said but what _____ said.”

“And what did she say?”

“She’s naive and determined. She wants a way out of this.”

Kurama did not respond.

“I want a way out of this,” Satomi said, her voice a low whisper as she gestured toward herself. “I know you don’t trust me. I know you have your doubts, but I stand by my offer. I have information that is no doubt useful to you. Come to me when you’re ready for it.”

“We’ve already discussed this. Your information is less valuable than you think it is.”

“No, Kurama. On the contrary, it’s far more valuable than you think it is. I will relinquish it on the condition that you take me back to Living World with you when this is all over.”

“That is quite a gamble.” He was not yet willing to confirm or deny his motives — Satomi was still a wildcard. Her persistence could very well be a ploy.

“I understand you have no reason to believe me. You’ll trust me when you have no other choice.”

“You say that with confidence,” Kurama started, “but, truthfully, in not committing your full loyalty, you have already betrayed your khan. You are offering me information that you claim is valuable in his defeat. I could go to him right now with your treachery. What do you think he
Satomi glared at him. “Would he trust you over a long-standing consort? I’ve given him no reason to believe me unfaithful. You, on the other hand, are only bound by a bloodpact.”

“Correct. But the bloodpact demands my loyalty, and as such, I imagine I would not wish to lie to him, lest I violate it.”

“You wouldn’t,” she said.

“You don’t know what I would or wouldn’t do,” he said, his voice cold.

“If you were truly loyal to him, as your bloodpact dictates, you would go to him right now.”

“Only if I considered you a threat.”

Satomi’s brows furrowed in frustration. She could not outplay Kurama’s wit. “Then we are at a stalemate. You know where I stand.” She stormed off without another word.

But they were not at a stalemate. Kurama now had the upper hand — a frustrated opponent.

If Satomi were truly loyal to Yul, she would report their conversation to him right now. Kurama did not know if Yul would act on such information. In fact, he doubted the khan would as little of it was useful. He did not exhibit any verifiable behaviors of betrayal — Satomi only saw what he wanted her to. If Satomi were committed to abandoning Yul, however, she would do nothing and await Kurama’s next move.

“Kurama,” you called out, waving at your boyfriend from down the hall. You quickened your pace to catch up with him, leaving Oktai behind. “I thought you would be training right now.”

“Good evening, _____,” he said. “I was. I had just returned from the training grounds. How are you doing?”

“I’m well.” You looked back toward Oktai, who gave you a nod of acknowledgement.

“I bid you goodnight, my lady,” he said. “Goodnight, Kurama.” He then departed.

You watched him leave, trying to make sense of the expression in his eyes — it reminded you of a gentle regret. You did not have time to contemplate, however, as Kurama slid an arm around your waist, giving you a gentle push.

“And in what adventures have you partaken this afternoon, my love?” he said.

“Something really interesting, actually.” You looked toward Nairu, who was encouraging you to follow her toward the winding staircase. “Let’s talk about this upstairs.”

“Very well.”

When you were back in your chambers, you told him about your interaction with Yul today. Kurama was concerned. He asked you several follow-up questions for clarification and then settled on a momentary silence, deep in thought.

“I wonder what Yul is expecting,” you said to Nairu. “Do you remember anything about your previous life as his spirit beast?”
“I remember very little. I remember I was strong, and I remember how to fight. I may have to make a few adjustments in this form, but I will be able to retain my skills.”

“Perhaps Yul suspects that,” Kurama said, “which may explain his comment today. Admittedly, I am also interested in your abilities, Nairu. If you and _____ are to fight in the tournament, you must train together.”

“I was hoping to keep that all confidential. I’d rather catch Yul by surprise. This is one of the few advantages we have, if not the only one.”

“If you have not yet attempted your abilities in this new spirit beast body of yours, I highly recommend against such a strategy. Otherwise, Yul may not be the only one who is surprised.”

“I’m sorry, Nairu,” you added. “I have to agree with Kurama. I’m unsure how my spirit energy will interact with yours, and I’d much rather know what to expect if we’re going to be fighting together.”

You heard the mental sigh as Nairu hopped into her own bed, a nest of silk cloth with a luxurious pillow. “Fine, fine,” she said. “I knew you’d both gang up on me. We’ll start training tomorrow. I’ll show you what I know, or at least some of it.”

You smiled at her. “I’m excited to learn about your abilities.”

Kurama seemed satisfied for right now. “There is one more thing,” he said. “Obviously, Yul does not know your name. ‘Nairu’ is not what you went by when you were his spirit beast. I am curious how he may address you in the coming weeks.”

“He’s only called me ‘spirit beast’ so far. Why is that so important?”

“I have a few ideas.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! You have a few more days before March is over!

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
White Fire

Chapter Summary

Nairu shows you her technique, and Eri makes another appearance.

Chapter Notes

OKAY. So this is coming along slowly. <3 We should have one more chapter of slow, and everything will pick up, I promise! Moving the plot along as been a bit of a challenge as this occurs over a couple of months, but the action will return soon. :) I like slow burn and slow builds. Thanks for hanging in there with me!

I hope you all are staying safe and well. Please reach out to me if you need anything -- a virtual shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen, writing to get you through these long days. I am happy to help!

Thank you to those who have made a request through my "A Single Word" project! I've enjoyed writing your requests, and I certainly hope you've liked reading them, too! The booklet is still open, so please continue to submit requests! <3

I think it's absolutely necessary to share this beautiful art of Kurama greeting you in the morning from Janishacolors! <3 Please check her out on Tumblr -- her art is gorgeous!

Finally, I'd like to thank those who have left me comments on the last chapter: Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, FannibalToast, Shara_Ookami92, CrossYourTeez, and Anne_frederick. Hearing from you bring my heart joy! <3 Please enjoy this next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You took a breath, letting your spring energy tingle between your fingers.

Nairu stood across from you, her tails flicking from one side to the other. She wouldn’t risk using her telepathy out here, but you could tell what she was feeling. She wanted you to imbue her with your spirit energy. It was as you discussed this morning.

You began to channel spring toward Nairu. You were reminded of the blossoming trees, the tender grass, and the chirping of young birds as they returned from their winter sojourns. It was a time of peace and growth, a celebration of life.

She was still at first, her eyes staring straight into yours. Then, you saw her move, one front paw moving forward, one back paw moving backward as if stabiling herself. Her four tails lifted, the very tips of them engulfed in what appeared to be a pale fire — you couldn’t decide from here whether it was hot or cold.
Her eyes frosted over, leaving their warm honey behind. She opened her mouth, white flames spilling from her lips. They danced and spewed, sputtering like a winter flare. And she ran toward Yoko Kurama, who volunteered to be her opponent today, launching an assault like none you had ever seen. The flames spread as she forced it out of her throat, one blast after another. They quickly diminished afterward — they were not like regular fire and did not burn what they touched. Instead, they fizzled out, dimming as if they were nothing more than fragments of light.

Yoko dodged to the side, performing an impressive acrobatic maneuver to avoid her attacks, and he summoned a plant in his palm — it grew around his hand, twisting and weaving until it jutted out in the shape of a blade.

“Fascinating,” Oktai noted from the sidelines.

“What?” you said.

“Kurama’s not one to draw a weapon so quickly. He must really wish to test this spirit beast of yours.”

Yoko dove toward Nairu, who sprang out of his way easily.

You had never seen her in action before, and she was fast. Your pitiful human eyes could not keep up with her. She was truly a blur.

Instead, you intensified your spring energy, and a rain of light came from above Yoko Kurama, almost like a shower of falling stars. They collided with the ring, driving holes the size of bowling balls into the very surface. Rubble and dust flew.

The two foxes brawled. They were both quick on their feet. From what you could gather, Yoko was trying to chase Nairu down, while Nairu was attacking from afar. At this rate, however, neither one was winning, and it seemed like they could continue this chase forever.

But your energy was running out fast. In the past few weeks, you were able to improve your stamina, but it was still minimal. Your pools of spirit energy, frankly, were not vast. Kurama assured you that you could work on increasing your spiritual vitality, allowing for more energy to collect and be stored, but you felt overwhelmed by the sheer measure of tasks you had to accomplish in training.

You still worked every day on your physical endurance and martial skill through a wide variety of exercises. Now, that seemed like the easy part. You then nurtured your spiritual side, practicing spirit awareness and toggling between the seasons of your energies to ensure the process was as natural to you as breathing — in the ring, there was no place for mediocrity. Your handle on your techniques needed to be perfect. The mornings, starting at 5:00 a.m. were for intense training. Your afternoons were for leisure, though you often meditated during the day as Oktai taught you. It would strengthen your connection with your energy, he said.

Nairu raced toward Yoko, another white flame in her mouth. You extinguished your spring energy at that point, and the blast that came forth was a tiny one, pattering out as though you had drenched her with a hose. She blinked, eyes returning to their golden honey, and she looked at you.

“I’m sorry,” you breathed. “I’m nearly out of energy. If you want to keep fighting, you’re welcome to, but I’ll literally pass out if I keep going.”

She panted, a pink tongue slipping past her lips.

“I’m impressed, though,” you said. “Your powers are amazing. I can’t believe we never used my
spring energy on you up until now. It’s like you weren’t ready or something.”

Nairu raced over to you, rubbing herself against your legs as if to agree.

“Well, there’s that,” Oktai said. “Looks like your spirit beast is growing. I must report this to Yulkhan. He’ll be most pleased.”

You shared a glance with Nairu, knowing you would have a private discussion with her later.

“Nairu, did you know you could do all that?” you asked her as you bathed. You were, of course, referring to her abilities, the white fire, the blasts of energy as they came down on Kurama. They rocked you to your core, the sheer intensity of her powers.

“Not exactly that. I was never sure how my powers would manifest in this body until I tried to summon them. Looks like I can still break things.” She rolled onto her back, rubbing against a towel as if to scratch an itch. “Who would have thought?”

“Did you see the state of that ring? Yul’s going to have to have it replaced with all those holes you put in it.”

“Oh, I’m sure he won’t mind. He’s probably just glad I’m not a dunce anymore.”

“You’re right.” You grinned at her. “Well, he must be relieved, but I guess we still need to figure out how to work this to our advantage.”

Nairu stretched out on the bench, curling up into a towel. “You leave that to me, ____. I have a few tricks left.”

“You sly fox.”

“Foxes can only rely on their own skill and expertise in battle. Even if they may form social groups in the wild, they are always solitary hunters. We fight our own fights.”

“Well, I hope you don’t mind fighting with me.”

“If you can make me that strong?” she said. “Of course not. We just need to work on your stamina.”

You sighed. “That’s easier said than done.”

“One step at a time, ____. One step at a time.”

One evening later that week, Kurama arrived with Arban in your bedroom. “The magic of the Mirage Hourglass is restored,” he said to you. “Would you like to see Eri again?”

“I’d love to,” you said, eager to chat with your ancestral mother again. “You haven’t even met her. And you, Arban, you haven’t seen her in so long.” The very thought of having Arban and Eri meet again, even in these circumstances, was heartwarming.

Arban nodded. “I won’t take up your time with her, if you have questions.”

“That’s ridiculous. We can hurry. Besides, my questions are all a bit more personal, so they can wait till next time.” You tilted your head toward Kurama. “I’m sure he’s the one with the questions.”
“I do have a few,” he said as he removed the rucksack from beneath the bed, undoing the knot with deft precision. He had told you before that it could only be opened by someone who already knew how to do it. You could barely follow the movements of his fingers — he was far too quick.

The hourglass came out, and he set it on the bed. It was as elegant as you remembered with its gold stand, smooth glass, and mesmerizing purple sand.

“Are we ready?” Kurama said. After receiving affirmation from you, he turned the Mirage Hourglass over, beginning your five minutes.

Eri appeared just as she did a month ago, materializing in a cloud of warm magic, a faint light spilling from her phantom body. It was soothing to see her again, the expression on her face a kind one. “Hello, ____, Kurama. Hello, spirit beast. Hello, Arban,” she said.

“Eri, how are you?” you said.

“There’s not enough time to talk about me,” she said, raising a hand to silence you. “I am a spirit; there is nothing of interest in my life. I’m sure you have questions about other things. I will do my best to answer them.”

“Tell us about Yul,” Kurama said. “You served him in a capacity that allowed you to explore his inner circles, his thought processes. If anyone knows a weakness, it would be you.”

“Yul is strong, physically fit, his energy potent. He has no flaws in the ring as he is a formidable, ruthless fighter. However, he is a paranoid man, who dictates law through fear. As such, he trusts no one, compensating instead with agreements fueled by a dark and ancient magic. His greatest weakness is his reliance on these bloodpacts. You know this well, Kurama.”

He watched her with guarded eyes. “Bloodpacts are two-sided — there are at least two conditions. If one is violated, then the remaining condition may be nulled by the magic.”

“Or forcibly executed,” Eri said. “Bloodpacts are an evil thing. Once you forge a blood pact, you subject yourself to the will of the ancient magic. In giving him your bones, Kurama, you are at the mercy of great peril — those bones allow the ancient magic to identify and construe your true demon nature.”

“I suspected so,” Kurama said.

“It was a risk he had to take,” Nairu said. “Otherwise, ____’s life could be jeopardy.”

“I understand,” Eri said. “Yul is unrelenting in his terms.”

“Then, what else?” you asked. “I’m not sure how his reliance on blood pacts can benefit us.” For a moment, your thoughts fluttered to Oktai, remembering his agreement with Yul. Now that Sarnai was dead, Yul could no longer ensure her safety as outlined in their blood pact. Assuming there were no other stipulations, you could only guess that Oktai was now free of the blood pact — his end of the bargain must have been nulled. He was a free man.

Eri looked at you, giving you a gentle smile. “You ask a good question, _____. Yul often insists on using blood pacts to protect himself. He positions himself well, maneuvers cleverly to seal each contract. Beyond that, he may not have any other alternatives. At least, that was my experience serving him.”

“All right,” Nairu said, “what other information do you have for us?”
She paused for a moment. “There is one more thing that may be of value to you.”

“And what is that?”

“He never elaborated on the location of this — not to me. It’s possible no one else knows aside from him. There is a great power somewhere that he keeps locked away. He hides it, specifically because he fears others harnessing it.”

“What can you tell us about this power?” Kurama said.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much,” Eri said. “Despite how Yul trusted me, he never divulged all of his secrets to a single person. All I know is that such a power exists far away from here, hidden away for himself. Someday he will need it. That someday may be soon.”

You looked to Kurama. “That means we need to find information about this power. Maybe Yul will use it for the upcoming tournament.”

He nodded. “That’s all we have, Eri,” he said. “Thank you. For the time we have left, I’m sure you’d like to reminisce with Arban?”

In her eyes was a hopeful glint.

“Bye, Eri,” you said.

“Goodbye, _____, Kurama, spirit beast.”

Kurama took your hand and led you out of the room, Nairu at your heels.

“Arban, I like this new form you’ve chosen,” Eri said, gesturing toward his Akita mix body.

You stepped into the den before you could hear Arban’s response.

“It’s the body with which _____ is most familiar,” Arban said.

“I see you care deeply for her,” Eri said. “Thank you for watching over her. Thank you for watching over everyone.”

“I know it’s what you wanted. I only regret not being able to save you and bring you to Living World as well.”

Eri’s expression was soft with nostalgia. “Don’t worry about that. We had our time together. It would have been nice to see Living World, having lived my whole life as a slave and consort. But I’m glad I was able to break the cycle for my child and her descendents.”

“It seems _____ has your same ambitions.”

“Hm?”

“She wishes to dismantle the human food trade here in Demon World.”

“That is ambitious.”

Arban shook his head. “If only she knew what she was getting herself into.”

“You will help her, won’t you?”
He paused.

“I know it sounds impossible, Arban, but I wish I could have done more. I had influence, however small, in my position, and I used my power to merely survive. _____ has more freedom than I ever did, and so many more people who care about her. If anyone could dismantle the human food trade, it would be her.”

“Do you realize what dangers she would be putting herself in?”

“Do you realize what dangers she’s already in?” Eri sighed. “Demon World is a treacherous place, especially for humans. I’m sure if either of us had our way, she never would have been brought back here. She could live a normal life among free humans. But that is not her destiny. She’s here, and she has choices to make. I wish I could help her to repent for my lack of courage in the past.”

“What are you talking about?” Arban said. “You have more courage than anyone else I know. You persevered. You betrayed Yul. Your sacrifice bought your child a new life, one far better than the one you had to endure.”

She smiled.

“And if it would allow you to rest in peace,” he said, “I will aid _____ on her quest, whatever it may be. You are right — her destiny is great, and the only piece of it I might control is what I choose to do.”

“Oh Arban,” she said. “How you make my heart so full. Take care of her. I will see you again soon, my darling.”

And she faded away.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. :) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Chapter Summary

A month passes, and you train hard. While Kurama is distracted, Arban approaches with an interesting offer. This is what you've always wanted, and of course, you accept.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I hope you are all staying safe and healthy! My company recently announced that they are matching 100% employee donations to charities that are supporting the COVID-19 cause, so I've made one beyond my usual paycheck deduction, and I've been really pleased that my money goes so much further. ^_^ I AM IN A GOOD MOOD. I chose St. Mary's Food Bank. A single dollar can feed seven meals, and people are struggling right now. I really encourage you all to donate, if you're in a position to do so!

Please don't forget about my Puu hand sanitizer holder raffle, if you're interested. It closes on April 15th!

As I mentioned last time, this is the final slow chapter. Things are about to get scary and emotional and you might hate me after one of the next few chapters, but I'll let you all be the judge of that. :D

"A Single Word" is still up and running, so please feel free to make a request! <3

Finally, I wrote up a tutorial on how to write fight scenes if this is something you're all interested in. I think I'll be focusing on some helpful content and headcanons in the near future, so you're welcome to follow me, if you have a Tumblr! ^_^

Thank you to Anne_frederick, Kupid, Shara_Ookami92, and LadyAmazon for the comments last chapter! <3 I always appreciate the feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weeks went by. You trained hard with and without Nairu. You spent endless hours in the ring, in the local fields and forests, on mountaintops and along springs honing your skills. Progress seemed slow, but you saw it each and every day. Your muscles strengthened, and your knuckles developed calluses, having been exposed to the friction of fighting. Your tolerance for pain and discomfort increased, while your overall acceptance of the sport improved.

You meditated for hours on end, your pool of energy increasing. Oktai taught you how to begin siphoning spirit energy away for use later. You could only do it little by little, day by day, but you would have a reserve you could deplete in times of emergencies.

“It’s a technique that can only be done with spirit energy,” Kurama said. “Yusuke’s mentor,
Genkai was able to collect decades of spirit energy before passing it to him, along with her revered Spirit Wave technique. What Oktai taught you is a very simple form of that, but it’s practical nonetheless.

It was an interesting feeling, carrying an additional pool of energy with you. It actually reminded you of a purse. When you went out, you would always make sure you knew of its location because it held items of great value to you. At first, it was like carrying a purse in your body, a pocket with the ammo that could potentially mean the difference between life and death for you.

Your spars were becoming far more vicious — truthfully, you surprised yourself. Fighting was not as unpleasant as you thought it would be. There was an artful precision to it, a craft that required ingenuity and cunning.

Yul continued receiving reports from Oktai, but he never bothered you about your progress. One day, he came to your training, observing silently and leaving when he had seen enough. You wondered what he wanted to glean from it, but even Kurama told you not to worry about him. There was nothing you could do.

Nairu grew stronger as well — she was no longer the adorable little fox that hatched so recently from her egg. She became a formidable opponent, assisted by your spirit energy. You learned to manipulate your energy so you could magnify Nairu’s with spring, while defending yourself with a powerful autumn energy barrier. Your winter energy you had not yet mastered to use in conjunction with spring and autumn — you couldn’t seem to use more than two seasons at once, winter being the most challenging — but you were eager to keep working at it.

Every day was a battle on its own. You struggled and persevered, hoping that your efforts would help you and Kurama escape from this place. You never lost sight of what was most important.

And, so, a whole month passed in this manner.

Nairu leaped across the ring, her four tails ablaze. She dove toward Oktai, jowls parted, fangs bared, and a burst of white flame erupted from her throat.

Oktai summoned a protective shield, the fire burst erupting into a wave of forceful mist as it made contact.

It was then that you joined the fray, dashing toward your opponent. You were far faster than you once were, legs able to carry you with tensiled strength, and your perceptions were elevated. The mild sun of spring set, and summer arrived, sizzling in your hands.

Oktai saw you coming, raising his staff for another barrier.

Your fist collided with his barrier, sparks of electricity springing from contact. You would never get through at this rate. Summer devolved quickly to winter, bringing the chill of an icy desolation, and Oktai’s shield weakened.

Nairu came charging in, slamming the side of her body against Oktai. She sailed through the shield, shattering it, and into him, knocking him off his feet.

You channeled spring again, the refreshing showers allowing for growth and rebirth, letting Nairu consume your spirit energy. Her fire blazed once more, flames foaming and spilling from her mouth, and she launched her attack.

Oktai was forced backward and out of the ring. “Well,” he sputtered as the dust settled, “you’ve
gotten quite strong, ____. You and your spirit beast, both. I am quite impressed.”

“Stop it,” you said, offering him your hand. “You’re going easy on me, and you know it.”

He sighed and accepted your help. “I’d rather not hurt the khan’s daughter, if I can help it.”

“That’s much appreciated,” Kurama said. He was in his human form, having just finished your training routine for the day. He touched your shoulder. “I think you deserve a well-earned rest.”

“I don’t mind training more,” you said. “The tournament is in less than a month.”

“That may be true, but as much as you’ve improved, you don’t want to push yourself too hard. Risking injury so close to the tournament would be foolish.”

You knew Kurama was only looking out for you. Surely, he would train even harder in the coming days. It was a double standard forged out of his concern — you didn’t blame him. He didn’t even want you to fight in the tournament, if at all possible, and you wouldn’t be surprised if he had some sort of plan to prevent it.

“Why don’t you come back with me?” you said, grasping his hand. It seemed that lately he spent more and more time training, exploring, doing whatever he could to invent a viable solution. It was understandable, but you worried about him. The burden of this unfortunate situation fell on his shoulders, and while you wanted to help as much as you could, you didn’t always know how.

Still, he always found time for you in the evenings. He kept you updated on most of his discoveries, giving you whatever details you wanted to hear. He took the time to cuddle you, kiss you, gifting you the attention you craved. You only missed your more intimate moments — with Nairu around, both you and Kurama were reluctant to initiate sex.

“As much as I would love that,” he said, lifting your hand to his lips for a kiss, “I’m actually expecting company.”

“Who are you expecting?”

“Hiei,” he said. “I had a message sent to him. I require his expertise.”

“Oh, how exciting,” you said. “It’s been a while since you’ve seen Hiei. What do you need him for?”

“Like you, I have been tending to my spirit energy since the banquet. I’d like to run a few experiments with someone whom I can trust. I hope he’ll stay until the tournament.”

Oktai stepped closer, the usual grin in his face. “Well, since you’re busy, Kurama, I’m happy to escort our lady back to the palace.”

“Very well,” Kurama said, eyes never leaving you. “Please take care, my love.”

You nodded, leaning in for a quick kiss. “You, too. I’ll be waiting for you tonight.”

“I just spoke with Eri,” Arban said, perching on your shoulder as a fly.

You pushed open the door to your chambers, stepping into the den. Qara was always out this time of the day doing laundry, so you had the whole wing to yourself. “Good,” you said. “I’m glad to hear that. I hope you had a nice conversation, however short.” Your heart ached for them, two star-crossed lovers that would never find solace in one another again — or, perhaps, only in death.
“Never mind that. The human ranch is not too far from here. That is where Yul purchases his slaves and supply of human meat. Eri never told me much about the ranch until now — she divulged some secrets to me. Although it has been reconstructed in partitions over the last thousand years, I hope those weaknesses in the fortress still stand. Would you like to see it?”

This was sudden. “Why are you bringing this up now?” you said. “Arban, I thought you didn’t want me to have anything to do with the human food trade.”

“Would that have stopped you? I don’t recall your respect for authority as an obstacle, even in your younger years.”

“Oh, you know me so well.”

“What will it be, then, _____?” Nairu said as she pushed the door open to your room. “I know you’ve been wanting to do this. I feel it in your heart. It’s your mission, and I’m happy to support you.”

“I’m up for it. But… what about Kurama?” You hated the thought of lying to him, even by omission. But if you told him, he would surely prevent you from going. Besides, he couldn’t very well defy Yul by destroying the khan’s supply of humans. The blood pact forbade it. It was best if you didn’t tell him.

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him, and he’ll be well-distracted with Hiei around, won’t he?”

“You’re right, Nairu. There’s no time like the present.” You were much stronger than you were when you first arrived about two months ago, and now you had Nairu with you. Although there were surely demons out there who could overwhelm you in battle, you felt confident enough with the help of your spirit beast to take that chance.

And Arban would be with you as well. If there was anyone whom you could trust, you knew it would be him, the silent guardian who had watched over you your whole life.

“Well?” he said. “Have you made up your mind?”

“Let’s do it,” you said. “We can leave right now.”

“Good,” Nairu said. “Where to, Arban?”

“Leave the palace through the back entrance and make for the western forest. Be as discreet as you can.”

You did as instructed, walking down the tower stairs as usual, Nairu at your feet. Your heart beat quickly in your chest. This was what you wanted, and after some time of burying the idea, letting it lay dormant, you were excited to be following the old trails again.

You never forgot about your goal of ending the human food trade in Demon World — you had only set it aside, feeling as though you had no control over the vast complexities surrounding this cruel practice. Now with Arban and Nairu at your side, you felt determined again, like you could affect some positive change in this world, if you had to live in it, no matter how temporarily.

Your thoughts wandered back to Kurama. Of course he’d be worried. He was a calm worrier, less so about himself than about you. His concern was touching, but you also wanted to keep your independence, and that was the last thing you had here. Ever since Kurama had walked into your life, you felt reliant on him.
In some ways, it was a good thing. You trusted him with your life and your heart. You saw a future with him. You hoped there would be a ring, a home, perhaps even a family. There would be happiness, a dog in your lap, late evenings of teasing and giggling by a fire. You saw celebrations and grief, loss and life — there was everything. He was everything.

And because of him, you wanted to make something of yourself. You didn’t want to wholly depend on him. You wanted this to be a two-way street, a relationship in which he could rely on you as much as you did on him.

You longed to contribute.

Terminating the human food trade was important to you, to the thousands of human lives that would be spared. Being useful to others and to Kurama, showing them that you were capable was meaningful.

But proving your worth to yourself? Now, that was essential.

You had a feeling that Nairu and Arban realized that. That was why they were the ones accompanying you on this journey, not your beloved Kurama.

“Please understand, Kurama,” you thought to yourself. He couldn’t hear you, of course, but it was the most prevalent wish in your heart.

Nairu heard it. She brushed up against your leg as you paced to the forest, giving you a reassuring look as she walked besides you.

Once you were in the cover of the trees, Arban fluttered from your shoulder, morphing into a proud stag, antlers held high. He knelt to the ground. “Climb on,” he said. “We have a long way to go, and only a few hours before sunset. This will be a reconnaissance mission only. We’ll take a look at the ranch from all angles and return to decide our next plan of action. Do you understand?”

It was wise, what he was suggesting. There was no need to be rash about these decisions — you had the time to plan this out properly.

You nodded, swinging a leg over Arban’s back. Nairu hopped up in front of you.

“Now hold on tight,” Arban said,bounding away in great leaps. His ability to navigate the forested mountains was impressive, and each stride of his legs seemed effortless.

“Where is this place?” you said.

“On the far side of the mountain. Yul needs to keep his supply of humans close by.”

Your heart ached for them, but there would be a brighter tomorrow soon. You only hoped they could wait a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.
Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Compromised

Chapter Summary

You arrive at the human ranch with Arban and Nairu, and you even have a plan. But, of course, things never go as you want them to.

Chapter Notes

Whoo! This chapter was a lot of fun to write. I know I've been dividing this story into arcs. The first arc details Kurama and the RC's start together, how it feels to fall in love, and how Kurama can hardly believe how it's happening. The second is them strengthening and developing that relationship, and Kurama's inner struggles with his demon secret. The third is Demon World, and how the pair work together to protect their future. BUT, as things have evolved, I think this might be the start of the fourth one because certain events are about to take place that will make things... messy.

I definitely have an end in sight, so this won't drag out forever, but the tone as I'm writing this is a little different. There are going to be scars and broken hearts, and I think the RC is going to very heavily develop going forward.

With that said, thank you for reading! Thank you to those who have left comments on the last chapter: GinaLiz, CrossYourTeez, Kupid, AyaneMiharu, Anne_frederick, and Shara_Ookami92 for the feedback! You are priceless and wonderful. <3

Anyway, I hope everyone is doing well and staying safe! <3 Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you! Enjoy, please!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m surprised you’re not within thirty feet of her.”

“Hiei,” Kurama greeted. “She’s safe in the palace. Yul and his vassals cannot harm her, and her spirit beast never leaves her side.”

“It must be some deal you forged with the devil,” Hiei said, appearing with view. The light filtered through the trees of the forest. They were a distance from the palace — Kurama clearly didn’t want anyone eavesdropping on this meeting.

“Bloodpacts are powerful. You know this. I may be at a disadvantage, but Yul’s greatest leverage on me is protected. He cannot use her against me.”

Hiei scoffed. “You must be proud of yourself.”

Kurama gave him a canny glance. “I have taken less pride in previous dealings.”

“So why have you summoned me here, Kurama? You seem to have everything under control.”
“My battle with Oktai had me thinking about my spirit energy.”

“The meager amount of spirit energy in that human body?”

“It’s been two months since the banquet. You’ll notice my spirit energy is far more substantial now,” Kurama said.

“But still not enough.”

“Humor me, Hiei. When I performed the bloodpact ritual, Yul specifically wanted me to serve him, not as a human, but as Yoko Kurama, a demon. The magic grows more potent each day — I can feel it. I wonder if I may overcome it by embracing my human nature.”

“Embrace away,” he said, a steely gaze in his eyes. “It won’t be enough. If you even attempt to fight Yul armed with what little spirit energy your human body can produce, you’ll die.”

Kurama stared straight ahead, acknowledging Hiei’s warning. Still, he felt determined. He had to be. He had a few ideas — he only needed to test them prior to implementation. And if there was anyone resourceful enough to assist him, it would be Hiei.

You arrived, your bottom sore from the long ride and the many leaps and turns Arban made along the journey. He stood on a covered cliff where the trees were especially dense as you looked down at the fortress from a distance.

The ranch was not like any ranch you had ever seen. It was a fortress made of metal and cinder block, stretching across the lay of the land — it was like a modern-day prison with its high walls and heavy gate at the front.

“This is no better than a slaughterhouse,” you said, unable to take your eyes away. “Humans actually live here?”

“So I’m told,” Arban said. “Live might be a euphemism. They are farmed here, kept until they are the right age for slaughter. Perhaps the fortunate ones are sold as slaves.”

“Fortunate?” Nairu said. “I’d prefer to be eaten.”

“I suppose a human slave would at least have a chance at a better life down the line,” you said. “If you were eaten, you’d have no opportunity at all.”

“I don’t know many happy human slaves.”

“Well, not happy. But, I mean, look at Qara. She may be a prisoner, but we treat her well — I’d like to think that she’s better off alive than dead. At least, now we can work toward freeing her from this place.”

“Hush,” Arban said. He studied the fortress from where he stood. “We’ll take a perimeter and see if we can find any weaknesses in their stronghold. Lean back.” He turned, scaling down the cliff on strong legs.

You held on, taking his advice as you descended. The forest around here was thick, and it only grew denser as you moved toward the fortress, until it broke into an open field — this was likely so that the demon sentries could easily track down any runaways.

“This is awful,” you said. “I can’t imagine how fearful these people must be.”
“They live every day like this,” Nairu said. “And that’s no way to live.”

“That’s why we have to get them out of here. The sooner, the better.”

“Stay here,” Arban said, kneeling to the ground. “Stay hidden. I’m going to get a closer look.” Once you and Nairu were on the ground, he shifted, shrinking, flesh warping into a small, harmless rodent. His nose twitched, whiskers flicking, and he started off, hidden in the grass.

He scrambled around the perimeter as he said he would, examining every wall and window, every door and tower.

You sat in the shrubbery with Nairu, noting the demons that guarded the gate. They were mean-looking with sharp fangs and scales. A month ago, you would have been intimidated, but with your newfound spirit energy and Nairu, you felt far more confident. “Do you think we could take them?” you asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said, watching them through the bushes. “They are of a lower class, which makes sense. You don’t need powerful demons looking after human prisoners. You and I could easily defeat them. Would you like to try?”

“No, I was just curious,” you said with a small laugh. “We should wait for Arban before making any decisions.”

“Agreed. Though I certainly wouldn’t mind stretching my legs. Riding a stag over a mountain is less fun than it sounds.”

“I hear you. We’ll still need to get back to the palace, too. Maybe Arban can choose a different form.”

“Unless he turns into a flying whale, I think they’re all about the same.”

Arban returned soon after. “There’s only one way in and one way out,” he said, his voice far too majestic and rich for such a diminutive rodent. “The compound is made up of several buildings inside — living quarters, a processing plant, laboratories, among them.”

“You went inside?”

“Only briefly. Shapeshifting is a useful talent.”

“I would like to see inside, if at all possible.”

“It’s possible. Remember we’re only there to gather information, however. I can get you inside so you can see the conditions, but we’re leaving after a quick surveillance.”

“And how do you expect to do that?” Nairu said, scratching at her ear with her back foot. “I’m small, you can be small, but in case you haven’t noticed, ____ looks just like the humans demons want to eat or otherwise do horrible things to.”

“Precisely. We can work with that. Play a game of pretend. I’m not the only one who can disguise myself. ____ is a pro at it, having played dress up since she was a toddler.”

“I’m willing to take the risk,” you said. “I knew that before we left the palace. Besides, if anything happens, we can take them. You said so yourself, Nairu.”

“We’re not taking anyone,” Arban said. “The moment you stir up any trouble, the moment you’re
recognized, that news is going right back to Yul, do you understand? We need information, and we need to obtain it as subtly as possible.”

You nodded. He didn’t have to take you inside the ranch, so the least you could do was heed his warnings.

“I can disable the two sentries,” he said. “While I do that, dirty yourself to make your face unrecognizable as if you’ve been traveling a long way. I’ll lead you inside as if you are a new prisoner, a human found wandering in the Makai — while rare, they’re not unheard of. Your access may be limited, but, Nairu, you’re free to wander as long as you can do so unseen.”

“I thought we were trying to be subtle,” she said. “Killing guards, no matter how useless they may be, doesn’t sound subtle to me.”

“She needs to be subtle. No one cares what I do. In fact, there will be no evidence it was me. I’m sure fights in this area aren’t uncommon. There’s always a stupid, lowlife demon who wants a pound of flesh and is willing to risk his life to get it. If the sentries wander off and are found dead, no one will ask any questions as long as _____ isn’t involved.”

“All right, then,” you said. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

Arban glanced at the gate, where the two demons were waiting, clubs in hand, whips at their belts. “I’ll come fetch you when the deed is done.” He scampered off, still a rodent, and in the middle of the field, he shifted. This time, he changed into a human, plump and dressed in rags. As soon as the demons noticed him, they called after him, eventually chasing him into the surrounding forest. They would be dead soon.

Meanwhile, you and Nairu tossed mud at one another. She smeared her paws over your cheeks, while you ran your hand through her luscious fur. You both giggled more than you should have.

Nairu dashed into the shrubbery to escape you, and you followed after her, pushing past the bushes in an attempt to find her.

“Aha!” someone said. “I knew I smelled a human here somewhere!”

You stopped, turning to see a young boy. Short black hair framed his face in a bowl cut, bangs giving way to a sharp horn in the middle of his forehead. His ears were large and pointed, much like those of elves in modern fantasy. His skin was pale, and although his eyes were bright and youthful, you saw a devastating power within them.

“Who are you?” you said, taking a cautious step back.

“ Doesn’t matter who I am,” he said. “But you look like dinner.” He charged at you with incredible speed.

You knew your winter energy would do nothing against the physical strength of your opponents and you weren’t fast enough to compete with him, so your only choice was to put up a shield. You summoned the autumn, the time of bountiful harvest, a precursor to the winter that would inevitably come — it was time to protect yourself.

The demon’s fist collided with your barrier, and he was forced backward in utter shock, slammed into the ground. “What the hell?” he spat as he picked himself up, shaking his hand. “Humans can’t do that!”

“You’d be surprised,” you said. “I’m sorry if you’re hungry, but I refuse to be food. There must be
“You’re not even supposed to be out here,” he said, pointing an accusing finger at you. “No humans escape these ranches alive. You must be from somewhere else.”

“What do you plan on doing about it?”

In a blur of pale blue, Nairu sprung from her hiding place, shoving herself into the young demon.

“Wait! Nairu!” Although you already understood her motivation, you loathed the idea of having to end the life of someone so young, even if he planned on eating you.

“He needs to die,” she said, only to you. “You can’t let him live now that he’s seen you. He didn’t hesitate to kill you for food. You cannot hesitate to kill him for your own survival.”

She was right. You called upon spring, the vivacity of life, a zeal in energy, and you directed it toward Nairu.

The hair on the back of her neck bristled, eyes frosting over in an opaque white. “Protect yourself, ______. I’ll manage this one. We need to take this fight as far away from the ranch as possible.”

The energy seemed to consume her, the tips of her tails on fire now, and she taunted him with a cry, leading him on a chase.

“You and your fox pet are going down!” The boy demon created some distance before launching an assault, a scattershot of energy that came forth.

You kept your spring energy going, but you also brought autumn back, creating that barrier to defend yourself. The blasts collided with your barrier, each one testing your resilience and courage. They shook you, pushing you backward with each blow.

Nairu growled, parting her jowls, combatting her opponent’s technique with her own white fire, sizzling from her throat. It shot at him, one burst after another, quick and deadly.

He was on the defensive now, scurrying away from each of Nairu’s attacks. He was fast, agile on his feet, somersaulting toward her, about to strike her with a mighty kick.

She dodged, rolling to the side. When he tried to attack her from behind, she whipped her flaming tails in his face, eliciting a cry of pain.

You watched as they brawled. Nairu cleverly drew him farther from the ranch, even scaling up the side of the mountain. She utilized her petite size to her advantage, weaving through the treetops and scurrying across the face of the cliffs. The smallest movements would allow her to evade his attacks.

You weren’t sure what she said or did — she was too far away at this point — but you had a feeling that she was toying with him as any sly fox would. You were certain, given your interactions with her, that Nairu was capable of provocation, and you were also certain she enjoyed it.

She could not fly, but she sailed through the air gracefully as though the fire in her mouth and upon her tails were carrying her. When the demon dove at her, she fired her blasts of wintery flame, allowing them to spill toward him. He would have to dodge to avoid her searing fire, giving Nairu the opportunity to reposition and go on the offense.

“Hang in there,” you said, more to yourself than Nairu. Now that she had led the demon away from
you, you lowered your autumn energy, letting the barrier diminish. You diverted it to spring, heightening her powers even more, and she blazed white, the fires intensifying.

One particularly forceful blow caught the demon boy off guard, and Nairu sent him flying into the side of the mountain, trees and boulders tumbling onto her unfortunate opponent.

You rushed toward the mountainside to see what had happened, but someone appeared in your path. He was fast — it was as if he materialized from thin air.

He was tall, pale, shoulders thick and lean. He wore sleeveless robes that revealed his muscled arms. His eyes were closed, but you felt him boring into you with yet another sense. Three pointed ears grew out of each side of his head, two horns from his forehead. The expression on his face was a neutral one. “A human,” he said, “with a spirit beast. This is a rarity.”

“Who are you?” you said.

He didn’t honor your question. “Call her off, human.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you’re dead.”

“You may wish to renounce your threat,” Arban said, appearing beside you in his stag form. His chest heaved — as loyal as ever, he rushed to you when he saw the destruction in the distance. “I know who you are, Yomi. I know your history with Kurama. This human is Kurama’s lover, and unless you wish to earn his ire and the wrath of her ancestral father, Yul, I would choose your words more carefully.”

Yomi stood where he was, unmoving, contemplating Arban’s words. “I see,” he finally said. “My son was foolish, then. He has those tendencies, raging hormones and irrational ambition. I was not so different as a boy.”

Nairu was at your side immediately, teeth bared.

“It’s okay,” you said to her, letting your spring energy subside.

She sat down, tails twitching irritably behind her, the fires fading. “The boy’s fine,” she said. “Might just take some time to dig himself out.”

“While I’m no ally of Yul, I would rather not make an enemy of him before the tournament,” Yomi said. “Nor would I seek to offend Kurama. You have my apologies, human, for Shura’s rash behavior.”

You should have been more upset — this disturbance ruined your reconnaissance mission, and would quite possibly attract unwanted attention from nearby demons. You hoped this news would not make it back to Yul. You needed to get out of here and not waste time on this interaction, however interesting.

Shura stepped into the clearing, fists curled, ego wounded — otherwise, he was relatively unscathed. He looked as though he wanted to dive forward again, but his father stopped him. “That’s enough, Shura. You’ve overstepped your boundaries.”

“It’s fine,” you said. “Just please don’t try to eat me again.”

Yomi’s lips tugged into a subtle grin. “You’re all the way out here without Kurama? I’m surprised
he hasn’t yet marked his woman with all the obvious dangers in Demon World, but he must have his reasons; he always does. Bid him hello on my behalf. We will see you at the tournament in a month’s time.”

You watched him leave with Shura until they disappeared among the foliage. Perhaps they would have interesting perspectives for you if the situation were more favorable. You certainly wondered how Yomi knew Kurama and what kind of history they shared.

“Is marking really that commonplace here?” you said, half to yourself.

Arban shook his head. “It’s a barbaric practice, rooted in chauvinist tradition and assertions of male dominance. Don’t listen to him. Kurama is right to not mark you.” He knelt to the ground. “It’s time we returned to the palace and determine our next course of action. We’ve been compromised and need to be careful.”

“Not so fast,” a familiar voice said.

You froze, filled with a sense of dread. “Oktai,” you said, calling out to him by name. Perhaps you could distract him long enough to come up with a viable reason why you were so far from the palace. “What are you doing out here?”

“Get away from him, _____,” he said, a dutiful gaze in his eyes. His staff was raised, cloak billowing behind him. His energies were potent. “I have found you at last, Arban the Deceiver. I will bring you back to Xanadu Palace as either a prisoner or a corpse. Take your pick.”

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhangers aren’t largely my style, but why not?

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

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Always a Choice

Chapter Summary

Oktai and Arban, two powerhouses, battle it out with the very real intention of killing each other. What will you choose to do?

Chapter Notes

I had muse, so this is a quick update! ^_^ Please enjoy!

I'm all caught up on "A Single Word," so please feel free to make requests! :)

Thank you to Anne_frederick, Rachsteph27, Yeah_I'm_Crazy.So.What, FannibalToast, Shara_Ookami92, and Queenasunasama for the comments last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I have found you at last, Arban the Deceiver. I will bring you back to Xanadu Palace as either a prisoner or a corpse. Take your pick.”

You touched Arban’s strong shoulders, hoping to convince him to not engage, but he had other ideas.

He stepped forward, striking his hoof against the ground as if readying a charge. “We left in secrecy, half-breed,” Arban said. “How did you find us?”

“It is simple,” Oktai said. “Qara. She came to me when she overheard your plot to come here. You should be ashamed for putting our lady in danger like this.”

Your heart sank. You had thought Qara was out doing laundry as she always did when you spoke with Arban and Nairu. In reality, you should have checked; your carelessness put your mission and Arban at risk.

“You may only be a servant, but you are a willing pawn in your master’s game,” Arban said. “The greatest danger has been curated by Yul. You know this.”

“Yulkhan is wise and powerful. His word is an inevitable truth — it has been so for thousands of years.”

“It is ‘inevitable’ because you make it so. You do not conquer whole territories without armies.”

“You would know all about that, wouldn’t you, Arban?”

He was unaffected by Oktai’s taunt. “I’ve left that past behind me. I found a new allegiance, something worth protecting. I advise you do the same, boy, and quickly. Should you choose to raise a hand against ______ or try to send her into the jowls of the beast, I will end you.”
“The beast you speak of with such scorn is her father—”

“Then, surely, he must have her best interests at heart — forcing her to fight in a tournament on his behalf, enslaving Kurama when he comes to her rescue, forcing her submission—”

“That is enough,” Oktai said. “I am to bring _____ home unharmed, and you in whatever condition you so choose. I do think Yulkhan would like to see you alive, but we’ll see just how cooperative you are.”

“Stop this,” you said. “Please. There has to be another way. Fighting can’t be the answer.”

“What do you think we’ve been doing for the past two months, my lady?” Oktai said. “Battle is a way of life here, and those who do not choose to partake are swiftly eradicated. Now stand aside.”

You looked to Arban to be the voice of reason, but his eyes were locked straight ahead. “_____,” he said, lowering his voice, “if Oktai overwhelms me, he will bring you back to the palace. You will have to answer to Yul. He cannot hurt you because of Kurama’s bloodpact, but he is sure to be furious. Decide now what it is you wish to do.”

“You can’t fight Oktai,” you said. “He’s clearly here because he doesn’t feel like there’s another way. Let me try to talk to him.”

“I think we’re beyond diplomacy, _____,” Arban reared up, bucking his front hooves, and charged forward. His head was lowered, antlers sharp and ready to pierce.

“No, stop!” you cried, watching helplessly from where you stood.

Oktai raised a barrier at the last moment, ready to absorb the impact.

However, Arban was ready. He shifted into a bat steps from Oktai, taking off on broad wings and soaring above his opponent. In mid-air, he shifted again, dropping to the ground as a huge stone golem, the impact stirring up dust and stone.

“Move, _____!” Nairu said, pushing at your leg with her paws.

“I can’t just leave them here,” you said, covering your face with an arm. “They’ll kill each other.”

Oktai had rolled to the side just in time to avoid the collision, and he summoned several blasts of energy from his staff to disrupt his enemy’s sight.

“Then let them,” she said, tugging at your pant leg with her teeth. “Wasn’t it Satomi who said that men are imbeciles?”

“You’re not funny. They could get hurt. I don’t see how it benefits us to have two of our allies fighting like this.”

“You’ve already tried to reason with them, _____.” Oktai said. “You did what you could. Now listen to reason.”

But reason was so subjective, and you saw it very differently than these three did.

Kurama and Hiei trained in the forest, experimenting with the potential at their fingertips.

Whole trees sprung from the ground at Kurama’s behest, reaching toward the skies, pushing past the exhibiting inhabitants.
“A hybrid plant,” Hiei said.

“That’s right. I was inspired by the rekeika trees. _____ had a run-in with them.”

“You give her a large degree of freedom.”

“She’s a woman, not a child. She is little trouble.”

Hiei exhaled sharply as if trying to disguise a laugh. “You don’t consider being forced to work for the devil incarnate trouble?”

“Not more trouble than she’s worth.”

“You really are pathetic.”

“I know.” Kurama couldn’t help but smile — and in a single moment, his expression turned somber. “Did you feel that, Hiei?”

“It’s coming from the southwest,” Hiei said. “It must be two idiots fighting over who has larger gonads. It happens in Living World, too, or have you forgotten?”

“No,” Kurama said. “I recognize that energy. It’s Oktai. I wonder what he’s doing so far from the palace.”

“He’s Yul’s stooge, just following orders.” Hiei’s eyes rolled toward Kurama. “You don’t think so?”

“Where is _____? Find her.”

Although Hiei rarely cared for the predicaments of others, he heard the urgency in Kurama’s voice. He removed his headband, his Jagan slowly opening and glowing faintly.

Arban, taking the form of a demonic cougar, leaped toward Oktai, several blasts of sizzling flame erupting from his throat.

Oktai met him with a large concentration of his own energy, a potent mixture of both demon and spirit. He let loose the burst, sending a shockwave of power throughout the surrounding area.

The force knocked you off your feet, and you hit the ground with a thud.

Nairu was at your side, nudging your arm with her wet nose. “_____, don’t be so stubborn! You need to figure out what we’re doing going forward. I’m sure Yul felt that blast — if he didn’t know before, he knows now that Oktai found us and is fighting Arban. If Oktai wins this fight, Arban will die either now or later. If Arban wins, we can’t go back to the palace with him. We need to decide now.”

You didn’t know what to do, even though Nairu was right.

If Oktai gained the upper hand, Arban was as good as dead — you would not tolerate that. If there was any reason to protect anyone, you owed it to the guardian who watched over you your entire life. You studied the battle closely, wondering if you should interfere.

If Arban managed to defeat Oktai, then Arban would have to go into hiding again, much more vigilantly than he did before. Yul would come after him for his defiance. What would you do then? Would you return to the palace with Oktai and tell Yul what you intended to do with Arban out
here?

In either situation, you could run away. That was not really a choice, however — you refused to leave Kurama behind, who was sure to be punished for your insolence.

Oktai began siphoning his energy again, utilizing his barriers as springboards in an attempt to catch Arban off guard with his many lasers. This caused immense destruction to the surrounding forest and mountainside.

Arban was fast on his feet, shifting from one form to another to take advantage of the terrain and each anatomy’s strengths. He was a swordsman one moment, a giant eagle the next; then, a poisonous two-headed cobra, a fly-footed ninja, a proud ram for scaling the cliffs.

You could barely stand it, this fighting. Although Arban was your friend and guardian, Oktai had also been kind to you. This conflict was pointless, curated by Yul, when these two could easily both be your allies.

They fought tooth and nail, powerful blasts of energy reverberating the very earth. You had to raise your own shields on several occasions to defend both you and Nairu. It was a mess, these two titans of Demon World, striking one another with the intention to kill.

Arban took a hit, followed by several others, forced backward as he was slammed through several trees. You heard the crack of the wood, even a cry of pain.

You ran toward him, against Nairu’s wishes, rushing toward the smoke and rubble. “Please be alive,” you thought, your heart pounding erratically in your chest.

You found Arban, crushed beneath the trunk of a large tree, and knelt beside him. He was a stone golem again, having changed just in time to harden against the blow. “I’m fine, ____,” he said, wincing. “Now get out of the way.” He shifted again, this time back into his Akita form, and he tried crawling from underneath the trunk.

“No. You’re hurt.” You noticed the blood — there was so much of it. You reached for him, touching his face.

“Get away,” he said, this time more forcefully. “You could be killed.” He coughed, blood sputtering from his throat, spilling over his black lips, and his legs gave out.

“Just rest,” you said. You heard footsteps behind you. “You’ll be all right. You took care of me for so many years. You have to let me protect you now.”

He watched you with dark eyes, unable to protest.

You stood, turning around to see Oktai, a serious expression on his face. “Stand aside, my lady,” he said. “I’m taking him back to the palace.”

“You know that’s as good as a death sentence for him. If he hadn’t protected me all of my life, I may not even be here right now.”

“If he hadn’t stolen your ancestor away, you may not have needed his protection.”

“There’s no way to know for sure,” you said, “so I’d rather not argue about hypotheticals.”

Oktai frowned. “You care for this creature, my lady? He’s enabling you, putting you in dangerous situations, giving you these ridiculous ideas.”
“That’s where you’re wrong. This was my idea — Arban’s just the only person who will help me. I’m the one who wants to free the humans and stop this horrible food trade. You can’t blame him for any of this.”

“It doesn’t matter what he’s done now. His life has been forfeit for a thousand years when he betrayed the khan. What’s happened today has nothing to do with the sentence that will befall him.”

“Please, Oktai,” you said. “There has to be another way.”

“You’re asking me to do the impossible. Yulkhan has spoken. If I disobey him, there will be consequences; and if he discovers you’re the mastermind behind this, he’ll find some way to punish you as well.”

You didn’t have a solution to all of this. You weren’t sure how Yul would react, given the circumstances. You certainly had never seen his anger firsthand, and while you didn’t want to, you were willing to take a few chances to save Arban from his cruel fate.

“Yul knows for certain that Arban is here?” you said.

Oktai nodded. “Yes. Qara told us so. She overheard you mention his name today. There’s no saving him, ____. Yulkhan knows. If I don’t bring him back, he’ll send an army after him now that he’s injured.”

This was your fault; you should have exercised more caution. You looked to Arban, who was glaring at Oktai with disgust in his eyes.

You stepped in front of him, still facing Oktai. “You’re not leaving with him, dead or alive. I won’t let you.”

Oktai’s eyes hardened, and he shook his head slowly. “Don’t make me do this. I don’t want to get physical with you. You know I have to do this for both our sakes.”

“You don’t, Oktai. You have a choice. You always have a choice.” You made sure to hold eye contact with him. You could see the uncertainty, a flicker of fear, the cogs in his mind turning as he rehearsed his options.

He lifted his staff from the ground as if to relax it. In one swift motion, he tapped it against your shoulder.

A jolt of electricity ran through your body — it was painful, dazing, and rendered you unable to move. Your legs gave out, your muscles tightening in agonizing discomfort. You crumpled into Oktai with a small cry as you fell forward. He caught you, lowering you to the ground with care.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” he said, and he looked like he meant it. “I need you to stay out of harm’s way.” He walked over toward Arban.

“What did you do?!” Arban barked, struggling to his feet. Blood poured from his wound, dripping also from his lips.

“A temporary shock. She’ll be fine after a minute or so. It’s plenty of time for me to finish you.” The stone in his staff began to glow.

“Stop.” Nairu was at your side, licking your face as if to tell you everything would be all right. “You’ve done enough for today, Oktai.”
“You speak telepathically,” Oktai said. “I thought you must have had a way of communicating with our lady. You’ve been hiding this ability from Yulkhan. He won’t like that, and I’m sure he has his suspicions.”

“Don’t worry about Yul. Worry about me.”

“I know whom you serve. But you have to believe me — this is the best course of action. If we don’t bring Arban back to the palace, Yul will punish all of us.”

“_____ and I are already in trouble,” Nairu said, trotting over to Arban and standing beside him. “We made the choice to come out here to the human ranch and scout the area. Arban has been in trouble for a thousand years, and he’s still alive. Your decision right now is for yourself. What you choose to do determines your future. Whose side are you on?”

“This isn’t about sides, spirit beast. It’s about survival.”

“You don’t think _____ will survive at this rate? With her free will? Her kind heart and radical ideas? Or has she not been broken by your khan yet?”

Oktai’s eyes glimmered. Nairu had struck a nerve, doing precisely what she needed to do — she bought you precious time.

You began to feel the tingling in your limbs again as your muscles relaxed, fighting off the remainder of the shock. A horrible soreness ran through your entire body. You imagined this shock was probably what being struck with a modern taser felt like. You pushed yourself off the ground, struggling to your feet.

Oktai saw you, and rushed to your side, steadying you. “Why are you trying to stand?” he said, holding you by the arms. He looked over you with obvious concern. “Are you all right?”

“I’ve been better,” you said. “I’ve never been electrocuted before.”

He winced. “I’m sorry.”

“Forget about it. Please, Oktai. I need your help.” In your eyes were tears — whether they came from the frustration of the situation or your body’s response to being shocked, he could only guess.

“_____ we’ve been over this. I can’t——”

“You can,” you said. “I know about your mother. I sent Arban to look for her.”

“You what?”

This was terrible timing. You had never intended on withholding this information from Oktai, and having it come out now when you were so desperate made you seem deceitful.

You took a deep breath. “Sarnai,” you started, “she’s gone, Oktai. I’m so, so sorry.” Your face was wet with tears. “I wanted to tell you sooner, but I knew how much it would hurt you to know.”

He stared at you for a moment, and within those pools of azure sky, the finest shade of ethereal water, like melted ice caps glacially drifting into the purest streams, you saw a suppressed rage.

He pulled himself away suddenly, and you collapsed on the ground again.

“I’m sorry you had to find out like this,” you said. “I wasn’t brave enough——”

“No,” he said. “It’s okay.” He kneeled down next to you, wiping away your tears with his sleeve.
“Does Yulkhan know about my mother?”

“I can’t confirm. You know Yul better than I do. How could he not know?”

“You’re right.” Oktai’s gaze fell to the ground. “The bloodpact conditions are not met if she’s dead. This means I’m free.”

“Like I said, it’s your choice.” Nairu trotted to him, placing her front paws on his leg. “You’re not tied to Yul anymore. I suppose he wanted you to think that. Your mother died of heartbreak, Oktai. She could not stand being separated from you, and in that way, Yul is responsible. Do you wish to continue serving him?”

Oktai brushed your hair from your face. “Thank you, ______,” he said. “If I owe my allegiance to anyone, it’s you.”

You gave him a puzzled expression. “Why?”

“Because you found me the truth when I was too frightened to look for it on my own.”

“Does that mean..?”

“Yes. I’ll help you.” He smiled. “But only if you stop crying.”

You returned his smile with a pathetic laugh. “What are we going to do, then?”

“I have a few ideas.” Oktai looked at Arban, who had limped over toward them. “Can you walk, old fellow?”

“I planned on doing more than that,” Arban said. “I was going to take off your head while you were distracted. I am still considering it. I didn’t expect _____ to turn you into an ally.”

You crawled over to Arban, summoning your spirit energy. “Here,” you said, directing the verdant spring at him. “This will help you heal faster.”

He nodded at you in thanks. “What now?”

“We return,” Oktai said.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. ;) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.

Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process! Friend me on Facebook if you want to chat!
Graveyards and Indispensable Men

Chapter Summary

You return to the palace to see Yul. He is furious, and you fear his retribution. There is pain and loss.

Chapter Notes

WHY HELLO! Happy weekend! :D I hope this update finds you all safe and healthy and sane!

If you think the chapter title is creepy, well, this chapter kind of is. XDDD I wasn't sure if I wanted to split this chapter into two because it is long enough to be two separate ones, but I think this would be kind of a mean cliffhanger to cut this off in the middle.

SO. You lovelies get the whole thing. ^_^

I do wish to provide a warning. Most of the chapter is fine, but the ending is NSFW because of the violence and gore. I don't go into too much detail, so I wouldn't say it's squick, but if you're extra sensitive, maybe be cautious? I'm happy to provide a summary for you if you'd prefer not to read.

Sincere thanks to FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, LadyAmazon, Rachsteph27, flyinginstinct, GinaLiz, AyaneMiharu, Shara_Ookami92, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), Kupid, Guitarherobears, Anne_frederick, and CrossYourTeez for your wonderful feedback! I am lucky to have you all reading my works! <3

Please enjoy!

EDIT: Sorry, guys. I missed up the formatting. Nairu's italics should be fixed now.

“I’m fine now,” Arban said. “Save your energy.”

“Are you sure?” you said, not quite cutting off your supply of spring. “You’ll be okay on your own?”

He chuckled, a deep rumbling in his chest. “I’ve been fine for a thousand years before you came along, ______. I’ll manage.”

You noted his wound — it was still open and swelling, but the bleeding had stopped. “All right,” you said. “Please be careful.”

“I could say the same for you.” He glanced to the side, watching Oktai as he tended to the umagi. “I don’t trust him.”
“I do. I have to. There’s no other way out of this.”

“There is always another way. Oktai has been under Yul’s influence for far too long, ever since he was a child. Do you really think he would betray his only father figure, no matter how terrible and gruesome?”

“Point taken, but I don’t think he’d betray me.” You realized you were being stubborn — whether because you truly believed it or because of your own confirmation bias, you weren’t sure.

Arban stood, his movements far less weak than they were minutes ago. “If he does, I won’t hesitate to end him.”

“He won’t, so you won’t have to,” you said, following him. “Now take care. Don’t strain yourself too much. Come find me when you’re feeling better.”

“Be safe, _____.” He then sprinted into the wilderness.

You watched him disappear, feeling nostalgic about having to say goodbye. You could only hope that this would all work out, that you would see him again.

“Are you ready, my lady?” Oktai appeared beside you.

You nodded slowly. “How sure are you that this plan will work?”

“I’m not. But I know Yul better than anyone, perhaps aside from his consorts.”

“What if he hurts you for failing?”

“Failing to capture Arban? My dear, Arban has eluded him for over a thousand years. Any punishment or infliction on me will only be temporary. He can’t afford to be rid of me if he wants another opportunity at seizing him.”

You gave him a sad look. “The graveyards are full of indispensable men.”

“What?”

“It’s a quote from home. It means that you shouldn’t be so confident that the world can’t get along with you. Or in our case, that Yul doesn’t have the means to dispose of his servants. We’re all disposable.”

“All except you, my lady. Yulkhan needs you in the tournament.”

“I don’t see why. He’s stronger than me. Kurama’s stronger than me. You’re stronger than me.”

“You and your spirit beast haven’t realized your full potential yet.”

“And he thinks we’re going to do it in the next month?”

“He’s betting on it. He’s invested too much in you to do otherwise — he spent no small fortune finding you in Living World, and the ancient bloodpact magic he used to ensnare Kurama is nearly running dry.”

You stepped toward the umagi, and Oktai helped you up onto its back. “We’ll see,” you said. “First, we have to survive this. Admittedly, I’m terrified.” Nairu joined you.

“Stick to the plan,” Oktai said, swinging himself onto the umagi in front of you. “Remember:
Arban led you out here because he wanted you to see the human ranch. This was his idea, not yours. I came after you when Qara informed us of your departure. Arban and I fought. I injured him, but he got away and abandoned you.”

“Well, it’s not too far from the truth, at least. Kurama always tells me I’m a terrible liar.”

“If there’s any lie you’ve ever told that needs to be convincing, make it this one.” He spurred the umagi ahead as it began climbing the mountain cliffs.

You held onto him, arms wrapped around his waist. The umagi was not nearly as graceful or fast as Arban was, but you couldn’t complain — you certainly didn’t want to hike these cliffs on your own.

Besides, you had things on your mind. You needed time to calm your nerves before your inevitable meeting with Yul.

“If you have questions for him, now is the time to ask,” Nairu said.

You were conflicted, and clearly your spirit beast felt it. “Oktai?” you said.

“Yes, my lady?”

You took a deep breath, catching the fine hints of sandalwood and cinnamon in his cloak. “You made a pretty big decision back there to help me. It’s not that I don’t appreciate it, but you do know what kind of a sacrifice you’re making, don’t you?”

“Are you looking for me to change my mind?”

“No. I mean, I hope not. It’s your choice.”

“I know.”

“And, I don’t mean to pry, but I know how much your mother meant to you. Isn’t news of her death upsetting?”

“Of course it is. But I’ve suspected it for a long time. Yul said my mother would ‘live out her days in peace.’ I didn’t think about those exact words until after she was sent away. He made no promises to keep her alive. I should have seen it sooner.”

“Oh, Oktai. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Your confirmation brings me a sense of peace. I may have lost my mother, but I lost her many years ago. I don’t have time to grieve now. I have a new purpose to fulfill. I’ve lived my whole life in Yul’s shadow, doing his bidding. Now that I’m free of him, no longer bound to protect my mother, I have options. My mother would have me do what I want for once.”

“And what is it that you want?”

He turned his head to look at you and flashed you a bright smile. “I want to help you,” he said. “There will be time for me to grieve later, to visit my mother’s grave and bring her flowers, but for now, you need me more than she does.”

Maybe it was his reassuring grin or the sincere look in his eyes, and, quite frankly, maybe it was stupid, but you trusted him.

“Thank you,” you said, giving him a squeeze. “Thank you so much.”
He might have responded, but instead he looked up. “I believe we’re surrounded, _____. We have visitors.” He pulled the umagi to a halt.

Yoko Kurama appeared from the depths of the forest, Hiei beside him. They moved so quickly, arriving without a single strain on their breaths. You marveled at their demon anatomy, their physical capability for tireless action.

But more than anything, you saw the stern gaze in Yoko Kurama’s eyes and nearly winced. You slipped off the umagi, your feet touching the ground. “Kurama,” you said, “I can explain.”

You thought you would have to tolerate Yoko Kurama’s cold stare and unnerving cool, but he changed as soon as you approached. He was your Kurama again, and you bounded into his arms. It was such a relief — although it was of little actual consequence, you were hoping you’d be able to see him before having to face Yul. He could give you the courage you needed.

“_____,” he said, “what happened?”

“If you’re not opposed,” Oktai said, “she can explain along the way. We’re short on time. Yul will suspect something if we’re away for too long.”

“Yul?” Kurama said. “I’ve never heard you address your khan without the proper title.”

“A lot has happened,” you said, squeezing his hand. “I’ll tell you everything.”

You arrived at the palace without any further delays.

Kurama and Hiei were quiet for most of the journey. You didn’t care so much that Hiei was silent, but Kurama seemed especially pensive. Maybe he was upset with you, and out of respect for the ordeal that was to come, he decided to save the reprimands for later.

You couldn’t afford to overthink it right now.

“The throne room,” Oktai said. “We need to go there. Yul will be waiting for us.” He led the way, and when you finally stood in front of throne room doors, you sighed. They were a work of art, stories of guardians and heros etched out within them.

You wondered if your story would end here. Would you be remembered? Would you be a hero or a traitor?

You nearly shuddered at the thought, and you felt the comforting caress from Nairu’s consciousness. Everything would be all right, she said.

Oktai gave you a knowing glance and waved his staff, summoning the doors to open. “Yulkhan, my lord, I’ve returned,” he said, speaking into the dim room.

There was a pause.

You looked to your companions, and all your saw was stoicism.

“Bring my daughter in, Oktai,” Yul finally said. “Only _____ and her spirit beast. Everyone else stays out.” His tone of voice was calm, at least.

You took a breath as Oktai gestured for you to follow. The doors closed behind you as you cleared them, and you felt a sense of anxious dread. The walk up to the throne was a long one as you passed the lit candles, two by two. When you approached, you and Oktai both kneeled as was
proper in Xanaduan culture. Nairu sat next to you, eyes diverted from the khan.

“Where is Arban the Deceiver, Oktai? I tasked you to bring him to me, dead or alive.”

Oktai did not move, keeping his gaze to the ground. “Arban the Deceiver escaped,” he explained. “When I found him, we fought for a time, and when he was near defeat, he used the rest of his energy to escape me. I could either follow him or ensure my lady returned to the palace safely.”

“I’m sure given my daughter’s new sense of independence, she can defend herself for a moment while you give pursuit.”

“Then I had a lapse in judgment. Forgive me, Yulkhan.”

Oktai’s humble explanation seemed to placate the khan. “Very well,” he said. “I trust there will be no lapses going forward. I want Arban the Deceiver. We have been playing this game of cat and mouse for far too long. You will capture him at the next opportunity, Oktai — otherwise, you will find yourself wishing your judgment were better.”

“I understand, my lord.”

Then, Yul turned to you. “You’ve been keeping secrets from me.”

You didn’t dare look at him. It wasn’t a question — you would not speak out of turn.

“So your spirit beast has a name, hm? Nairu, your servant said. How long have you been communicating with one another? Did you not think it important to share her development with me?”

“I-I wasn’t—”

“It was my idea.” Nairu moved, her tails flicking to the side as she stepped toward the throne. She projected her telepathy for all to hear. “I wanted to see exactly how my powers would manifest before revealing my capabilities to you, Yulkhan.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he said, his voice coming out as a growl. “A creature as noble as a spirit beast should never lie.”

“There is no lie.” Her eyes gleamed. “All foxes have their share of secrets. We fight our own fights. We hone our own skills. We rely on no one. You should know that.”

“Silence! I will tolerate your insolent tongue no longer. You may be my daughter’s spirit beast, but you both belong to me. I am your king.” Yul stood, stepping toward you.

You kept your gaze on the ground, your heart thumping in your chest. He was so close, and he knelt in front of you. He reached for your chin, tilting it up so you would look him in the eye. His touch was surprisingly gentle.

“I cannot harm you, Daughter,” he said. His expression was neutral, not a hint of anger in it. Instead, he seemed contemplative. “You are protected here, even from me. Do you know why?”

You swallowed, feeling nauseous — you knew where this conversation was going.

“Do you know why?” he repeated, the dark silver in his eyes clouding over.

“Because of Kurama.”
“That’s right. Your demon lover made a contract with me in blood to protect you. I stripped him of his will and freedom. He’s mine now. He will serve me for all of eternity, until I release him from my service. Is this how you thank him?”

“Please don’t hurt him,” you said. You were not above begging.

“Silence.” He cut you off with a stern look, and when he saw you shaking, he touched your face and smoothed your hair. “Now, now, Daughter,” he said. “I’m not going to hurt you. But how else shall I punish you for your misconduct? You may be my blood, but there are no exceptions for this behavior. You left the palace attended by an enemy, and I cannot be accused of favoritism when I demand fealty.”

You stared at him, your breath caught in your throat. You had never known such fear in your life. How could you? No one you loved as much as Kurama had ever been in such danger, and certainly never because of his own sacrifice on your behalf.

“That reminds me,” Yul continued, releasing you. “Come here, Qara.”

The little girl stepped out from the shadows next to the throne. Her hands were folded in front of her in respect as servants were taught. She seemed uncertain, unable to meet your gaze — she knew the gravity of what she had done.

You couldn’t blame her. She was only trying to survive in a world that deemed her spirit broken. It was your fault for being so careless with your words.

“You’re in this position because of this girl.” Yul looked to her, placing his hand on top of her head. She was so small compared to him. “I know the truth because of her. She alerted me to Arban the Deceiver’s presence, Nairu’s ability to communicate with you. I should reward her. But” — he paused — “I gave her to you. Her loyalty was supposed to belong to you, Daughter. The only thing I loathe more than liars are traitors.” In one sudden motion, he struck Qara with a fist to the stomach.

A sickening crack reverberated through the throne room.

She flew several feet backward with a choked cry, skidding along the polished floors. She tried to pick herself up, only to crumple onto the floor, clutching her stomach. “M-my lord,” she said, her voice a tremble. “P-please.”

“You were meant to be loyal to my daughter,” Yul said, walking toward her, a devastating ire in his eyes. “She is your master. Despite her misbehavior, you should have served her to your dying breath. And because of your treachery, your mistress will now be punished. I shall find her a better servant than you. You deserve your fate, traitor.”

“No,” you said, the horror of being forced to watch this execution overriding your fear. “She’s just a girl! Leave her out of this!”

Yul ignored you, coming upon the injured and terrified Qara like a tiger stalking its prey.

Nairu dashed forward, clearly incensed, her eyes glowing white. “Did you not hear her, demon?” she said, charging at him. “Leave the girl alone!”

He turned around at the last moment, knocking her back with his arm.

She was pushed backward and landed on all four paws, fangs bared, tails erect.
“You would dare attack me, spirit beast?” he said. “You are only here because of me. You were once a part of me.”

“Not anymore,” she said, glaring at him. “I would rather my soul dissolve than serve you. You are a monster. I did not see it then, but I see it now.” Glistening fire spilled from her lips, and she let loose several blasts aimed at the khan, forcing him away from Qara.

Smoke filled the room, the air moving as a result of her attack.

“Nairu!” you cried, your mind racing with your options. You weren’t sure if her open aggression toward Yul was the wisest choice, but she was invested now. The only viable solution was to help her. She knew better than you how destiny would open its doors, how events would unfold. Perhaps now was the moment when Yul could finally be defeated.

You began channeling your spring energy, siphoning it toward Nairu. It was a familiar, comforting feeling to be in control of something — and then it stopped. You looked around you, catching in the candlelight a mere glint of a barrier. This wasn’t right. You reached out and touched it. It felt like cool glass against your hand, equally transparent, and you wondered if, for a moment, you mistakenly channeled your autumn energy instead.

But the more you inspected it, the more you realized that this wasn’t your energy — it belonged to Oktai. Your eyes widened at the realization. You were trapped, and your energy was not potent enough to travel beyond the barrier.

“It’s all right,” Nairu said, a whisper into your mind among the chaos. “I picked this battle, ____. It’s personal, and I have a secret that I kept, even from you.”

In a burst of brilliant white fire, silver dust sweeping over her body, you sensed a new energy — it was Nairu, you knew, one hundred percent of it. But, it was different — bolder, stronger, more vigorous.

She had evolved.

Kurama stared ahead, eyes narrowed. For all of his patience, a virtue he learned in his thousands of years of reflection, he felt restless. His beloved was behind those doors, shut tight and nearly soundproof, and he feared the horrors to which she may be subjected. He wanted to go inside and protect her, to, at the very least, assure her of his presence.

“Don’t even think about it,” Hiei said. “You swore loyalty to a monster, and if you disobey his orders, you put her in danger. She’s safe, Kurama. You already made sure of it.”

He loathed how right Hiei was.

So Kurama waited. He could not hear the words they spoke behind the doors. He could sense Yul’s potent energy. He heard cries, and he only endured them because he knew they did not belong to _____.

Then, it happened.

“Something is amiss,” Kurama said. “I feel it in the air.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Hiei said. “Wait here. You walk through those doors, and you give Yul license to do her harm.”
Kurama did not do well being helpless, but he was not one to act on mere whim, either. He would bide his time as he always did. No matter how distressing or uncomfortable, he knew he had already ensured her safety.

She would be fine, if only she could weather this.

When the debris settled, like scintillating powder snow, you saw her.

She was a fox, still, but she was much larger in size, grand enough to serve as a mount. Her face had narrowed, no longer cute, but majestic. Her eyes were the same, a vibrant and warm honey. You wanted to reach out and touch her sumptuous coat, a breathtaking pale blue that reminded you of wintertide. The fur around her neck seemed to flow, gathering around her chest in a soft and luxurious pelt. Her tails were many — she had a total of seven, each one plush and tipped in white flames. Her legs were slender, paws white and consumed in fire, blazing with each step.

“Ah, so this is your evolved form,” Yul said. “It must have taken you quite some time to stow away that energy, drop by drop. I see why you were such a late bloomer. I am disappointed — you were once far more fearsome than this.”

“I was once a beast at your command. No longer. The contents of your soul are rot and destruction,” Nairu said. “I will defeat you.” She lunged, a blur of stardust, and she appeared behind Yul. Her jaws parted, revealing a row of canines. She sank her teeth into his shoulder, yanking him off his feet and sending him into the air toward the vaulted ceiling. Fire gathered in her throat, burning hot and bright, and she launched a blast that was so concentrated in power that you felt a tingle through your body.

The white blaze consumed him, forcing him against the stone ceiling. He had only enough time to draw his weapon, attempting to divert the blow. The structure cracked, sending masonry and rubble down to the ground, the debris spilling everywhere. The night sky was now visible.

“Is that the best you can do?” Yul said. He hung onto a beam with one hand, his sword in the other. His skin was steaming from contact with her fire. He dropped down, boots touching the ground with a thud. “Your power is nothing compared to what it once was. You are nothing but a shadow of your former self.”

Nairu growled, charging forward. Her fangs met Yul’s sword in a loud clash, the ringing a torment to your ears. They scrapped and brawled, a battle of enhanced physical strength that shook the throne room, breaking stone and disturbing dust.

You looked back at Oktai, striking your glass-like prison. “Let me out!” you said, your voice muffled by the barrier. “You have to let me help her!”

He gave you a shake of his head, a reflection of sadness in his eyes. “This is for your own good, my lady,” he mouthed. “I can’t let you out of there.”

You tried summoning your spirit energy, but it could not be directed beyond the confines of the barrier. You looked desperately toward Nairu, hands pressed against the transparent walls.

She was a ferocious fighter, her muzzle soaked in red, blood splattering everywhere — you couldn’t tell whether it was from her or Yul, and you watched with such anticipation you nearly forgot to breathe.

“You chose a human with whom to bond,” Yul said, slashing at her with his sword.
Nairu stepped back just in time to avoid the blade, the flames from each paw giving her speed and lift.

“And, as such,” he continued, “you’ve become weak, spirit beast. Soft and impertinent! You could have chosen a formidable warrior” — he slashed again — “or you could have chosen to return to me, your master! But you made poor decisions, and now you will suffer the consequences!”

She dodged the sword again, spitting a burst of fire in his face. She lifted her tails and neck, howling toward the skies, the open piece of the ceiling she had damaged earlier. White rain came showering down from the heavens, aimed directly at her opponent. They fell, colliding with Yul, summoned like distant stars to resolve her cry for assistance.

As each star made contact, you fell to your knees. Oktai’s barrier protected you from the impact, but you felt the floor shake below you nonetheless.

“I chose _____ because there is more to life than power, and strength, demon, comes in many different forms. You are not as strong as her.” She snarled, her hackles raised, hair standing on her back. “You will die alone and afraid, trembling in regret.”

“I’ve had enough of your insolence.” Yul appeared, bursting from the rubble. Aside from the dirt and sizzling skin, heat radiating from his body, he looked to be in good condition. He dashed toward Nairu. Your eyes could not follow his movement — he was too fast. He slammed the dull side of his blade against her torso, sending her flying.

He charged again while she was in midair, kicking Nairu in the ribs. You heard several of them break, the resounding crack causing your heart to skip a beat.

She cried out in pain, landing limply on her paws before collapsing.

“No!” You rammed your fist against the barrier. You wanted to run toward her, to give her your spring energy so she could begin to heal. You were even willing to channel winter toward Yul to weaken and disorient him; you could fight him with summer and protect Nairu with autumn. “Let me out of here, Oktai! I need to help her!”

He ignored your pleas, watching the carnage from the other side of his barrier.

Yul did not desist. He came after her again and again, attacking her mercilessly. Each of his blows was enhanced by his demon energy, brutal and savage. The throne room echoed with her calls of pain, the cracking of bones, the heaving of bile and blood, the thud of hitting the ground and walls over and over again.

Still, she never once begged for him to stop. There was no fear in her eyes, only stubborn courage. She glared at Yul with disgust, and, surprisingly enough, pity.

Your heart shattered for her as you saw her broken body. She could barely move from his cruel assault, tossed around as if she were nothing more than a rag doll.

“Oktai!” You screamed his name. “Let me out of here! Look at her! She needs my help!” When he didn’t respond, you continued your tirade, shouting at the top of your lungs, banging on the barricade — for all you knew, he made the barrier soundproof so Yul wouldn’t hear you.

Tears came, streaming down your face. You couldn’t stem them. You didn’t feel her physical pain — in fact, you felt her rage, her pity, her pride. But what you saw was not consistent with the emotions she shared. She was fragmented, her body mutilated and crippled.
Nairu snapped at him as he stepped close, and Yul thrust his sword into her chest.

Her eyes widened, and she froze, stunned by the sudden stab wound. “It’ll be all right, ______…” she whispered to you, her words fading.

You heard a heartbeat, a resounding thump, and you cried out. “Nairu, no! Stop this! Tell him you give up!”

She crumpled, and Yul spun around, kicking her in the jaw. Another crack. She skidded across the room again, leaving a trail of blood on the ground. She lay still.

You didn’t even know if she was breathing. “N-nairu? Please, you can’t— you can’t be gone.” The idea of losing her was more than you could bear. It was like losing a piece of yourself.

“You disappoint me,” Yul said, studying his work. “This is what you’ve become. Remember what you gave up for this.” He then walked toward the doors. “Oh, and before I forget.” He passed the shaking Qara who was weeping in pain, huddled on her knees. In one swift flick of his wrist, he brought his sword down upon her.

Her head rolled, blood flowing freely and staining the ground. The expression on her face was of fear and morbidity. She knew her fate before it happened.

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Realization

Chapter Summary

You are crushed, but even as you cry and brood, you come to a realization.

Chapter Notes
Have any of you seen Ozark? I wanted to create a few images like the ones you see when each episode starts -- there are always four items that are significant in the episode, and it gives the viewer a few clues to what may happen. I made a few doodles today while on my appointments. ^_^ I made a collage out of them and thought I'd post them here, so you get a visual preview before you read. :) We'll see how long I can keep this up.

For other images, I thought I'd show you Nairu, in both her hatchling and evolved form, and a doodle of Kurama and Nairu together.

And last but not least, I have a few doodles of Oktaij from @Janishacolors, who is significantly more talented than I am. ^_^ Thank you for these gorgeous doodles! <3

But aside from having a lot of art muse, I'm doing well, and I'm happy to share with you this next chapter. ^_^ Things will calm down for a little while before picking back up again. Please enjoy! <3

Thank you to FannibalToast, Yeah_I'm_Crazy_So_What, jumponthechandelier, GinaLiz, Shara_Ookami92, PseudoHuman, Hana (Scarlet_Hana), CrossYourTeez, AyaneMiharu, Kupid, Anne_fredrick, and Shai for your comments last chapter! <3 Sincerely appreciate you for reading and the feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You couldn’t stem the tears. They fell from your eyes, streaming down your cheeks, dropping from your chin to the ground.

You were on your knees, watching Nairu, each of her agonized breaths bringing regret and torment to your heart.

This was your fault. You touched her shoulder as gently as you could, letting your spirit energy tingle from your hand and transfer into her body. “Please don’t let me be too late,” you whispered. “Please.” Spring felt warm in your hand, its revitalizing energy a relief as it flowed into Nairu — she accepted it, even though she did not move.

Her jaw was broken, hanging loosely beneath her maw. One of her legs was twisted, bent in a way that legs should not be bowed. Blood oozed from her chest wound, though other cuts and bruises lined her body beneath her fur. Her beautiful pelt was smeared and torn, matted and cut.

“I’m so sorry,” you said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Don’t do this, _____.“ Her good eye opened — the other one was swollen shut. “I’ve always believed you are stronger than Yul.”

“This is my fault. This is all my fault. Oh, Nairu, I’m so, so sorry.”

“_____. ____, listen to me. I made the choice to fight him. That was on me. You have no fault in this.”

“Nairu, you did it to protect me. I’m so sorry.”

She let out a particularly pained breath, hacking up blood. “I need to rest, ____. Let me heal. We’ll talk when I awaken.” Her eye shut, and her consciousness faded. A white glow encircled her
body, and she shrank to her previous size. She was now back to how she was, small enough for you to carry in your arms.

You leaned toward her, giving her as much of your energy as you could. You wanted to collapse onto her, hold her limp body, tell her everything would be okay. Perhaps you would have done so, if only you weren’t afraid of hurting her further. You began to sob uncontrollably.

“_____.“ Kurama called your name softly, a tender whisper on his lips. He touched your shoulder with his fingers, testing your reception before kneeling down beside you. “Spirit beasts heal quickly,” he said. “She will be all right.”

It was horrific, seeing Nairu in this condition, but you couldn’t tear your eyes away. You felt that if you were to turn your gaze elsewhere, you might lose her. She was weak and frail, so different than she usually was.

“Kurama,” you said, the tears falling faster now. Your voice trembled. “I’m so sorry. I should have listened to you.”

“No, ______. You were brave.” He enveloped you in his arms, bringing you to his chest. He stroked your hair and let you cry without a word of judgment.

You heard footsteps approach from behind. “I recommend returning to your chambers,” Oktai said. “You’ll have privacy there.”

You looked up at him. “How could you?” you said, angrily wiping away your tears. You stood, stepping away from Kurama and toward Oktai. “Look at her. She’s so broken and injured. You wouldn’t let me help her.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, ______. I stand by my decision. You would have enraged the khan. His punishment would have been even worse than this.”

“You were too cowardly to stand up to Yul, but you wouldn’t let me help her either!” You were about to lunge forward and give him the most venomous verbal assault you could muster, but you felt Kurama pull you back by the shoulders. His grasp was firm but gentle.

“Stop it, ______,” Kurama said. “Don’t take your frustration out on Oktai. He was right to confine you.”

“I could have prevented this,” you sobbed, trying to push him away, and eventually collapsing into him as he held you. Potent guilt, accompanied by grief and resentment, consumed your heart. This was, by far, the worst you had ever felt.

Nairu was not just someone you knew and loved — she was a piece of you, and, yet, she was separate. This was not the same pain that you would have experienced had Yul taken his rage out on you — it was a thousand times worse. It was a blow to your soul, your dignity, and your confidence. He succeeded in punishing you, hurting you in the most devastating way possible.

“Here.” Someone else arrived. Through your tears, you saw a woman walk toward you, shawl in hand. It was Satomi.

“Wrap her in this, and carry her to your chambers,” she said, and Kurama accepted the cloth.

“How long have you been here?” Oktai asked.

“I was here the whole time, entertaining the khan before you arrived. I was in the corner, behind
the throne. I saw everything.” She stepped toward Qara’s bloodied body and head, her eyes darkening, as she knelt down. “She was my servant before yours. I taught her how to survive here. The punishment does not fit the crime.”

Even stoic Hiei, who had been still up until now, removed his cloak and tossed it over Qara’s severed head.

You felt so hopeless, whimpering pathetically when you saw all the blood from Qara’s corpse. A new bout of tears came.

“Take her upstairs,” Oktai said to Kurama. “I’ll handle things down here.”

Kurama nodded, only releasing you to wrap Nairu’s body in the provided shawl. He treated her with such kindness, handing her to you as one would hold a newborn. “Come,” he said, guiding you out of the throne room.

“Kurama,” Satomi said, a telling tone in her voice. She gave him a glance.

He acknowledged her with a subtle nod before leading you away.

You cradled Nairu to you as you sat in bed, giving her whatever spirit energy you had. You said nothing to Kurama, focusing only on nursing your beloved spirit beast back to health. It was the least you could do for her sacrifice.

“____,” Kurama started, “please take care. I sense your energy reserves are dwindling. Nairu will heal. Give her time.”

You nodded, your cheeks wet with tears. There was wisdom and care in his words. Even if you didn’t want to, you cut off your spirit energy, gently setting her down on the bed.

“I drew a bath for you,” he said. “I’ll watch her. Go relax. The warm water will help.”

You couldn’t bring yourself to leave her. The very sight of her beaten body wracked a new round of sobs, and you brought your hands to your face, trying to stifle the cries.

Kurama watched you with pitying eyes, and he embraced you from behind, kissing your head. “It will be all right,” he said. “Nairu wouldn’t want you to blame yourself, and you shouldn’t.”

“I know,” you said, shakily, wiping your eyes. “I shouldn’t have wandered off to that human ranch. I’m in over my head. I shouldn’t have insisted that Arban take me there, and I should have been more careful. This wouldn’t have happened, and Qara wouldn’t have died.”

“Qara made her choice,” Kurama said. “Cruel as her fate was, she played a weak hand.”

“You didn’t see her, Kurama. She was so scared. She’s just a little girl — she didn’t deserve that. She didn’t deserve any of this.”

“You were trying to change that for humans like her.”

“And I failed. The price is too high for this to be worth it. I should have listened to you. If I did, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Oh, _____,” Kurama sighed. “Don’t do this to yourself. This is a dark path you’re treading. Please trust me when I say that regret is a silent, relentless beast. If left unchecked, it can devour you, and I certainly can’t bear to see that happen.” He tucked your hair behind your ear, leaning his head
against yours. “You must forgive yourself.”

You sniffed, fresh tears coming again. It was Kurama’s compassion and tenderness that brought them this time. You knew he was right.

“Your intentions were pure. I know that; Nairu knows that. Nairu even agreed to help you. She knew the risks, and Yul’s savagery is not your fault. You cannot blame yourself for the very cruelty you attempted to desist.”

Nairu’s breathing was smooth now, the gash in her chest fading, her skin slowly closing up. She still looked broken and ragged, but you could tell she was on the road to recovery.

You felt a little better. You looked at Kurama, noting the somber concern in his eyes, and you managed to cough up a bitter laugh. “When we were traveling with Oktai, I was afraid you were going to scold me for going to the human ranch. I guess I find it ironic that I was so worried about what you’d say.”

“I suppose no amount of my reprehension can compare to what you endured.”

“You know what?”

“For not scolding me.” You took a deep breath, finally closing your eyes and leaning against his shoulder.

“I might if you don’t bathe — the water’s getting cold. And I’m not sure what transpired, but I hope you’re aware you have muddy pawprints on your face.” He swept a hand along your jaw playfully.

You pushed him away. “I came all the way back here with mud on my face? And you didn’t tell me?”

Kurama chuckled. “I thought you had more important things to worry about.”

“You know what? You’re probably one of those awful people who’d let me walk around with food in my teeth.” You stood, marching over to the washroom. “If we ever return to Living World, remind me to never trust you with this kind of stuff.”

“We will,” he said, “and I will.”

The way he responded with such mild confidence brought a smile to your face, the first ray of hope you’d seen in what felt like a long time.

She enjoyed her baths. She would be in the washroom for at least twenty minutes. Probably more — the more she needed to think, the longer she bathed. It was as certain as the rising sun.

Twenty minutes was plenty.

Kurama stepped out of the room. He knew exactly where to go to find Satomi. It seemed that she had information for him, given the tone in which she said his name. He hurried down the stairs, pacing down the halls. She would be here somewhere — he could smell her perfume.

“Ah, Kurama.”
He was right. “Satomi,” he greeted. “You wanted to talk.”

“Yes.” She stepped out from behind a pillar, part of her face obscured by a fan. “What a day, hm?”

“My time is short.”

“I was there the whole time. I saw what happened to Qara and Nairu.”

“Yes, your lord has spoken and acted.”

She sighed, lowering her fan. Her eyes were dark and stormy; she had been crying. “I don’t approve of his cruelty. What he did to Qara was unforgivable. The girl and I were close. She was like a younger sister to me and reminded me of the home I was taken from.”

Kurama remained expressionless.

“That information I have — I’m giving it to you. Do with it whatever you wish.”

“You had such concern for your personal safety and future. You intend on handing over your bargaining chip so easily?”

“You weren’t taking my bargaining chip, Kurama. Or is your memory so pathetic?” She sidled up to him. “No. I want out. I want Qara and those whose lives he has taken to rest in peace. Come with me.” She led him outside and toward the training grounds, ducking into the nearby forest.

“There is no one else here,” he said. “We are alone.”

“There is something you should know about Yul,” Satomi started. “He talks in his sleep, mumbling paranoid nonsense most of the time — but on occasion, he speaks about something worth listening to. Those who spend their nights with him know him the best. In the mornings, if a consort mentions anything about his precious secrets, they are executed immediately. I am alive because he does not realize I know this.”

Kurama nodded.

“He cites a location, sometimes over and over again while he slumbers. Coordinates and directions.”

“And what might I find there?”

“That’s your job. I have no idea what this location is or where it leads. I imagine it must be of great importance to him. Otherwise, he wouldn’t hold it so close to his heart, would he?”

“No, Yul is deliberate.” Kurama watched her, noting how the gleam in her eyes had changed.

She was persistent before, but now she seemed angry. Her heart was racing, and the energy she exhibited, little as it was, was one of vengeance — she wanted him dead. He had never been sure before, but without solid evidence, he was near certain she was now an ally.

“Give me the coordinates,” Kurama said. He would have to handle this with caution. If Satomi was to act as an informant for him, she would now have to be protected. Yul could not find out his consort betrayed him.

Kurama was right. The water helped. You quite literally washed away the day — the mud, at least — and soothed your senses with the hot steam. You let your eyes close. They were sore and raw
from your crying. 

You scrubbed yourself clean, letting the water seep into your skin. It felt nice.

Still, you were disheartened by the events of today on several accounts. You failed those thousands of humans who would eventually be slaughtered or forced into slavery. You failed Nairu, who had nearly given her life to protect you and Qara. And while this was not the most important, but perhaps the most impactful to you, you failed yourself. You wanted to prove your worth, be of some sort of influence over destiny, even if it was only over your own.

But you refused to cry anymore. You refused to be weak. Giving into the pain meant defeat, and that could not be your fate.

If you wanted a future with Kurama, you would have to overcome this. If you wanted a ring, a honeymoon in Inoji, perhaps children running around — definitely a puppy running around — a solution was necessary. The thought of not having these opportunities with the man you loved after all you had been through together was too much to bear.

Yul wished to break you. He needed you to feel hopeless and vulnerable, punishment for your clear intent on disbanding his human food trade. He needed your loyalty to him, and he didn’t want to waste a bloodpact on you to ensure it — he had other levers he could pull.

You were new to Demon World, new to the ferocities and carnage. You were not particularly crafty or strong, even if you were learning. Yul had already enslaved Kurama, which he knew would keep you here.

You were foolish, indeed, for thinking you could overcome the human food trade on your own. This was exactly what Kurama had warned you against. Nairu had too much faith in you, and Arban only wanted to be of service to your vision — you would remember their willingness to help you, even if it was a futile attempt.

You had to focus. You hated the idea of abandoning your quest — you still wanted to help those poor humans, after all — but you needed to change course, at least for now.

“The tournament,” you thought. “I have to figure out a way to win, to come out ahead.”

Either that, or…

“I have to free Kurama.”

This was the answer. You could do nothing while Kurama was in Yul’s grasp. Kurama’s sacrifice ensured your safety, so there was no alternative in his eyes. He would not break the bloodpact for your sake, and, if he did, it would be the final card he played.

He had to have some sort of plan. You wished he would talk with you about it.

And why not? You could assist him now. You weren’t the helpless human who was kidnapped and brought here against her will. You weren’t the same person you were two months ago. This adventure in Demon World changed you.

You stepped out of the bath, drying yourself, and pushing open the washroom door.

He was there, watching Nairu, as he promised.

“Kurama?” you said, towel around your torso, climbing into bed next to him.
“Hm?”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“What makes you think there’s something I’m not telling you?”

“No secrets. You promised me.”

To your surprise, his eyes glimmered with amusement. “No secrets,” he said, taking your hand into his and gracing it with a kiss. “Ask and you shall receive.”

His tender affection heartened you, and you settled right next to him, leaning against his chest. You breathed in, his scent reminding you of morning dew and mountainous pines, of sprigs of rosemary and lavender, earthy mahogany and a touch of citrus. Ever since you had arrived in Demon World, the perfume of roses became subtler, little by little — somehow, Kurama had become more wild, embracing his demon nature.

But the smell of roses comforted you, and you took another deep breath. “Can you smell yourself?” you asked, your mind diverting for a moment.

Kurama chuckled. “Is that the secret you’re after?”

“I’m just curious. I feel like your scent has evolved since we first met.”

“Well, the aroma of roses is effective for wooing women — or you, at least. Admittedly, I haven’t tried it on many women.”

“You made yourself smell like roses so you could charm me?”

“There you have it,” he said. “There’s your secret. I manipulate plants, and, thus, your experience with me.”

“Just how many different seeds do you hide in your hair?”

“A selection. Now, that is a secret for another day.” He kissed your hand again. “I have something else to tell you, _____."

“What?”

“Satomi had some information for me. We’ll need to verify it, but we may have the beginnings of a solution.”

Your eyes fell to Nairu, who rested at the foot of your bed. You were ready to avenge her. “What do you need from me?”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to draw your attention to my raffle to thank those who have left or will leave future comments on my works: An Expression of Thanks. If you like raffles and enjoy having your fanfiction requests fulfilled, take a look. :) I encourage you to check it out! This occurs monthly, so there is always an open raffle.
Follow me on Tumblr for updates and insight on my writing process!
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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!