To Love a Demon Lord (2019 Rewrite)

by StarlightDruid

Summary

It's been 10 years since Naraku was defeated and the Sacred Jewel destroyed. Life has been happy and peaceful, even for Sesshomaru, InuYasha's older and stoic brother. Sesshomaru and InuYasha are no longer quite at each other's throats; Rin, his adoptive daughter is almost grown and coming into her own happiness with a blossoming romance with Kohaku; and Sessho is rather warmly accepted by the village. However, the worst tragedy of Sesshomaru's long life strikes and sends him into a tailspin and the Bone Eater's Well has inexplicably opened to him. Escaping into Kagome's modern era, Sesshomaru meets Rina, a redheaded American woman with a temper and mouth to match, raised in Tokyo by adoptive parents after the inexplicable deaths of her parents. She fascinates him, challenges him, and draws him past the tragedy that shattered his soul. But when old enemies rise up and capture Rina back to the Feudal Era, Sesshomaru must hunt them down before he suffers yet another crippling loss.

Notes
This is a reimagining of an InuYasha fanfic I wrote beginning back in 2003 and posted to FanFiction.net -- reposted on FFNet in 2007 under same as current title. Doing this complete overhaul because the original story was my baby for several years despite the hangups of Writer's Block, but I feel like my characters deserved better from me. Also, aforementioned Writer's Block is a bitch, it's been ages since I've felt the pull to try to write anything, and I thought trying to overhaul this story would help wake up my drive to write again.

- Inspired by To Love a Demon Lord by Myself (ElvynWolf on FFNet/StarlightDruid on AO3)
My name is Rina and I can barely process what I've been through. I've been missing for an as-yet-undetermined number of months, dragged to the Sengoku Period. But I wasn't ready to come back! Not without him. Not without Sesshomaru. I don't understand what's happened or how the sacred well at the Higurashi Shrine was the gate between these two starkly different worlds. I don't even know how I would have made it through this without the Higurashi family...

Rina had no idea how long she had been sitting beside the well by the time she was found by Kagome’s grandfather, the shrinekeeper. After having been trapped inexplicably in the Feudal Era for so long with no memory as to how she’d gotten there, she’d begun to think that her memories of her native era had all been a dream, leaving the nightmare of her altered circumstances to be her only reality.

Now she was back. Sesshomaru had left her here hours ago. Heartbroken. Alone. Afraid. She could hear the familiar sounds of the noisy city, but she was frozen in place. Despite the horrors she’d experienced during her captivity, the Feudal Era was what was most familiar to her now. The natural silence of a world centuries away from developing modern technology. Gods, she had forgotten how fucking noisy her native era was. She felt like her mind was going to split from trying to reconcile her memories of having lived in two different centuries. And now, though she knew how she was taken from this world to the Feudal one via the well she still clung to, she had no idea how she was going to summon the courage to leave the well house and face her re-entry into this world and life she had been forcibly taken from … how many months ago now?

But then the door to the well house had opened and, with the entrance of Kagome’s grandfather, it seemed that fate decided it was done waiting for her courage in favor of forcing the issue.

Rina wasn’t even aware of how much she was rocking back and forth in her stupor until she looked at the old shrinekeeper. He stared at her for several moments, utterly slack-jawed, before opening his mouth to bellow at the top of his lungs for his grandson.

“Sota!!! Sota, come quickly!!”

Rina was relieved to realize that she recognized this boy, who gawked with requited recognition. He was a busboy during the summer at the club she used to sing at.
“Rina! Oh, my gods, Rina! Is that you?!” he started to rush forward, but his grandfather stopped him.

“Take it slowly, Sota. She’s been through a lot and she’s clearly traumatized. Go get your mother.”

Sota fled to do his grandfather’s bidding while the old man cautiously sat on the steps opposite of where Rina cringed against the sides of the well, putting his hands out in a gesture that meant to reassure her of his harmless intentions.

“It’s going to be alright,” he said in a kind voice. “My daughter will be here momentarily and we’ll be able to help you, ok?”

Rina couldn’t speak past the boulder of sorrow forming in the back of her throat.

“Don’t put your life on hold for me, Rina. I don’t know how long it will take to find Kumayomaru and ensure your safety. It’s not fair to expect you to wait for me. So, go on with your life as if you will never see me again, for you very well may not.”

Rina continued to rock back and forth as his last words to her kept playing on a cruel loop in her head. The pain in his eyes as he spoke did nothing to assuage the hollow agony she felt. Not even when he’d kissed her with the full force of his passion before pushing her into the well. The last thing she remembered before his world faded from her view was the deep sadness lining his face.

When she first awoke on the floor of the well, she’d only laid there. The sounds of the world outside terrified her. All the noises she’d never really paid much attention to previously now sounded unbearably loud and terrifying, especially while her brain was still trying to wrap itself around the events of her life over the past… how many months has it even been?

The thought of having to try to explain to anyone -- her best friend, the police, etc., -- her whereabouts for the past several months made her want to vomit.

Speaking of…

Rina lurched behind the walls of the well where she’d be out of sight as her empty stomach heaved violently. Her heart thundered, her ears rang… and then the world went white.
When she next opened her eyes, Rina found herself in a strange room. *I should be used to that by now,* she thought when her anxiety spiked back up at the disorientation. She closed her eyes to try to focus on her breathing. Her hands groped at the folds of the sheets that covered her, hyper-focused on the texture.

_Breathe, Firefly, slow and deep. In, 2, 3, 4; hold, 2, 3, 4, and out, 2, 3, 4…*

She tried to focus on the memory of his voice. Her heart ached, yet began to calm.

“Rina? Are you alright?”

Rina’s eyes opened to see Mrs. Higurashi standing in the doorway. She approached slowly with a tray. The smell of the broth reached her nostrils and her stomach cramped with hunger. At least the smell helped to ease her anxiety a bit. Her heartbeat started to go back to normal and she didn’t feel quite so sick and clammy.

Mrs. Higurashi sat down next to her, placed the tray next to the mattress, and proceeded to put her hand on Rina’s forehead. Rina’s heart panged. It had been so long since she last had the ministrations of a mother and Mrs. Higurashi reminded her of her adoptive mom. Kagome was a lucky woman.

“How did you know my name?”

“Well, aside from Sota’s admiration of you while working at the club, Kagome has kept us apprised of you, your circumstances, and well-being since you first went missing.”
Oh, yeah. That makes sense.

“Is there anything we can do to help you now that your back?”

Rina closed her eyes and began to breathe again. “I don’t know. I’m just terrified and overwhelmed right now. I don’t know what I’m going to tell anyone about where I’ve been. I don’t know how to reintegrate back into life here and I honestly just wish I could go back.” Especially to him, she thought before her throat closed and her eyes filled. She took the last few swallows of the broth to disguise the flux in her emotions. Thankfully, the constriction in her throat subsided a little.

Mrs. Higurashi placed a hand on Rina’s with a motherly sympathy. “I can’t even begin to imagine what you’ve been through. But we will help you in any way we can.

“In the meantime, why don’t you stay with us for the time being until you can get back on your feet? We’ll help you talk to your best friend and whomever else, ok?”

Rina nodded her thanks before gratefully accepting the bowl of rice that Mrs. Higurashi held questioningly in her direction.

“It’s late, so why don’t you finish what food you’re able to eat and then go take a bath before you go to bed, ok?”

“That sounds like a plan,” Rina replied with a thin smile.

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Rina felt like a zombie. She couldn’t sleep. It was so goddamn noisy. Plus, she couldn’t get her mind to shut the fuck up. It kept whirling through the jumble of her thoughts and her anxiety kept trying to spike up again. The waking world was just far too much right now. Was it so much to ask to be able to achieve some solace through sleep?

A soft knock sounded on her door followed by Kagome’s grandfather entering with a steaming cup.

“Your restless energy is permeating the entire house,” he announced kindly without even a tinge of grudge in his voice. “I thought you might like some tea to calm your anxiety and help you sleep.”
Rina breathed in the scent of the tea and had to force down the tears that threatened to spring up. Not only for being touched by his kindness, but also because Sesshomaru had given her this same kind of tea whenever she’d struggled to sleep or had awoken screaming from a nightmare.

“Thank you so much, Kannuchi Higurashi[/*is this right?**/]. I’m deeply humbled by your kindness.” She accepted the cup and bowed her thanks. These people, Sota excluded, didn’t even know her, had never seen her before today. And yet they were as kind to her as though she were a longtime member of the family.

“Think nothing of it, my dear. And please, just call me ‘Grandpa’ if you please. No need for such formalities here. It’s been a long time since I got to dote on Kagome like this and, from what she’s told us, it sounds like you could really use some family right now.”

Rina swallowed hard but could not stop the tears this time, no matter how hard she tried to keep herself frozen. Her trembling hands set the teacup on the bedside table lest she spill. She dragged in a ragged breath before the sobs she’d been holding in for what felt like an eternity came ripping through her chest. She was able to grab a pillow to smother the first hoarse cry that dredged past her throat. She felt Grandpa’s hand soothing her back as she cried for what felt like years. The dam had burst and there was no stemming the tides until they were utterly spent.

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Grandpa refilled Rina’s tea and she accepted again with gratitude and a hiccup.

“Now then, child, how are you feeling?”


Grandpa nodded his understanding. “That’s to be expected, but it’s good you unloaded like that. Are you able to sleep or would you like to talk for a while until you can?”

“What about you, though? Don’t you need your sleep?”

“Trying to get rid of me, are you?” he chortled.

“No! I--”
Grandpa cut her off with a meek laugh. “I’m sorry, that was not a very good joke to make right now. I apologize. As for sleep, I don’t tend to sleep but for a few hours at a time. The joys of getting old. So, don’t worry about me.

“You, on the other hand, are the one with recent trauma, so it is you I am more worried about.”

Rina gave him a wan smile. “I don’t mind talking for a while. What would you like to talk about?”

“Well, it seems to me that you have a lot of things to process. Talking about these things with someone can sometimes help you sort through everything on your mind a bit at a time. Would you be willing to tell me about some of the things that have happened to you?”

“I’m not even sure where to begin,” Rina said quietly. It was hard to fully identify at this time the exact point her old life came crashing to its end and where this new life had begun.

But, of course, the first day of the end of her old life had been the first day she encountered him on the beach. Sesshomaru. She hadn’t even realized that she’d breathed his name aloud until Grandpa made himself comfortable and gave her his full attention.
Welcome Home, Father

Chapter Summary

It's been far too long since my last visit. I apologize, Rin, my beloved daughter. But what was that strange energy I just felt from the Well as we walked by?

About 2 years earlier...

“Lord Sesshomaru! You’re back!” Rin’s voice greeted Sesshomaru as he approached the village where she stayed with and assisted Kaede. Sesshomaru’s typically cold gaze softened a degree as it often did whenever getting to visit his beloved mortal adopted daughter. Before her, he’d never been able to imagine caring about anyone or anything. Making sure he was feared had been far more important, something that used to make his father rather exasperated with him. But it was no secret that Sesshomaru had inherited more of his mother’s coldly logical personality rather than his father’s emotional capabilities.

*It probably didn’t help anything that Mother was the one to primarily raise me. Toga was away fighting in wars so much of my youth, he didn’t really have much of a chance to influence my upbringing.*

But the more time passed, the more apparent it became how Toga did his damnedest to pass on his influence and wisdom to Sesshomaru after all. To counteract the cold, severe logic passed onto him by his mother, who would have sacrificed him if it granted her an opportunity as well, Toga left him the Tenseiga, challenging Sesshomaru to open his heart to compassion.

Sesshomaru had hated his father for that for so long. It had felt like Toga was mocking him with his own soft-hearted foolishness. Then Rin had happened across his gravely wounded form in the forest. He, a powerful yokai lord, who could make demons and grown men cower in terror with just a look, had been unable to inspire that same fear in a mute wisp of an 8-year-old girl. He’d snarled at her, made his demon nature known and the only reaction he’d been able to elicit from her was a happy, delighted smile. That had been Sesshomaru’s first encounter with the realization that some things were better than instilling fear.

*Toga would have loved Rin. He would have probably coddled her as if she were his own flesh-and-blood granddaughter.* His eyes softened further at the thought.
Sesshomaru couldn’t help but find it odd that even though his father had been dead for over a century, he found his affection and his understanding for his father deepening. He would probably never be as warm as his father was toward humans, but surely his revered father would be proud of his eldest son for finally learning what it meant to desire someone’s safety.

Rin, now a young woman of 17, pulled Sesshomaru out of his introspection by unabashedly pouncing on him for a hug. He wasn’t terribly fond of physical displays of affection in general. He still had an instinct to want to snap to reclaim his personal space, but he was getting better used to keeping that impulse in check. That had especially become more necessary since Miroku and Sango’s children seemed to have the same fearless fascination that Rin had had as a little girl and they just loved using “Uncle Sesshy” as a “jungle gym” -- a term he’d heard his sister-in-law, Kagome, use more than once.

He used to just hold very still when the children clambered over him or when Rin would run up to embrace him. Now, he managed to give her an awkward hug in return every now and then. Thankfully, Rin never seemed to mind his aloofness. She’d always been able to see beneath his icy exterior and accept whatever he was able to show. For her, a stoic order to get to safety as was good as an emotional proclamation, for she always seemed to understand that if he didn’t care, he wouldn’t say anything at all.

This time, he managed to grant her a fuller hug, probably because his adoptive daughter and his thankfulness for her were already the center of his thoughts.

“It’s been too long, my lord!” she squealed happily.

“That it has. How have you been faring these past few months, Rin?” He felt slightly guilty; he usually visited at least every three months, but this time it had been almost six.

“It’s been fine!” She looped her arm through his as they walked the rest of the way to the village, chattering about what Kaede and Kagome had been teaching her about the healing arts and about Sango and Kohaku teaching her how to fight and defend herself.

“That’s impressive and not a bad idea at all. I should have started teaching you how to defend yourself years ago.” Sesshomaru now felt a little guilty that he hadn’t thought to do that.

Rin read him like a scroll and hugged his arm. “It’s alright, my lord. I know I didn’t understand very well at first when you insisted that it was best for me to stay with Kaede, but I’ve long been glad that you did.”
“I am glad for your happiness.” He sounded as stoic as ever, but he felt the truth of those words down to his very core.
“So, does Kohaku come to see you often?” He tried to keep the corner of his mouth from quirking with the question. Even he had not failed to notice that as they had gotten older, Kohaku didn’t stay away from the village so much. Initially, the boy would be gone for many months at a time, traveling around Japan to help villages beset by demon problems. But by and by, his visits became more frequent and his absences less so.

He felt Rin shrink beside him and his eyes smiled as he saw her shy blush.
“Well…uh…”

“Kohaku maintains his respect, I take it.”

She looked up at his non-question and smiled shyly. “Yes.”

“Good. If he were anything like that lecher brother-in-law of his, I’d have to kill him.”

Rin had the audacity to blow a raspberry at him. “Please, if he were like that, I’d have beaten you to it and you would have just had to get whatever leftovers that made it to the underworld.”

Sesshomaru threw his head back and barked out a laugh at her cheek. He couldn’t help it. Rin was the only one to have ever made him laugh and he was getting a little more comfortable with that concept. “Fair enough, daughter. Fair enough.”
He pulled her to a stop so he could look into her eyes. “As long as you are happy, as long as he treats you with respect, you and the boy have my blessing.”

Rin blew a sigh of relief. “I’m so glad. I’ve been scared of telling you about how I feel about him for ages!”

“If you thought I didn’t already know, Rin, you were mistaken.”

She laughed. “True. That’s very true. You just never gave any indication.”

“I didn’t see the need to give such. I figured you would tell me when you were ready. And I have heard far and wide about that boy’s integrity.”
“So, why do you only call him ‘that boy’?” she teased.

“Because he is, after all, harboring affections toward my daughter. I must maintain certain standards, of course.”

“Of course.”

They passed the Bone Eater’s Well and the Sacred Tree as they continued to banter and catch up. Sesshomaru felt an odd pulse of energy that caused him to pause. He looked back at the well and tree as he and Rin kept walking, however, he felt nothing further. Perhaps it was nothing.

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“Uncle Sesshy! Uncle Sesshy!!” Sango and Miroku’s daughters and son came streaking toward him with shrieks of delight, followed by other children of the village. Rin laughed as she stepped aside so Sesshomaru could brace himself for the onslaught of youngsters who always loved to see if they could tackle him to the ground with their rambunctious affections. He may not feel a whole lot toward them, but even Sessho knew that he would not hesitate to slaughter anyone or anything that dared to threaten them with harm.

He’d once overheard Kagome liken him to the neighborhood watchdog. The comment made him bristle at first until he heard the rest of what she had to say. “He’s like that neighborhood stray dog that doesn’t much like children or doesn’t really know what to do with them, but wouldn’t hesitate to go full Cujo on anyone who frightens them.” He’d mused over that one for a while before he decided he wasn’t actually insulted by the sentiment after all.

He caught the twin girls up and placed them on his shoulders without missing a beat before catching up their little brother, the spitting image of Kohaku as a little boy. That caused Sessho to regard him with a little more affection than the rest.

He’d wanted to kill Kohaku once, back when Kohaku was held prisoner under Naraku’s influence. It had been little Rin who’d stayed his hand, however, insisting that when Naraku wasn’t exerting his control, Kohaku had gone above and beyond to protect her. Anyone who protected Rin automatically earned Sesshomaru’s protection. Eventually, Kohaku also earned his respect.

They’d been trapped in the Underworld. Rin was dead. Tenseiga could not revive her.
Sesshomaru’s mother had opened a path out of the Underworld with the Meido stone, warning them that this would be their only chance to escape. Sesshomaru had commanded Kohaku to take the exit while he intended to keep looking for a way to revive Rin. However, as he’d walked away, Kohaku stubbornly stuck by his side, unwilling to abandon her either.

Sesshomaru waited until the rest of the village children clambered to attach themselves to his legs and his back before proceeding the rest of the way, unencumbered by the extra burdens of weight. He wasn’t particularly thrilled, but he found he didn’t mind so much. The delight on his daughter’s face was more than worth it.

Villagers, mostly the parents of the children hanging off of him, approached to greet him with gifts of food. They offered their continued thanks for his patience and indulgence with their offspring and with pleas to inform them if their children became too much of a nuisance so they could set them straight. However annoyed Sesshomaru felt at being the favorite entertainment, he could never find it within himself to deny them or lose his patience with them.

*Rin is the one who ultimately taught me what it means to feel the way humans do. She’s the one who taught me what it means to have empathy whatsoever. How can I deny these brats their innocent joy? That’s what the old Sesshomaru would have done. Rin is the one who made me able to finally understand my father’s lessons.*

“Your gifts are not necessary, I assure you,” he informed them coolly before bowing deeply. “But I thank you nonetheless for your kindness.” This had become the routine every time he came to visit the village.

He looked down at his charges, clutching tightly to his form with the stubbornness of ticks. “Alas, children, I must insist that you go on about your business so that I may attend to mine.”

This was met with a chorus of whines and pleas for him to play with them a little longer but when he arched his brow, they hastened to do as he said. “I’m sure you all have chores you could do to help your parents. Worry not, we will play later, so long as Rin and Kohaku may join us. There’s far too many of you, after all, and it does not do to be so outnumbered since the pack of you will surely defeat me with little effort.”

His mouth quirked with slight amusement at their laughter.

“Welcome back, Sesshomaru!” He looked to where Sango received her children back and greeted him with a wave.

“My thanks, Sango. How fare you these past months? You keeping your lech of a husband in proper line?”
She laughed. “We’ve been faring fine. Between his responsibilities at home and his demon-slaying with InuYasha, we’ve been keeping Miroku far too busy to be lecherous with anyone but me!”

“That’s good to hear. Speaking of InuYasha, is he here or is he off on a hunt?”

“He and Miroku had to take a contract that took them out four days east, but they should be returning sometime tomorrow.
“Kagome is here, though. She’s out with Kaede gathering herbs for drying.” She pointed out the direction. “If you’ll please excuse me, I’ve got some things I must finish in order to prepare dinner for tonight. Is there anything special you’d like for your welcome back?”

Sesshomaru shook his head. “No, I am sure whatever you make will be delicious, thank you.” Sango nodded her head with a smile and turned to get back to her duties. “Sango,” Sessho called out to stop her. “Rin told me that you and Kohaku have been training her how to fight.”

“Yes, we have. Is that alright with you? She’s been a quick study and is already showing a lot of talent.”

“It is fine. I trust you with this. I just wanted to thank you for doing so. I should have started teaching Rin to protect herself long before this.” Sango inclined her head respectfully before she took her leave.

“Rin, will you walk with me to meet Kagome and Kaede?”

“Absolutely!” she cheerfully replied. She paused for a second before shyly adding, “Father.”

Sessho’s heart stopped momentarily. He’d never once asked for her to call him that, always being more comfortable with her usual monikers of “my lord” or “Lord Sesshomaru”. He couldn’t even recall a moment when she’d called him by name without his title, though that wasn’t something he’d insisted on. And yet, hearing her call him “Father” caused a bittersweet feeling that he couldn’t quite explain and it cracked his stoic heart open just a little more.

“Father?” he questioned with a softened gaze.

“Is that alright?” she questioned, the shy blush deepening her cheeks. “I’ve heard you talking with InuYasha and the others referring to me as your daughter or adoptive daughter. And you’ve been
like a father to me ever since that day in the woods when you saved me from the wolves.”

Sesshomaru tenderly touched her cheek. “I do not mind. You may call me ‘Father’ if you so wish.” Her expression was one of delight as she linked her arm with his again to walk with him to the herb fields. Really, could he deny her anything? Yet, there was an inward dread that nagged him. Rin was his mortal daughter. He’d almost lost her once and the pain of it would have driven him mad. She would live long, grow old like Kaede, and she would die. He, on the other hand, would live for many centuries beyond her.

“Life is finite, my son. It is not something that you can save as many times as you like at your convenience. It’s something you have to learn, that when your heart wishes to save someone dear to you, it must at the same time feel sadness and fear of losing them.”

His mother’s words rang unbidden in his ears and the dread deepened. He’d always feared losing Rin. Perhaps that’s why he continued to maintain some sort of distance to try to protect his heart that would shatter upon losing her. But she had just wholly decimated that distance by her soulful request to call him her father. And now he carried a pit in his stomach that would not be quelled.

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Dinner turned out to be a more raucous affair than Sesshomaru had anticipated. It became more of a village-wide potluck that became necessary to hold outside. Villager after villager had turned up to Sango and Miroku’s abode with food they’d made and requested that they might be allowed to join “Sesshomaru’s welcome home feast”.

Sesshomaru wasn’t entirely comfortable with all this attention, but Sango bade him hush. “Really, you should take six months away more often if we get to look forward to fare such as this when you return!” she’d teased. Five villagers later, Sango gave up on trying to fit everyone in her hut and she ordered the feast to be moved outside.

Soon, two fires roared in separate communal pits. Tables were dragged out of houses to set up the food offerings for everyone to partake of, makeshift cushions were fashioned for seating, and soon everyone was gathered and chattering happily. It was all a little too much for Sesshomaru’s introverted self, but he flawlessly maintained his aloof graciousness in thanking them one by one for their hospitality. It still amazed him, really, when he thought about how he would have reacted to this 50 years ago. He’d have rebuffed them coldly and kept on moving.

As it was, when they insisted he take the first choice of the food, that was where he drew the line. “I thank you for your kindness, but I must politely refuse. Please, take food for yourselves and your
children first.” At their crestfallen expression, he tried to place more kindness in his voice to explain, “I don’t really need to eat human food and don’t often indulge. Please see to your families who need it more.” Understanding dawned on their faces and they acceded to his request, thanking him in return, then, for his consideration.

Sesshomaru sat beside Kaede with his food and contented himself with listening to her and Kagome converse, lost in his thoughts still. He was glad that people still gave him his space. It wasn’t lost on anyone that he wasn’t much of a talker. He forsook that preference for very few people.

He continued half-listening to Kagome and Kaede as he took a bite of the dish Sango had said she’d made specifically for him. It was a simple, hearty Oden -- a feudal era take on one of Kagome’s favorite modern recipes of the dish. He’d found he favored it as well when Rin learned the recipe and made some for him a few years prior. Somehow, food was always better to him when prepared by Rin, but perhaps that was simply because he loved his daughter. Sango’s was every bit as delicious. He’d found that he didn’t much care for complicated dishes. Despite being a highly powerful yokai lord, he was rather simple in his more frivolous enjoyments.

“Say, Kaede, did you or Kagome happen to feel a weird pulse of energy earlier today?” His ears pricked to attention at Sango’s question.

“Yeah, I did feel that earlier,” Kagome mused. “It was only once, but I’d swear that it felt like the Bone Eater’s Well was re-opening.”

“I felt it, too,” he interjected before he could think the better of it. Kaede, Kagome, and Sango’s eyes all turned to him curiously.

“You did?”

“Yes. It pulsed as Rin and I were walking past on our way to the village.”

“How odd,” Kagome frowned thoughtfully.

“Indeed,” said Kaede, her own brow furrowed. “I wonder how that could possibly be, now that the Shikon Jewel has been destroyed for good and can no longer activate the portal.”
Sesshomaru observed Kagome pushing her food around with her chopsticks, her expression that of wistful thoughts.

“Do you miss your family, Kagome?” he asked without thinking.

“Huh?” she looked up. “Oh. Yes, Sesshomaru, I do. I’m not sorry for my choice to come back to this era to be with InuYasha, but I think of my family all the time and wonder how they’re doing. I sometimes wish I could still travel back to visit them, but without the Jewel, I think I’d be afraid of getting trapped there again as I did for those three years after we defeated Naraku.”

Sessho nodded quietly. “I suppose that makes sense.” I don’t know what I would do if I were to be forced to be separated from Rin or the others like that.

“What do you suppose is causing the disturbance from the well?” Sango wondered.

“I do not know,” Kaede replied with a frown. “But we’d best keep our collective eyes upon it for the time being.”

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After dinner, Sesshomaru insisted he help the villagers with collecting the empty dishes, sorting through what belonged to who, and moving tables back in to their respective abodes. Then, hearing the laughter of the children off in the darkness, he found Rin and Kohaku playing games with them in the dark, trying to catch fireflies. If he stepped out into view, the children would assuredly pounce on him all over again. Deciding it was worth the risk, he stepped out from the shadows of the trees to join Rin and Kohaku.

Sure enough, the shrieks of delight rang his ears mere seconds before the children clambered onto him. “Lift us! Lift us!” they squealed, hanging off his biceps. He coolly complied despite the louder onslaught of their glee on his ears as he lifted his arms almost all the way over his head.

“Come chase fireflies with us, Uncle Sesshy!” the rest of them begged as they clamped around his legs and climbed up his back. “You promised to play with us more!”

Sesshomaru blew a gentle scoff. “So I did. Well, children, point the way to the fireflies.” One little girl who’d perched herself on his shoulder eagerly pointed toward a swirling group of the little
green bugs. “Alright. Hang on tight, children,” and he broke into a careful run, taking as much care as he could to not jostle them terribly. If anyone fell, he was quick to grab them before they could hit the ground.

Once he stopped to let them off to chase fireflies, one of the little ones tugged on the leg of his robe. “Uncle Sesshy? Is it true that you can become a giant doggy?” His ear twitched for a moment at the term “doggy” but he shook his head at himself with a small, wry smile and let it go. Children. What can you do?

“Yes, little one, I can. A very big, monstrous doggy.”

“Oooh!” she clapped. “I want to see!” He knelt down so he could look in her tiny face and wide, innocent eyes. This was an idea he needed to quash gently before it became an uproar of pleading from the others. Convincing one was way easier than trying to convince an entire loud brood.

“My apologies, but I cannot do that. It would be far too dangerous and it could make your parents afraid of me.”

“Why?” she asked without guile.

“Well, I only tend to transform when I’m really angry and needing to defeat an enemy. I’m not exactly a playful doggy in that form.”

“Oh,” she said, a little crestfallen. But she smiled at him again. “Ok. I understand. Thank you for not wanting to scare us or our mommies and daddies.”

“You are most welcome.” He gently shooed her to chase more fireflies and took the momentary reprieve to look for Rin and Kohaku. They were at the edge of the clearing, slightly obscured by the shadows of the trees. Making sure to keep a careful eye on his charges, Sesshomaru edged closer to get a better look. They were alright, of course, and still where they could keep a good eye on the children. However, in their trust in Sesshomaru keeping the children entertained, they’d been able to give in to distraction enough that he caught them in the midst of a kiss.

_Ah_. His heart panged slightly. Yet, he did not feel any sort of overprotective rage fill him. She was almost 18. And Kohaku, about 3 years older than she, was not a lecherous old man trying to move in on her like a predator. His hands gently framed her face and he looked upon her like she’d hung the stars in his universe. No, Kohaku was no threat to her. As always, the boy treated her with respect and deference. He did not try to grope her or anything else untoward.
Still, I should like to speak with him before the night is done.

He hadn’t meant to stare so long with his intense scrutiny, but suddenly Rin and Kohaku broke apart and regarded him with nervous, awkward expressions and laughs. Well, no time like the present, I suppose.

“Oh! Uh… Father…” Rin choked out breathlessly. “How long have you been standing there?”

Sesshomaru put up a hand. “Be at ease Rin. I did not mean to spy. However, would you mind returning to the children for a little bit? I should like to have a word with Kohaku and I do believe the parents would like to get them settled for bed soon.” He didn’t quite mind that the boy paled a little when he made his request. He and Kohaku watched Rin as she scuttled off to gather the children and invite them to chase her back to the village.

Finally, he looked at Kohaku. “So…” Kohaku paled more. Good. He chuckled inwardly at himself. Kohaku was a truly decent young man and he and Rin had practically grown up together. He shouldn’t torture the lad so.

He softened his eyes. “Be at ease, Kohaku. I truly only wanted to speak with you, not threaten you with disembowelment.”

Kohaku regarded him sheepishly. “Yes, my lord.”

“I’ve noticed over the past few visits that you and Rin seemed to be getting closer. Rin thought I didn’t notice simply because I did not react, but her feelings for you are as plain on her face as the marks on mine.” The involuntary shy smile that statement drew from Kohaku spoke volumes. Still, he needed some verbal affirmations for a few things.

“So, how long, exactly, has this been going on?”

“Well, I’ve liked her for the past few years, my lord, but we’ve only recently begun to express our affections.”

“How recently?”

“Not long after your last visit, my lord.”
"Kohaku, relax. You don’t need to punctuate every sentence with ‘my lord’. At most, just call me Sesshomaru. You earned my respect years ago when you refused to obey my order to take the path my mother opened and escape the Underworld. You thought nothing of your personal safety and refused to abandon her.” He was actually glad to see Kohaku relax. Good. Sesshomaru had learned in the past few years that people who are afraid are more prone to falsehoods. Not that he really thought Kohaku would actually have the audacity to lie to him. He knew he would smell it on him if he did anyway.

“I take it that you’ve been ceaselessly respectful of her boundaries?"

“Yes, my- … er… yes, sir.”

“You haven’t pushed her into doing anything she’s not yet ready for?”

Kohaku shook his head ardently. “Absolutely not, sir. The only thing we’ve done is kiss and hug. Oh, and one time we accidentally stayed out too late talking and we ended up falling asleep together. But nothing happened, sir!” he added hastily.

Sesshomaru held up a hand. “Rin is old enough and mature enough to decide for herself what she wants. I trust her to make the right choices for her and I trust you to respect her. Besides, I am not a human. We don’t have the sexual hangups that humans tend to have regarding virginity and such. I just wanted to ensure that you are letting her call the shots.

“However, have you two yet discussed your future plans as of yet?”

“No, my lord,” Kohaku sheepishly responded, forgetting to curb his formality.

“Well, as you two must still live in the world of humans, I would ask that you two try to refrain from… ah… deeper affections until you are both quite sure of what you each want. Rin will be fine either way, but I do not want her heart broken unnecessarily, do you understand me? Do not go further with my daughter unless you are both in agreement about what your relationship is or is not and where you want it to go. She is mature enough to know what she wants, yes, but she is also young. I do not want you leading her on if she wants a future with you that you do not. Do I make myself clear?”

Kohaku bowed deeply. “Yes, Sesshomaru,” he said with the most heartfelt sincerity. “I swear to you and to her.” He looked up to meet Sessho’s gaze again. “I love her, sir. I’ve loved her for a few
years now. I would never want to do anything to hurt her.”

Sesshomaru dipped his head slightly in acknowledgment. “Good lad. Run along and bid her
goodnight so she can be assured that all is well and I haven’t killed you or anything. But Kohaku?”
The boy paused his departure and met Sesshomaru’s eyes again. “Hurt her and you won’t even
have a soul left to send to the Underworld.”

The boy actually smiled. “Heard, understood, and acknowledged, my lord. Goodnight,
Sesshomaru!” Then he was off running to find Rin, joy and excitement permeating his every step.
This was the most lighthearted Sesshomaru had ever seen him and for once, Sessho could not resist
the urge to smile.

*Whatever happens, whatever fate befalls her, at least I know she’s happy.* That was enough to
quiet his earlier trepidation. So long as Rin was happy, it was enough.
Broken

Chapter Summary

Rin’s happiness with Kohaku pleases me greatly, but oh, how I wish I hadn’t gotten roped into a hunting trip with Kohaku, InuYasha, and Miroku. I’ve got a terrible feeling about this...

2 months later

When Sesshomaru arrived for his next visit, Rin was there to greet him like always. She flew into his arms to give him a hug and quickly set to chattering about all that had happened in the past few weeks since his previous visit. But rather than walking with him arm-in-arm as she usually did, she grabbed his hand and was practically dragging him down the path as she prattled.

“Rin, what is the hurry?”

“Oh! InuYasha, Miroku, and Kohaku have a contract on a demon that needs slaying and they were hoping that you would go with them. It sounds like a big one!”

Sesshomaru groaned inwardly. An overnight trip with his brother, the lecherous monk, and his daughter’s paramour was not exactly a prospect that delighted him. Rin turned to face him, still dragging him hurriedly. “Please, Father? It was Uncle InuYasha’s request, actually. He thought that your Bakusaiga would come in handy for this one.”

Sesshomaru wrinkled his nose at the mention of his brother, with whom he had a decent but still-tense truce and understanding with. “Very well, I will assist InuYasha if it means that much to you. But does your insistence have anything to do with your lover, by any chance?” He hadn’t actually given any thought to the possibility that she and Kohaku had taken their relationship further since his last visit, but the blush that flamed across her face declared otherwise. Oh, really? Still, he forced his face to remain passive to the unspoken declaration.

“Well, it sounds like a big enough demon that I can’t help but worry for Kohaku’s safety. I know he knows what he’s doing, but I can’t help but fear for him sometimes,” she admitted.

“Fair enough, daughter. Fear not, I will make sure your Kohaku comes back to you.”
Once again as they passed the Bone Eater’s Well and the Sacred Tree, Sesshomaru felt another odd solitary pulse of energy. He looked back with a raised brow. That was still going on? He’d have to ask Kagome and Kaede about it when he returned. He was most curious as to how often it had been happening during his latest absence.

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The village pleading for their help was a 2-day journey on foot, however, Sesshomaru really didn’t want to be parted from his daughter for that long, so he volunteered his two-headed dragon, A-Un, for part of the transportation. Kohaku, in return, proffered the aid of Kirara. So long as there were no unnecessary interruptions, InuYasha figured they’d be able to get to the village before morning.

Sesshomaru was already mounted on A-Un and waiting for his brother and comrades to follow suit. He watched passively as InuYasha kissed Kagome goodbye with promises to see her sooner than previously expected. They’d been married for going on 6 years now. Sesshomaru had seen plenty of other couples get bored and sick of each other in much less time. Yet his brother still looked at his mate with the same adoration Sesshomaru had first observed long before InuYasha ever admitted how he felt.

Then his attention turned to Kohaku as he kissed and embraced Rin in the same manner. At his last visit, their affections had been shy and innocent. Now their body language spoke of deeper intimacy, as did their collective scents. Sesshomaru smiled thinly at the thought. They were clearly happy together.

InuYasha climbed up behind him on A-Un at last and, as he got his seat settled, he saw the direction of his brother’s gaze. “Do you approve, brother?”

Sessho did not break his gaze from his daughter. He continued in his thoughts for a few more moments before he finally said, “Perhaps it is a surprise even to myself that I do. He’s a good lad.”

“Yeah, he is,” InuYasha agreed. “I’m sure you know that Kagome and I look out for her while you’re not here.”

“Of course.”

“Whenever they’re together, she practically radiates happiness. And whenever they’re not, she’s
still happy all the same. Same for him. He never raises his voice at her, even when they argue. She’s stubborn and strong and he is patient and indulging.”

Sesshomaru’s gaze softened slightly. “Fine, but when is he going to come along so we can get this over with?”

“It’s always like this with them. Takes them forever to say goodbye. You’d think they were never going to see each other again.”

Sessho frowned as something panged in his chest. Given the increase in his fears since Rin started openly calling him “Father”, he didn’t much care for InuYasha’s choice of words.

“Do not begrudge them, brother. You forget they are mortal. They will not live as long as we will. In this line of work, perhaps it is better to make their goodbyes in such a manner so that if any goodbye turns out to be their last, there is nothing left unsaid.”

“Hmmm…” He felt InuYasha shift behind him thoughtfully. “You make a very valid point, my brother. On second thought, I think I’m going to go say goodbye to Kagome again.” InuYasha was off of A-Un and speeding his way back to Kagome before Sessho could speak a word of protest. He watched his brother sweep her up into his arms and spin her around to give her one more thorough kiss and whisper his affections to her again, before sprinting back.

Once he was again settled, he hollered at Miroku and Kohaku, “Hey, you two! Let’s get going! The sooner we get outta here, the sooner we can get back!”

Miroku kissed Sango one more time and ruffled his children’s hair. Kohaku did the same, holding Rin’s hand for as long as he could as he started away from her, letting go only when their arms could not sustain the contact. Finally, he turned from her and ran to Kirara to leap onto her back and bid her fly.

Sesshomaru looked to Rin, whose eyes seemed they would never leave Kohaku’s retreating form. And yet, she looked over to Sessho, at last, to wave him off with a loving sign and shouts that wished him a safe journey. Sesshomaru silently returned the sign with a small smile before urging A-Un to follow after Kirara.

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The demon they dealt with had been far easier than Sesshomaru had expected. Hardly seemed worth the four of them going. Then again, since dispelling Naraku from this world almost 10 years
ago, most demons he’d fought since then had seemed rather tame in comparison. Still…

Sesshomaru guided A-Un closer to Kirara where Miroku and Kohaku would be better able to hear him over the roar of the passing winds. “Did that somehow seem easier than any of you were expecting?”

“Yeah,” InuYasha answered first. “I guess the villagers were over-exaggerating. I mean, it’s not unheard of for humans to do so when they’re frightened and needing help. Maybe they said what they did so that they’d get help sooner.”

“Maybe.” Sesshomaru frowned.

“They still paid rather spectacularly for such a low-effort fare,” Miroku pointed out. “Doubtful they would have scraped that much together if they didn’t feel so genuinely in danger.”

They continued in silence for a few minutes, but Sesshomaru felt uneasy. And for as many centuries as he’d been alive, he’d learned to pay attention to such feelings. One look over at Kohaku told him that he was not alone in his growing discomfort. Ignoring the other two and meeting Kohaku’s gaze full-on, Sesshomaru simply said, “Something’s wrong.” Kohaku nodded and immediately urged Kirara to go faster as much as she could and Sessho urged A-Un to do the same.

They needed to get home.

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The sun had set and the breezes were strong. By the moon’s position, Sesshomaru estimated it was nearing midnight. They weren’t far now, but there was something alarming on the wind. A scent of demons. A whiff of blood. Smells of terror.

Sesshomaru took A-Un down closer to the ground and he and InuYasha jumped off as soon as A-Un was close enough to make a jump-landing tenable. They landed near the Well. Sesshomaru didn’t pay any mind to the pulse he felt this time. His thoughts were only on Rin.

“Sesshomaru, I smell reptiles!” InuYasha called, his voice increasing in alarm. Sesshomaru knew exactly where his brother’s thoughts were. Especially as the stench of reptiles got stronger the
closer they ran to the village.

The village was dark. Seemingly entirely deserted. The houses were all trashed. And there were bodies. Not very many, but that hardly quelled Sesshomaru’s rising fears.

“InuYasha!” Sessho hissed. At his brother’s look, he nodded a gesture toward the forest where he knew that Kaede and Kagome had fashioned an emergency shelter in a cave that they could disguise with a sacred barrier. InuYasha returned the nod and went tearing off in the direction of the cave.

He could hear Kirara approaching with Kohaku and Miroku. As Miroku jumped down, Sesshomaru signaled for Kohaku to not dismount. “Follow InuYasha to the cave,” he ordered quietly. Kohaku didn’t hesitate to follow his order.

“Monk, you check the bodies. Don’t worry, your family got out safely. I smelled their scent heading to the cave.” Miroku’s face relaxed only slightly as he began to follow Sesshomaru’s order.

Sesshomaru walked the perimeter to gauge the scents until he finally found a viable trail to follow. The smells of blood were so strong. He focused on the reptilian scent and followed it into the nearby forest. Not far out, he found the underground tunnel they had emerged from. There was about 5 of them. Maybe 6. But they did not return this way into the tunnels. One of the scents, however, in retreat, had gone past the tunnel entrance. There was a scent of blood intermingled with it.

His eyes were already starting to turn red. He was having to fight the urge to explode into his true Daiyokai form. Don’t think, just follow. He ran at his topmost speed, his mind going blank. His heart was screaming, but he didn’t understand why until he came to the clearing.

The scent of the reptilian demon lingered, but the scent of blood was rooted in this spot. Alone, crumpled in the grass, was a broken body with flesh missing. This human was treated as prey. Pain clutched his heart even though his instinct-driven mind had yet to deduce the panic. Then the moon came out from behind the clouds and his world shattered.

*Rin!*

He couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe. All he could do was stare in utter horror at what was left of
her. He couldn’t look. Wouldn’t see anything beyond the emptiness of her gaze. And then his control snapped. A roaring shriek of agony, like metal being shredded with enormous claws, rang his ears, suddenly the moon was red. He was on the ground next to her, screaming until his throat was raw. Something warm and wet streaked down his face, kind of like blood but without the choking copper.

It was her blood he’d smelled. Her blood was the first thing he’d smelled but his mind had refused to consider the possibility his senses were screaming to him.

_Her blood. Her blood. Her blood. Her blood._

The sound of fast-approaching footsteps entering the clearing caused him to turn around with a howl. An inu hanyo stood there, white hair gleaming in the moonlight. Not the creature that killed Rin, but a potential threat all the same. Two human males showed up behind him. Sessho was barely aware of rising to his full, hulking size in order to attack. No one would come near her. No one else would do her harm. _Kill!!! Kill them!!!! KILL THEM!!!!!!!_ One of them was screaming at him. The hanyo. Was it saying his name?

It was the other sound that broke through the senseless rage ringing in his ears. One of the human males. The younger one. He had collapsed on the ground at the edge of the clearing, boneless on his knees. He was screaming. No, it was more than that. It was a sound not dissimilar to the howls that had ripped past his throat.

He was coming down to the ground now.

Kohaku. That was Kohaku screaming. He was screaming her name. Miroku was holding him. Holding him back. Rage intermingled with agony. Kohaku broke past Miroku’s hold and he was running to her. Miroku screamed at him to stop. He was afraid. His eyes were on Sesshomaru and they were afraid. Miroku was afraid that Sesshomaru would kill Kohaku.

Sesshomaru grabbed Kohaku before he could come into full view of Rin’s corpse. Kohaku wildly fought his hold, but Sesshomaru would not be budged. He did the only thing he could do. He pulled the boy close and held him there until Kohaku exhausted himself. Collapsed down to the ground with him. Refused to let Kohaku look.

_Don’t look. Don’t look. Don’t see her that way. Don’t look._
He’d seen, even though his mind violently rejected the horror. She’d been ripped in half. She’d been predated upon. The kill was fresh. The reptile’s scent was fresh. It had probably fled its kill… Rin… because they’d arrived. She was gone. She was dead. Her throat. Oh gods.

NO!!!

Darkness.

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The demon they’d gone to kill had been a minor reptilian sort. Some minor offshoot of a Dragon species, but far more crude. Far less evolved. And while they were away, the village was attacked by the next more evolved form. Kagome described them as looking like the demonic versions of “Komodo Dragons”, though he didn’t really understand what that meant. All he understood was that this attack was planned. He, InuYasha, Miroku, and Kohaku had been lured away for this.

Kagome had sensed them coming, as had Sango and Kaede. Kaede had guided the children and as many of the other villagers as she could to the hideaway cave. Kagome had kept them hidden from the demons’ senses with a barrier that she was able to sustain while moving. She was still a Miko in training and the energy it took to sustain the barrier until Kaede could hold it at the cave had put her into a coma for almost a week.

Sango had stayed behind with her Hiraikotsu to try to find stragglers. There had been 8 demons in total. She was able to kill 5 of them. She was still recovering from her wounds, but she had not lost her edge as a demon slayer.

Rin hadn’t been among the villagers taken to the cave. Sango couldn’t find her. It was later determined that Rin had gone out by herself to gather some flowers. Her body, dead from a slash to the throat, was purposefully brought back around through the village before being taken out to the clearing where she was found. It had purposefully spread the scent of her blood before making off with her. Of the villagers who had died, she was the only one who had actually been predated upon.

It ate her.

Sesshomaru had yet to move from the clearing where he’d found Rin. All the blood and death he’d seen across the numerous centuries of his life could not compare to the sight of her lying there. He
was broken.

He spoke to no one. He was still lost in delirium. He could hear people talking to them. He was gradually able to process what was told to him. But he was lost. He felt nothing but ice, wherever he was. Someone was beside him, and yet they were not. A big male presence. He smelled vaguely familiar. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, Sesshomaru, my son. I am so sorry.”

_Father?_

But it was gone. _It couldn’t have been Father. Father is dead._

“You have to come back, Sesshomaru. You must come back to us.”

A female voice. Who was it? She was real. She was not the product of a shattered heart or a broken mind.

“Sesshomaru. My son, you must come back.”

_Mother?_

The voice grew more insistent.

“Sesshomaru, as your mother, I command you to come back.” The voice took on the reverberation of absolute power. It was a command he literally could not ignore.

The fog began to clear away. He was falling. _No! I don’t want to come back!_

“You must, my son. You must. It is not your time yet.”
It was like he was surfacing from the bottom of a lake. Light pierced his previously uncomprehending, sightless eyes. Mother’s face swam before him before finally focusing into view. She was cradling him in her arms. Something she hadn’t done since he was very small.

“Sesshomaru.” Her hand was on his face.

“Mommy?” the word came from his lips unbidden. He hadn’t called her that since he was a whelp.

“Yes, my son, my poor son. I’m here.”

He couldn’t remember ever hearing her sound this tender. It frightened him.

“Rin,” his long-unused voice choked out.

“I know, my love.”

“They killed her, Mommy. They killed my daughter.”

“I know, my dear, sweet son. I know.”

She was rocking him gently. Helping him to come back.

“I don’t want to come back.”

“I know, my baby. I know. I know.” Her voice was thicker. Was she crying? Mother never cried. Not even when her marriage to Toga dissolved. Mommy never cried.

“Sleep, my darling.” Her voice, though tearful, reverberated with the power of command and he knew no more.
When Sesshomaru opened his eyes, his mother was the first person he saw. “Mother, you’re really here.”

He’d never seen her expression so sad as she reached her hand to caress his face. “I’m here, Sesshomaru.” She clasped his hand with both of her own as though she were bracing herself.

The pain clawed itself through Sesshomaru’s chest at lightning speed and several times its heat. He raggedly gasped for breath as the full weight of tragedy crashed down onto him. Tears filled his mother’s eyes as she watched her son suffer.

Another hand clasped his. He hadn’t even smelled this other person. Hadn’t heard them. His outward senses were terribly dulled right now. InuYasha? The sorrow on his brother’s face was terrible. The golden eyes were red from weeping.

“InuYasha,” he gasped. “Rin…” His brother’s eyes screwed shut with agony. “Rin! Where is Rin?! Where is my daughter?!” His brother’s arms were crushing around him. He couldn’t stop. “Rin!!! Rin!!!”

A cloth smelling of strange herbs was placed on his forehead. The herbs emitted a strong vapor that cut through the fog and brought him back to the brink of sleep. Now the only sound he made was a continued, strangled whimper.

Sesshomaru was asleep again at last. InuYasha refused to budge from his brother’s side. He was frightened. He was inconsolable, so immense were the tidal waves of agony rolling off of Sesshomaru’s aura even in repose. InuYasha had only cried a handful of times in his life. The past few days, he’d been unable to stop when near his broken brother. The pain was too great.

He was confused when Sesshomaru’s mother reached across to caress his face. “You are not my son, but you are my son’s brother. And you have stayed by his side with an enduring loyalty that so few of our kind are capable of showing. You are my son now, too.”

“Thank you for coming,” he choked out. “But how did you know to come here?”
Her golden eyes shadowed. “As demons, we often have to maintain a certain distance from emotions that could make us seem vulnerable. As parents, we maintain a connection to our children even beyond life. I felt a great agony rip through my soul and I could hear my son screaming. It was all so much that I lost consciousness. And then Sesshomaru’s father, your father, came to me in a dream. Our son needed me. Needed us. But he couldn’t reach him. He told me where to find Sesshomaru and I came here as quickly as I could.”

“I’m grateful, my lady. He’d been catatonic out there for weeks.” InuYasha dragged in a shuddering, ragged breath. “I’ve never seen him like this, my lady. And never have I been so frightened of him.”

“We keep our emotions locked away because, so often, we must,” she said gently. “Lest we somehow provide a vulnerability that can be exploited. But the downside is that all those emotions build up. And the force of those emotions being released through a great tragedy can be beyond imagining.” She looked back down at her sleeping son.

“When he came to my palace to inquire about the Meido Zangetsuha and Rin was killed by the hellhound, the crack to his heart was deafening to me. I knew that if I did not do something, he would shatter like this. Through her death, he’d learned the lesson he needed to in order to wield the full Meido Zangetsuha, but once we allow ourselves to feel pain and sorrow after so many human lifetimes of abject refusal, it can be enough to drive us mad.” She watched for InuYasha’s nod of understanding before she continued.

“He’s going to need you, InuYasha. He’s going to need you more than ever once he wakes up -- truly wakes up. I can help with trying to get him through the worst of it, but the pain he’s feeling inside is not unlike that of a burn victim who is kept asleep with herbs until they’ve healed enough to not go insane from the pain. It’s going to take time. And he’s going to need you.”

InuYasha looked at her through his reddened eyes. “What can I do?”

Mother’s face was pinched with pain mixed with determination. “Do not let him retreat back into his emotionless state. And he is going to want to, more than anything. Sesshomaru has never flinched away from any pain, but this is so, so different. Wounds to the body heal. But damage to the soul is so much more difficult. He’s never felt pain like this and he is going to want to run from it to protect himself. You cannot let him.”

“How?”

“You’re going to have to seem an enemy to him again. He’s going to hate you. He will hate you for not letting him run from this. He will lash out and strike at you. Let him and fight back. Keep him emotionally engaged. He’s not going to process through this otherwise and trying to smother it down will eventually kill him. Don’t let him retreat from this. Do you understand?”
InuYasha swallowed the lump in his throat and nodded. “Yes, my lady. I understand.”

Mother looked around for a moment. “Where is the boy? Who is looking after him?”

InuYasha’s eyes fell. “He saw too much that night. He saw what Sesshomaru tried to keep him from seeing before he blacked out. He’s gone insane and I don’t think there’s much hope for him.”

“He and Sesshomaru are going to need each other. The pain they share is one and the same. And with all the blood and death Kohaku was forced to do by Naraku’s hand, he’s not going to be able to recover from it unless Sesshomaru can somehow reach him and bring him back. Otherwise, the boy will die.”

Finally, she stood up. “I shall take my leave. I will be close by to help should you need me. Get some sleep, my son. And thank you.” She drew InuYasha into an embrace. “Any mother, human or demon, would be blessed to call you their own. Izayoi was a blessed woman, indeed, to birth someone so noble and good.” She touched InuYasha’s face briefly before she faded out of sight.

He took his place back down beside his brother and prepared himself for the night’s long vigil. Before he could try to put himself into a meditative repose, Kagome was by his side and draping a blanket over his shoulder.

“InuYasha?” She stroked his face as she settled by his side. He wordlessly kissed her hand and nuzzled against her. He was exhausted and completely emotionally flayed. One look at his wife was all it took to see that she was, too. “What did his mother say?”

InuYasha drew in a shaky breath. “She said that he’s got a long road ahead and that I’m not to allow him to withdraw back to an emotionless state.”

Kagome nodded. “That makes sense.” Her eyes closed in grief. Losing Rin had been a tragedy that had made it difficult for them all to breathe. Losing Sesshomaru and Kohaku to the depths of their respective grief had crushed the remaining breath out of them.

“We’ll get him through this, InuYasha. I swear to you, your brother will not go through this alone and he will not be lost forever.” She snuggled into his side and readied herself to keep vigil with him.

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8 months later...

Sesshomaru still half existed in a fog. Over the past several months, his brother, mother, and sister-in-law had wrung his emotions mercilessly, refusing to let him retreat to the dark, emotionless corners again. Now, he still barely felt anything, but they’d forced him to rage and tears. They’d give him space at times -- his mother was very adept at when they should press and when they should retreat and give him some time. It had been a very grueling process that he’d hated them all explosively for even as his logic understood the need. But now he’d cried and raged every tear he could have possibly produced and now he was broken and numb.

He spent most of his days alone in the woods near Rin’s grave. Jaken, who had been traveling with Totosai for a few years, had returned to him a few months ago upon finally being located by Sesshomaru’s mother. Jaken had been desolate upon learning of Rin’s death. He understood. Though he no longer was able to weep, he still felt the weight of Rin’s loss heavily. It was hard to imagine the possibility of never feeling that pain again. At this point, Sessho didn’t think he wanted to be without it. He was afraid he would forget her.

He looked at the space next to Rin’s grave shrine. Kohaku. He’d been beyond help. He went insane like Sesshomaru had and then he’d retreated into catatonia and no one -- not Sango nor Miroku, not Kagome nor Kaede -- could coax him back. Sesshomaru understood. He knew the kinds of memories the boy still carried from his previous traumas. He wholly understood how the sight of Rin like that… his beloved… slaughtered in such a brutal fashion was more than Kohaku could take. Remembering how Kohaku looked at her and she at him, it reminded him of InuYasha and Kagome.

Sesshomaru did not know what love like that must feel like, but he had no doubts whatsoever that Kohaku had loved Rin with his entire being. He’d joined her in death six months ago and Sesshomaru had taken to guarding their graves ever since.

He felt a whisper of a breeze against his back. A familiar scent hit his nostrils. He hadn’t yet figured out if this was a bi-product of his grief, nor did he care. Rin was here. She came to him sometimes and brought a strange, bittersweet comfort with her. He could feel her happiness. She was happy and at peace. She’d grieved Kohaku’s suffering, but since they were reunited, they both felt a lot more at peace with their deaths.

Father, come with me.

Where?
You can’t stay here forever.

Yes, I can.

I don’t want you to.

What am I supposed to do?

Find a reason to live again. Come with me.

He followed the gentle pull of her energy, felt her walk beside him quietly.

Where are we going?

He felt a small pulse on his hand as though she were squeezing it.

Here.

He looked up. The Bone Eater’s Well? The Sacred Tree? Why?

Listen.

He cocked his head after a moment. In the wake of Rin’s demise, he had completely forgotten about the odd pulses he’d feel from the well. He’d forgotten to ask Kagome and Kaede anything more about it.

What does it mean?

Go ask them now.
He didn’t even hesitate. He turned on his heel and walked back toward the village.

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“Come to think of it, Sesshomaru, the only time I’ve felt the pulses from the Well have been when you have come to the village for your visits. Every time it’s happened, you’ve been right there for it. Don’t you find that a little strange?” Kaede rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

“That is very strange,” he agreed. “What do you think it means?”

“Well, Kagome said previously that it’s felt as though the Well were waking up again, but with the Shikon Jewel destroyed, why on earth would it be doing that?”

It felt like there was some sort of obvious answer that was staring them right in the face, but lingering just out of sight, sort of like trying to look at a dim star full-on rather than from the periphery.

“Well, it did open up 3 years afterward and allowed Kagome back through, so maybe it’s not entirely tied to the Shikon Jewel. Maybe the Shikon Jewel only kept it open more consistently for her and InuYasha to travel through.”

Kaede’s expression was one of acknowledgment. “You may be right. Perhaps we should go find Kagome and see what she can suss out from the energies.” She strained to get up off of the floor, so Sesshomaru gently grasped her arm to help her up. It was getting more difficult for her to move with every winter. A pang of sadness hit Sesshomaru’s heart that this kind old woman, Kikyo’s younger sister, might not be around for much longer. When that happened, he hoped Kagome would be fully ready to take over fully as the village’s Miko.

She held onto his arm as they sought Kagome out. They found her gathering herbs and tending the plants that were not yet ready to harvest. The herb garden had become one of her primary havens after the attack of the reptilians.

“Hello, little sister,” Sesshomaru greeted her solemnly. She turned and graced him with a kind smile that still contained a tinge of sadness.
“Hello, Sesshomaru. Are you doing alright today? Where are you and Kaede headed?” Her voice was warm yet cool. Nobody in the village had regained themselves fully since the attack. Her voice was like a springtime day clouded over with rain. Only then did Sesshomaru begin to understand the toll it had taken her to try to, along with InuYasha, help Sesshomaru process through the tides of his grief. Now Sesshomaru began to fully understand that part of the weight that remained over the village was caused by him. Everyone else was trying to move on with life as best they could and, while no one begrudged him the time his grief process was taking, he realized it wasn’t fair for him to linger around the village like a perpetual death knell.

“Lady Kaede and I need your perspective on something, if you don’t mind,” he answered her primly.

“Oh?” she looked back up at him, stood up, and brushed the dirt off of her hands.

“Yes, child. Sesshomaru has told me that he’s felt the pulse from the Well again. And I have noticed that the only time we feel the energy pulses are times when he is here within the Well’s vicinity,” Kaede explained.

Kagome hiked a brow. “That’s odd. Yeah, let’s go check out the Well and see if we can’t discover what’s going on.”

As they walked, Kaede filled Kagome in on Sesshomaru’s theory thus far.

“You know, I think you might be right, Sesshomaru. Perhaps the portal in the well isn’t entirely tied to the Shikon Jewel. Or maybe the Shikon Jewel began the Well’s existence as a portal but perhaps there is something else around that keeps it from closing off entirely.”

They reached the well and the three of them paused to feel the energies. At first there was nothing. Then…

“There it is!” Kagome exclaimed. Both Kaede and Sesshomaru confirmed that they felt it too. Kagome put herself into an open-eyed meditative trance so she could See. “There’s an aura emanating from the Well, Sesshomaru, and it’s tied to you as Kaede thought. What in the hell?” Her brows knit in confusion. “It’s beckoning you. It wants you to go through.”

Sesshomaru stared incredulously at the Well. “Why in the seven hells would the Well want me to step foot into your era? It doesn’t make any sense.”
“Perhaps you should go through and find out, Sesshomaru.” The three of them turned to see InuYasha. He walked up and looked down into the well. “What do you think, brother?”

Sessho’s face remained impassive, but inwardly, he wanted to shrink in fear. Kagome’s home era sounded entirely too big and busy and completely overwhelming.

“I get the sense that the Well is going to keep insisting, Sesshomaru. If you don’t answer its call, we may never know precisely what it wants you to see.”

Finally, Sesshomaru nodded. “Alright. I will go.” He took a step towards the Well.

“Wait!” Kagome cried. “Wait, I want you to take a note to my mom. She hasn’t heard from me since the Well closed those years ago and I want to let her know that I’m ok and to let her know about you a little.” Before Sesshomaru could reply, Kagome began racing for the village. InuYasha sprang after her, tossed her gently onto his back, and carried her at full speed to the village.

Kaede patted his arm gently while they waited for them to return. “Perhaps this change in scenery will do you some good, Sesshomaru. There’s nowhere you can really go here to escape the reality of Rin’s death even for a while. Perhaps this will help you.”

“I truly hope so, Lady Kaede,” he responded honestly. He truly was exhausted. The pain of Rin’s death had lessened considerably, but the weight of it still hung about his neck like a heavy collar and he didn’t know how to work through the rest of it. He’d never been a particularly “happy” person prior to Rin. He was able to note that everyone else who had managed to recover from the tragedy was able to find their way back to happiness. For him and for Kohaku, however, Rin had been the most happiness they’d ever really been blessed with. How do you look for something you’ve never experienced otherwise?

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, lad,” Kaede said to him, sounding in her uncanny way as though she could read minds. “Do not give up and you may yet find out.”

Before Sesshomaru could respond, Kagome and InuYasha returned from the village. She’d packed a bag for him that contained some random items as well as the envelope with the note Kagome had written for her mother.

“When you come out on the other side, you’ll find that the Well is inside a building rather than outside. Go out the doors and…” she proceeded to rattle off a list of instructions that left Sesshomaru feeling a little dazed.
“Look, you’ll be ok, I promise. My mom is really nice and Sota will probably be really jazzed to meet you if he’s still living at home.”

Sessho took a quiet deep breath to steady himself before he stepped up to the Well. He looked back at his brother and sister-in-law and to the kindly Kaede. “InuYasha, Kagome, Kaede, I cannot thank you enough for your continued and stubborn support since…” he closed his eyes for a moment. He hadn’t been able to say it aloud, but it was time, “…since Rin died. I know that this hasn’t been an easy time for you and I know that I have added a heavy weight to your spirits to bear along with your own suffering. For that I am sorry.”

“Stop talking as though you’re not coming back, ok?” InuYasha said gruffly. “And of course, Sesshomaru. We’ve never been good at acting like it, but we’re family and this is what family does, ok?”

Sesshomaru nodded slightly in acknowledgment before he turned back to look down into the well. Well, here goes… and he stepped off into the empty space. The floor of the Well rushed up at him and just as he thought that he would hit the bottom as would otherwise be the logical result, he was suddenly surrounded in a colorful aura. It was like being surrounded by stars. He wasn’t falling, he was floating. And then it felt like the energy was gradually setting him down until his feet gently and finally came into contact with the solid ground again. How bizarre. It was fascinating, yet alarming. Beautiful, yet disorienting. Especially given the noise level outside. It was so loud! How did Kagome stand growing up in a world where there was no peaceful quiet?

So, Bone Eater’s Well, why exactly have you been telling me to come here?

He looked up and saw that, indeed, there was not open sky above the Well here. He took a deep breath before leaping up and out of the well. Opening the door, he tried to remember Kagome’s instructions to find the part of the shrine where her family was housed. Before he could stew on that for too long, the smells of something cooking reached his nostrils and made it easier for him to find.

He arrived at a door and could hear people rustling about inside.

“So, Sota, how were your university classes today?” said a female voice.

The voice of the male responding to her was low enough that Sessho couldn’t quite catch what he was saying, but he wasn’t worried about it. The words were meaningless to him. All he cared about was that he’d heard the name of Kagome’s brother mentioned, which assured him that Kagome’s family was still around. Sighing, he raised his had at last to knock on the door.
When First They Met

Chapter Summary

I don't know what the fuck is going on, but I'm in no fucking mood to deal with any assholes today! Wait... I've never smelled a scent like this before. Who are you?! Are you seriously that "family friend" that Sota mentioned?!

“So, that’s why he came here,” Grandpa said thoughtfully, his voice tinged with sadness. “We all wondered. His energy reeked of grief when he arrived and gave us Kagome’s note. She didn’t really tell us anything, just that he’d suffered a tragedy, it wasn’t for her to give specifics, and that he needed our help. But he was a very closed off fellow. I tried asking him one night after he’d been here for a few days, but all he said was that he didn’t wish to talk about it.”

Rina nodded quietly as she sipped at her fresh cup of tea. “Before I got taken to the Feudal Era, I only knew that he’d had a daughter who died. I didn’t push because even without the rest of the details, that was enough for me to understand. Plus, Sesshomaru makes oxen look positively pliable and coming from me, that’s saying something. He doesn’t do a thing until he’s ready to.”

“Yes, we got that sense from him, too,” Grandpa confirmed with a nod. “He was very polite, very gracious while he was here. If asked to help around the shrine, he did so quietly without complaint. I think the work was good for him since he wasn’t much of a talker. He seemed like the type who more wanted to figure things out for himself rather than accept any outside help. But it’s hard to share a tragedy like that with people who won’t likely understand to the level that he needed.”

Rina considered that for a moment. “I think it was more than that. I mean, because of Kagome and InuYasha, you all knew about him and what he is and didn’t bat an eye. I think it’s more that he felt you all were doing more than enough by letting him stay here and he didn’t want to risk overburdening you. Especially not after realizing the pall he’d cast on the village.”

Grandpa’s eyes deepened in their sadness. “That makes sense, I suppose. I just wish I could have told him that it wasn’t his fault and I’d be surprised if Kagome or InuYasha or any of the others resented his grief.”

“Yeah, I know. I definitely see your side of it. But I also see his. Come to think of it, there’s a lot of things on my end that I’ve never really told anyone for similar reasons.” Aside from Sesshomaru, anyway. But she didn’t really feel like getting into that right yet. “Anyway,” she said, taking another draught of her tea...
About a year ago…

Rina always treasured the few hours she had between her two jobs to just hang out at the beach. It was her ritual to come to the beach every day, even when she wasn’t scheduled for any shifts at the nearby club she waitressed and occasionally sang at in the evenings. No matter how overwhelmed she got with the day-to-day chaos of her life, she could always count on the ocean to soothe, balance, and cleanse her headspace and her soul. She didn’t swim in it very much. It’d be too bothersome to have to go home to shower the salt out of her hair before having to come all the way back for work. But wading a little, sitting in the sand and listening to music while writing, doodling, or reading was usually the perfect mini-daycation for her.

Today, though, she couldn’t sit still. She couldn’t name this restlessness she’d been feeling. She did, however, notice that the wolves she worked with at the wildlife sanctuary had been acting strangely. Even before then, she felt like the hair on the back of her neck had been constantly on alert the past couple of days. But with the wolves’ behavior, she had the feeling that they were reacting to whatever had been setting her off. It rather reminded her of how they’d acted before the earthquake in 2011. But whatever this was, it was different. It was something in the air. Something in the energy. And there was nothing she could do to console them. They wouldn’t even let her near them.

She’d helped raise most of the wolves that currently populated the pack. Usually, they acted like she was one of them. Today, however, they snarled and lunged at her no matter what she tried to do. I don’t know what’s bothering you guys, but I feel it, too. She tried not to internalize the dismay she felt at being so harshly rejected, but it was hard not to. Meanwhile, all she could do was helplessly watch as they paced and ran back and forth, getting skittish at every rustling leaf, howling alarm calls, and even getting aggressive with each other.

A strange scent crossed her nostrils while she watched them. Nobody else seemed to notice -- then again, they never seemed to; she’d been called a freak more than once for her heightened senses -- but it was rather eerie that the moment the scent arrived on the breeze, she and the wolves turned simultaneously toward it, sniffing. That was the quietest they’d been all morning. Once the breeze changed direction, they’d returned to their howling. By the time she’d been allowed to leave for the day, she couldn’t recall ever having felt so grateful for the reprieve.

And yet, here she was at the beach and could find no solace here either. It was fucking maddening. Unable to sit still, she’d been pacing up and down the beach for hours, trying each and every mindfulness technique her adoptive parents had taught her to try to manage her anxiety. Nothing was working and the longer it went on, the more irritable she became.
“Hey, cutie!” some unfamiliar male voice whistled at her in heavy-accented English. She cast a sidelong glance in the direction of the voice. Pffft. Figures. Fratboy exchange students. Either that or tourists. They weren’t from around here. They weren’t the first caucasian dumbfucks here who tried to hit on her at the beach. **Of course, I’d have to deal with douchebag dumbassery today. Why the fuck not?**

If she could roll her eyes any harder, they’d pop out of her head and hit the road. If she allowed herself to think of the way some of them probably treated the local women before trying their shit on her, that might become a more probable possibility. She kept on with her walking and ignored them. **So not in the mood for that shit.**

“I thought redheads weren’t supposed to be frigid!” the first guy’s buddy hollered out at her. She didn’t even bother looking at them this time. Instead, she raised her hand and popped her middle finger up in their general direction. If they had an iota of a brain cell, they’d fuck off. But, of course, they didn’t. She curled her lip from knowing that men like that were more entitled than they were intelligent. **On the bright side, if they try anything, maybe kicking the crap out of them will depressurize me a little,** she thought sardonically. She kept walking without missing a beat, her eyes on the horizon, but it was her hearing and sense of smell she was particularly focusing on.

Sure enough, she smelled them approaching her. They hadn’t even made another sound, so she rather enjoyed the surprise mingling with the snotty offense on their faces when she turned around to face them squarely.

“That wasn’t an invitation,” she said coldly, “so fuck right off.” Of course they didn’t heed her. Instead, they leered at her like a couple of petulant brats about to torment a cat for fun. Pathetic.

They threw a few hair-raising phrases in her direction in a different language. Sounded like Italian. She blatantly rolled her eyes at their immaturity. She knew a couple of choice phrases herself, thanks. One of her high school friends had spent a year in Italy and learned how to say a few… ahem… extracurricular phrases just for shits and giggles, even though her favorite one was not, by any means, a typical Italian insult. It was something she’d heard in English and asked someone over there to translate into Italian for her.

“How many times do I have to flush before you go away?” Yep. They understood her. “Vai a cacare!” she added for good measure. She smirked a little at their darkening expressions.

“Seriously,” she said, switching back to English, “you rich lackwit rejects from a Godfather movie, I’m not in any mood for your shit. Last warning: Piss. Off.”

“Vaffanculo, puttanna!” the first one snarled as he stalked toward her with his fist raised.

She kept her face冷冷 passive as she said, “Well, can’t say I didn’t fuckin’ warn you,” before
snapping her left arm out to restrain and redirect his fist away from her long enough for her to palm-hand him square in the nose. She managed to increase the damage with a headbutt, knocking him thoroughly senseless, before she pushed him back with a shove and felled him with a kick to the sternum. She didn’t have enough time to pirouette to deal with his buddy, who had skulked behind her.

He was quicker than she’d anticipated and he’d succeeded in grabbing her from behind. Dumbfuck. She smashed the back of her head on his nose, stomped her foot on his instep, and then reached behind her to grab him savagely by the balls. She spun around to face him, smashing him in the cheek with the elbow of her free hand and twisting his sac enough with the other to make him lose what remained of his breath.

“When a woman tells you to fuck off, that does not mean ‘bother me some more’. It means, very specifically, that your attentions are not wanted. Do you under-fucking-stand me?!” Her temper spiked to a volcanic level as she snarled out that last question and an odd haze of red darkened her vision. The man’s eyes widened as he stared at her and his face paled. “Answer me, goddammit!” she roared. Jesus. She sounded like she could audition for a death metal band. The reply she got out of him was high-pitched, incoherent babbling. Frankie Valli would be impressed.

“I’ve got you and your buddy’s scent now. Harass another woman while you’re here and I will finish the job of yanking your sac like a paper towel and that’ll be all that’s left of your ‘little friend’ to say ‘hello’ to. Got it?”

She finally dropped him and watched with grim satisfaction as he slumped down to the sand and curled into the fetal position with his hands clasping his traumatized genitals. Now I gotta wash my hands. Ew.

At that moment, the breeze shifted and a very odd scent reached her. Her head snapped around to face towards wherever the scent was originating from. The strangest man she’d ever seen was about 20 or so yards away. Long, white-silver hair was crowned by a baseball cap that seemed rather at odds with the air of cold dignity that radiated off of him. Each cheek bore a pair of slash marks. But the most striking thing of all were his eyes. Passive, rather icy, with an underlying sorrow that he was trying to hide, his eyes were the color of molten gold so rich they could spark another Gold Rush across the sea.

His eyes moved from her at the same time she felt one of her would-be assailants stir. She didn’t take her eyes off his face while she grabbed the woozy offender, who stupidly thought to attempt something else, and hauled him up by his shirt with one hand.

“Did I fucking stutter?” She finally looked at him. “I’ve already broken your nose. If I strike you there again, it will crack the cartilage up to your brain. What do you think will happen when I do?” She let the words sink in. “Trust me, with the mood I’m in, you really do not want to test me any
further, because I will go to jail with a goddamn smile on my face and not give the slightest of fucks.”

She released his shirt and walked away from them without looking back. The man with the long, silver hair was nowhere to be seen. She shrugged. Didn’t matter. It was time for her to get over to the club and get ready for work anyway. It was then she spotted her best friend, Izumi, walking over to her, a mask of concern on her face.

“Rina, you ok?”

Rina rolled her eyes in response. “I’m fine. Just annoyed. Those guys probably need an ambulance, but I ain’t gonna call it for them.” She stalked past her friend to get to the back door of the club to go get changed. The club was one of a small handful of openly LGBTQ+ clubs in the city. Izumi, a lesbian herself, was one of four co-owners along with her girlfriend, Ryuka.

It was intended primarily as a safe space for LGBTQIA+ women -- lesbians, bisexual, transgender, etc. -- but it made sure to have at least one night a week for mixer nights. Tonight was a karaoke fundraiser night and it was expected to be insanely busy. All the karaoke participants paid a fee to sing but got free drinks for the night, their money going to a local LGBTQ+ legal advocacy group.

Rina hurriedly changed clothes. There was no uniform for waitstaff here, but everyone who worked here enjoyed dressing up in their most eccentric tastes. Tonight, she wore a purple plaid miniskirt, a simple black corset, and her favorite pair of knee-high combat boots that were comfortable enough to weather the hours on her feet with nary a sore.

“Well, someone called the cops and an ambulance for those bozos you pounded out there,” Ryuka’s voice announced cheerfully as she and Izumi sailed into the room, arm-in-arm, pulling Rina out of her thoughts.

“Oh?”

“Yeah!” Izumi confirmed with a mischievous giggle. People on the beach vouched for you in that you didn’t do a damn thing to them until they harassed you and tried to assault you. They were gonna come and get a statement from you, but some dude convinced them or something that they needn’t bother you for now.”

“What dude?” Rina asked absently.
“I was out there,” Ryuka piped up. “It was this dude with the whitest and longest hair I’ve ever seen. I will say, though, that if I weren’t a lesbian, I’d probably be drooling over the dude, given my penchant for weird people.” She leveled a teasing wink in Izumi’s direction. She turned to find Rina staring at her with sharp eyes and an arched brow.

“What?”

“Did you say a dude with long white hair?”

“Yeah, why?”

Rina frowned. “I don’t know. I saw him out there right about the time I finished kicking the crap out of those fuckwits. The guy had a seriously weird vibe that raised the hair on my neck. You said he spoke up for me?” What the actual fuck?

“Yeah, he was super calm and matter-of-fact about the whole thing. Like he didn’t really give a shit either way but wasn’t gonna let the cops have any doubt that those shithawks were the perpetrators. It was actually kinda weird hearing them take his word on their not needing to collect a statement from you. Kinda reminded me of a Jedi mind trick or something, and yet not.”

He smelled strange, too. He didn’t smell human at all. Rina kept that thought to herself. Instead, she headed out to the bar to set up a few things. One of her co-workers, Sota Higurashi, breezed in with some ice for the cooler.

“Hey, Rina!”

“How’s it going, Sota?”

“It’s going good!” he replied. “Uh… we have a family friend staying with us for a little while. It’s his first time in Tokyo and I invited him to come to the club tonight since it is a mixer. He’s kinda introverted and not much of a talker, so he’s not going to bother anyone. If he orders any drinks, just put it on my tab, ok?”

“Sure, Sota, no problem.”

It was only one more hour til the doors were to open, so Rina didn’t have much time to contemplate
that Sota’s scent had a tinge of the strange man with the long white hair. Nope, there was too much
to do.

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The doors were open and the club was packed with ticket-holders -- those participating in the
Karaoke and those who’d paid to come watch the show. The first hour was for people to mingle,
socialize, and get comfortable for the show to start. Rina’s tasks were split between helping
Dazzle, a vivacious and delightful drag queen, behind the bar as well as running drinks out to
different tables with the other waitstaff. Thankfully, she was a floater tonight, so she wasn’t
chained down to any particular sections that would suffer from her split attentions.

As it was, she was monumentally grateful for the distraction. The energy in the club was
boisterous, joyful, and alive. Whatever strange energy had been disturbing her earlier, at least it
wasn’t able to permeate beyond the walls or doors of this haven.

Rina got back to the bar from running out a drink order for one of the newer hires. She loved the
hell out of Dazzle and it was always fun getting to help her behind the bar.

“Hey, shug!” Dazzle greeted her, busily shaking a cocktail, “would you throw together a Sex on
the Beach for this lovely gentleman right here?” She nodded her head toward the customer, a
friendly gent in a rainbow-colored sequined jacket.

“You got it, Dazz!”

“And then a Forbidden Fornication for the lady on his left.”

Rina had just finished making the second drink, an original concoction of Ryuka’s creation, when
the lights dim-flashed a few times to get everyone’s attention as Izumi took the stage.

“Welcome, welcome all of you lovely ladies, gents, and everyone in between! Welcome to our
inaugural Karaoke for Kindness Fundraiser! We are so blessed and delighted by this turnout!

“As you’ve already seen if you purchased a Karaoke ticket or an audience ticket, the proceeds from
all ticket sales will be going to the Love for Equality Advocacy Group right here in Tokyo, and
50% of drink purchases by you lovely audience members will go to LEAG as well.

“For any who might not be aware, LEAG is primarily run by a pair of gay lawyers...” she paused to
call their names and asked them to stand up and be recognized. They were received with voracious enthusiasm. “Please give them another round of applause because these two gorgeous people just recently got married and it was their greatest wedding wish to be able to start this advocacy group.” The applause was delightfully deafening.

“LEAG strives to offer free or highly discounted legal services to LGBTQIA+ people, whether it’s related to their rights to equality or other legal needs. It can be difficult still for we LGBTQ+ folks to obtain legal services here and LEAG seeks to remedy that as much as possible. If you can’t donate financially, or even if you can, please explore the possibility of donating your time to volunteer whatever services and skills you can to help them keep this running as smoothly as possible.” Izumi paused to let the applause run its course.

“Now, on to the Karaoke! We’ve got a surprise for you all! We’re making tonight something like a Battle of the Bands! You may have noticed under your chairs some printed ballots. After the performances are concluded, we’ll be taking your votes to decide a winner. Whoever gets the most votes will receive a full-packaged day of delicious pampering, which was generously donated by our LGBTQ-friendly affiliate, The Self-Love Spa and Cat Cafe!”

Rina laughed with delight as the thunderous approval made her ears ring. She couldn’t be more delighted to see Izumi and Ryuka’s idea for this fundraiser kick off with such success!

“Also, before we officially kick this off, please give a hearty round of applause to all the staff working here tonight. Each and every one of them is an employee of this club; they’re either part of the LGBTQIA+ community or are our staunch allies, and it was their idea to generously donate their time tonight to work this event wage-free. They’ve been immensely supportive of this idea, which has been mine and Ryuka’s baby for a few years, and when we decided we wanted to try to finally make a go of this, they’ve rooted us on, contributed their ideas, helped us with networking, and they’ve gone above and beyond to help us make this happen. So, please tip them generously and remember to be kind and patient tonight, ok?

“I think it generally goes without saying, but I’ll say it anyway just in case: Anyone that acts like a shit to any of them will be banned from here permanently, ok? Now, I don’t expect that any of you here would actually pull any shit like that, but I just wanted it to be made clear, just in case.” Everybody assented their enthusiastic agreement as Dazz, Rina, and the rest of the staff waved their hands, grateful for the appreciation.

“Right! Well, welcome again, everyone, and let’s get this party started!”

Rina was in the middle of bantering and laughing with Dazz during the last round of applause when a scent reached her nostrils. What?! Before she could think the better of it, her head whipped around to see the white-haired man sitting alone at a table towards the back. He was watching her with a rather passive yet curious stare. There was something thoroughly unnerving about his gaze.
Not threatening, really. Rather, it was a piercing, studious scrutiny that made her feel as if he could see past all her defenses to her every hidden truth. It was a very naked, uncomfortable feeling.

“Rina? You ok, shug?”

Rina shook out of her gaze-locked reverie with a start. “Huh? Oh! Yeah. Sorry, Dazz, I’m fine.”

“Ok, sweetie. You just looked lost in the Twilight Zone for a bit. Sota just dropped a drink order for his family friend he mentioned earlier. Would you mind running it out?” She handed Rina the ticket and bustled off to help a customer who patiently flagged her attention. The tickets for tonight were color-specified for Karaoke participants and for audience-only customers. This ticket was white, denoting audience status, rather than the pink.

“Sure thing, Dazz,” she said softly despite Dazz not being able to hear her over the din of the customers she was assisting. She looked at the order. Sota’s friend just wanted some sake. Huh. Ok. They didn’t even specify brand, type, or anything. How helpful. She smiled to herself wryly. Whoever it’s for is definitely not from around here. She frowned. She couldn’t find Sota in order to ask him. She supposed she’d have to pick something for them. Her frown deepened as she tried to decide what to give them. It was rather difficult without knowing who Sota’s friend was, their personality, tastes, or anything else.

Shit. She needed to hurry. Finally, she settled on grabbing a bottle of the Dewazakura Oka Cherry and hoped for the best. If Sota’s friend didn’t care for it, she decided she’d take the financial hit so Sota wouldn’t waste any money. She placed the bottle, a glass upside down on a napkin, and the ticket on her serving tray and set off. That was when she finally checked the table number….and almost tripped over her feet.

Wait, what?! It was the table where the white-haired stranger was sitting! He was Sota’s family friend?! Oh, boy. This night just kept getting more interesting.

She collected herself with a mental shake and marched resolutely to his table. She steeled herself with a deep breath before she reached him.

Placing the tray and opening the bottle, she blurted, “So you are Sota’s family friend?” before she could think the better of it. She winced and literally facepalmed at her tone as he hiked a brow. “Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to sound that way, I swear.” She bowed a sheepish apology.

“I’m the one who made you uncomfortable. You can’t be blamed. Rather, it’s my fault,” he replied quietly. His voice was smooth and deep, like a fine wine complimented by a rich brie.
Focus, Rina. “Um… so, I wasn’t sure what type of sake you'd prefer and I don’t, obviously, know your preferences, so I brought you this bottle. If you don’t care for it, just let me know and I’ll cover it and bring you something else, ok?” She poured him a glass of the Oka Cherry, her face flaming as red as her curls.

“I appreciate your kindness,” he said as he accepted the proffered cup with all the formal dignity of royalty. He sniffed at it for a moment before his stoic expression changed to interested curiosity. He took a small sampling swig. “Interesting,” he said at last as the flavors processed across his tongue. “I’ve never tasted sake such as this.” He took another draught. “I like it,” he finally declared.

Rina couldn’t help a soft smile at his pronouncement. “Would you like me to leave the bottle?”

“Yes, please,” he affirmed.

“You got it.” She placed the bottle before him. Screw it. I’ll pay for this one anyway so Sota doesn’t have to worry about it. “Well, let us know if you would like anything else, ok? I hope you enjoy yourself, friend of Sota.” She bowed again and turned to walk back to the bar when he gently touched her hand to stop her. She looked back at him, a questioning look on her face.

“My apologies, but may I ask your name?”

“Katarina, but I’m usually just called Rina,” she blinked at him curiously. “And you?”

“My name is Sesshomaru.”

Huh. Not a very modern name at all. She liked it. “Well, nice to meet you, Sesshomaru.” She offered a smile before she took her leave to resume assisting Dazz.

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The first leg of the KFK proved to be a huge hit. Rina hoped this was a sign that this could be a regularly occurring event the way Izumi and Ryuka hoped. But oh gods, she was so ready for a break.
“Here, shug,” Dazz handed her a cup of stew and some chopsticks. “Ryuka told me you’ve had a rough day and you’re looking a little dead on your feet. Go take a breather and get some food in you.”

Rina accepted the cup with a grateful bow and a smile. “You’re a treasure, Dazz. A treasure beyond compare.”

Dazz returned the sentiment with a shining smile and a confident tsk. “Of course I am, sweetie, but only the best for my lovis. Go on, I’ve got this. Don’t take any less than 20 minutes, you hear me?”

“Your wish is my command, my queen!”

“That’s right!”

Rina laughed as she made her way out the employee entrance and settled herself on a bench in the smoking area that gave a perfect view of the ocean in the moonlight. She couldn’t get enough of that view, but her stomach roared at her to get down to business before the stew got cold. She lifted the cup to her lips to drink some of the decadent broth and groaned her appreciation. Dazz was originally from Korea and she was deliciously creative with her food and how she combined Japanese and Korean cuisine into tasteful compliments of each other. Rina sucked more of the broth down greedily before finally utilizing the chopsticks to grab a chunk of beef. Ohmigods, so tender!!! She felt like she would weep from delight. She inhaled the rest of the stew ravenously and sighed with sated relief punctuated with a loud belch that made her giggle.

“Good thing I didn’t do that inside,” she muttered to herself with amusement.

Something in the breeze raised the hair on her neck again. She looked up and saw Sesshomaru. His body was facing the horizon but his head had turned to face her. He hadn’t followed her out here, clearly, but apparently her belch had been heard by more than just her.

Well, that’s just charming, she snorted at herself. She looked at her watch. She had 10 more minutes before she was allowed, per Dazz’s orders, to return to her work. The whisper of footsteps approaching on the sand made her look back up. Sesshomaru was walking towards her. She was still a little wary, but she was more curious than afraid.

“Miss Rina, may I join you?”
Dammit, she fucking blushed. “Sure, as long as you don’t call me ‘Miss’ anymore. Rina is just fine, friend of Sota.” A small wisp of a smile played across his lips.

“Very well. Rina.” He moved to sit beside her on the bench but with a proper amount of space.

Points for the big guy. And he was big. He had to be close to 6’5” and the energy of his commanding presence made him feel almost double that.

“I’m not particularly good with tact, so I’ll just come out and ask: What are you?”

Rina couldn’t have been more gobsmacked by the question if he’d asked it onstage for a karaoke performance! She could only stare at him stupidly as she mentally flailed for a response. The best she could come up with was a dumb-sounding, “Come again?”

“You have senses far more acute than the typical human. I know you’ve caught my scent. And I heard what you said to those scumsuckers on the beach. So, what are you?”

“How did you hear that, though? You were so far away.” She hated how fucking stupid she sounded, but Sesshomaru had so casually smacked her brain with the most unexpected question possible, she couldn’t really help it.

“Do I smell human to you?” he asked her simply.

“Well… no,” she finally replied.

“Your scent is slightly human and yet it’s not. Do you really not know what you are?”

“A freak?” she blurted, her brain calling to memory all the times she’d been crowned with that sentiment, insulting and otherwise.

“What is a ‘freak’?”
“What the hell are you?” the hair on her neck, spine, and arms were at full attention now. “And what does Sota know?”

“Sota and his family know exactly what I am,” his tone was that of reassurance. “His sister is married to my half-brother.”

Somehow, that made Rina feel quite relieved. “Ok, so I don’t have to tippy-toe around Sota at least. But what are you?”

“I’m an inu daiyokai.”

Well, that fucking did it. “Did you just say ‘dog demon’?”

He looked at her with a sidelong glance and nodded. Rina could only stare. She knew he was not lying to her. There was absolutely no scent of a lie on him. And yet she felt like she couldn’t help but wait for someone to jump out from hiding somewhere nearby to tell her she’d been caught on Candid Camera or something.

“Do you not believe me?”

“I’m at an odd juxtaposition,” she admitted. “My instincts and your scent tell me you are telling the truth. But this is a lot to wrap my head around.

“Wait, you’ve only just met me. Why on earth would you even tell me this? Do you go around telling every stranger you meet what you are?”

His eyes smiled this time. “No. I told you because I could smell that you are not human and you are, thus far, the only other non-human I’ve encountered in my time here in this era. Plain and simple, you’ve aroused my curiosity.”

“‘This era’? What ‘era’ are you from?” My brain keeps melting and my stupid keeps growing. Greeeeaaaaaat.

“It’s a very long story. And, if I’m not mistaken, you are due to go back inside soon, are you not?”
Rina looked at her watch and yelped. “Yep!” Without thinking, she jumped up, grabbed her empty stew cup and chopsticks and hauled ass back inside without another word to Sesshomaru.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What a horrid time to have such a fantastic revelation revealed to her! Rina could barely keep her thoughts straight as she accidentally mixed up a couple of drink orders.

“Shug! What’s wrong? You’re even more out of sorts than you were before I sent you outside!” Dazz asked with a slight tinge of exasperation.

“Fuck! I’m so sorry, Dazz.” Rina closed her eyes for a moment and took a couple of deep, slow breaths. “I couldn’t even begin to tell you. Literally. I am so sorry, I’m gonna get a grip on this, I swear.”

Dazz grasped her arm gently in a comforting squeeze. “You got this, girl. Don’t sweat it. Just try to pay better attention, ok?”

“Yep. I got it.”

Dazz looked up behind her. “Then again, I may have to do without you again for a few minutes more,” she said with a grin.

Rina’s first thought, for some reason, was that Dazz was looking at Sesshomaru standing behind her. She was actually quite relieved, for a moment, that it was just Izumi standing on stage with Rina’s violin in her hands.

Wait, wha--?? Oh, fuck me. Dammit, Izumi!

“Hey, everyone! Before we conclude this intermission, I wanted to invite someone up here to serenade us with her violin real quick! Rina, the hot little redhead I’m sure you’ve seen flitting about this evening, is not only an employee here, but she’s also my lifelong best friend and she can make you weep with her violin playing! In a good way, of course!” People laughed appreciatively at the joke. Rina could only flail some more in her head.

“She’s this club’s best-kept secret and if you all clap really loudly for her and be super nice, she
might not kill me in my sleep tonight!” Izumi shot her cheekiest grin at her.

“Oh, I wouldn’t bloody count on it, bi-atch!” Rina shot back as she walked toward the stage, trying to not seem like she was walking to her execution. The laughter that erupted in response to her quip made her feel a little calmer and a bit more humorous.

"Oh, honey, you know I'm full-on lesbian! I leave the Bi department to you!” Izumi returned fire good-naturedly. The audience roared with laughter and some of the known bisexual regulars whooped and hollered at the quip. Rina, trying to control her laughter, turned to the various cheers in the audience and graced them with a sweeping, dramatic bow followed by a couple of cute curtsies before she joined Izumi where she stood on the stage, clapping and crowing at Rina's antics. She gave Rina a hug as she handed Rina her violin. “I know that the violin is one of the things that can help you when you're out of sorts," she said to Rina out of the hearing shot of the microphone. "Sorry for the unpleasant surprise, but you’ll do great, ok? I’ve got your accompaniment CD for ‘Song of the Caged Bird’ cued up and ready to go.” Izumi winked at her before turning to exit the stage.

Rina closed her eyes for a moment to steady herself, readying her violin on her shoulder as a light, designed to detect the count of cued music, pulsed a countdown beat before the music accompaniment began. It was her most favorite piece by Lindsey Stirling and she couldn’t possibly count the number of hours she’d spent practicing this particular piece.

The world around her faded away as she drew out the notes she knew by heart, the lonely notes of the beginning progressing to the notes of the chorus that always reminded her of a butterfly flitting from flower to flower. This piece had a soul to it that always reminded her to not lose hope in darkness and to live bravely unashamed of her light no matter how much the rest of the world might want her to dim it down.

In the final refrain, she couldn’t help dancing a little the way Lindsey always did when she played; swaying and spinning, her feet skipping and shuffling before ending the piece with sinking slowly down to her knees and arching her torso toward the ceiling until she was done holding the last note.

The room erupted in deafening applause and whistles as Rina rolled back onto her feet to stand and take a bow, her face unmistakably flushed with breathless pleasure. Izumi came back on the stage and gave her a hug, her eyes filled with tears.

“It always makes me cry when you play that,” she said with a shining smile through the roar of the din. “Thanks for doing that.”
“You’re still gonna pay,” Rina quipped lightly with a wink before exiting the stage.

Once she was out of the blinding stage lights and hurrying back to Dazz and the relative safety of the bar, she spotted Sesshomaru seated back at his earlier table and his expression was positively stunned. For reasons she did not yet understand, she found that his expression pleased her most of all.
Beginning the Thaw

Chapter Summary

That red-headed woman is an utter mystery to me. She’s clearly not human, she beat the holy shit out of a couple of dirtbags without breaking a sweat, and yet she's gentle and compassionate, even to me. She played the violin like an angel and yet she's bold and crass like a... well... like a demon. How are you able to see right through me like this? Wait, did you SERIOUSLY just flick my nose?!

Sesshomaru had never previously had much use for music. Especially not back when he’d had such a limited emotional range. Music was meant for people who could feel. Even after the death of his daughter, it had never occurred to him that music would have anything to offer him. Oh, sure, he’d been listening to these strange, colorful people singing for the past couple of hours and he’d politely clapped his support. He didn’t really understand the issues surrounding the focus of this fundraiser, but he at least understood that it was something that meant the world to these people, all of whom had been very kind to him thus far.

But the moment Rina had been called to the stage by the woman who identified herself as Rina’s best friend -- followed by the rather amusing banter between them -- and began playing her violin, Sesshomaru had felt such odd sensations in his chest. Not the fierce shattering he’d suffered when Rin... He swallowed. He still couldn’t finish that sentence very well. But no, this was an ache that made every beat of his wounded heart twinge with a nameless, exquisite longing.

And Rina. She’d looked like she was in another world, untouchable so long as she played that sweet, melancholy melody that reminded him somehow of a few of the children back home in the village. The very ones who still made wishes on fireflies and still somehow possessed a measure of hope even after becoming orphaned in the demon attack that had claimed Rin.

If Rina were to play her violin for them, he had no doubt the whole village would sit raptly at her feet. Is this what drew people to music so much? Is this why music was worshipped so extensively by every person he’d ever known?

His heart withered a little when the music was over and Rina exited the stage. Don’t go. Not yet. Please keep playing. It had felt like his heart had been on the verge of some sort of breakthrough but hadn’t quite yet found the last few steps to make that last reach. Surely if she played more, his heart would find whatever unnamed revelation that he couldn’t even begin to verbalize. Then her eyes met his as she practically fled back to the safety of the bar and the company of her friend she’d been working with. His heart had done a flop that felt like a burst of light had exploded forth from it for a moment. She’d held her gaze with him for a few long moments, but when she looked away to return to her duties, the nameless cloud returned, along with a hefty dose of feeling like a total idiot for his weepy inner conflict.
You’re not an idiot, Father. Rin’s essence manifested nearby with a warmth as though she were hugging him from behind. Gods, how he missed her pouncing on him with her unbridled glee. And how stupid he was for being so distant. Hey. Stop it. She gave him a firm shake. Do you know what your problem is? Your heart is heavy because you won’t allow yourself to shed the weight. Even with how much InuYasha and Kagome strove to keep you from retreating into an emotionless cocoon, you only gave just enough to satisfy them. You never delved in enough to actually heal yourself. Why is that, Father? He could practically see her next to him and getting into his face with the stubbornness he’d heard she had with Kohaku.

“I don’t know,” he said softly.

Think about it. You don’t have centuries to figure out your issues this time. Be brave, the way you taught me. Remember? Be brave, dig in, and face this. You don’t know how much depends on this. Then she was gone and he was alone with his thoughts, his heightened confusion, and his sake once again.

Crap. So much for the sake. He’d finished it right after Rina had headed back to the bar. Dammit.

A bottle was suddenly set on the table along with an extra glass. He looked up with a few blinks of surprise as Rina seated herself in the chair opposite him. “You looked like you needed this about as much as I do,” she said with a weary smile as she opened the fresh bottle and poured for him and herself.

“Thank you,” he finally managed to say.

She took a sip of the sake and held it in her mouth for a couple of moments before swallowing it. “So, one thing I do know about myself is that I’m an empath.” She looked up and met his gaze for several quiet seconds before she continued. “And another thing I know is that you’re carrying a weight that you’re typically very good at hiding. But when I played the violin a little bit ago, your heart cracked and now that weight is overwhelming you. And, in the process, because your energy radiates it like it’s being announced on a bullhorn, it’s now overwhelming me because I don’t have the extra energy to keep my guard up.”

Sesshomaru couldn’t help the guilty look that flashed across his expression before he could mask it again. “I’m very sorry about that.”
“Why?”

“I didn’t mean to bring anyone else down.”

She scowled at him fiercely for a moment before she reached across the table and flicked him on the tip of his nose with an audacity that no one had ever dared to cast in his direction.

“Are you insane?” he blurted.

“No, I’m exhausted. And when I’m exhausted, I have drastically less patience for nonsense. And it’s nonsense to apologize for not knowing how to deal with your own emotional buildup. Dealing with our shit is as much a learned skill as anything else we do, only not very many of us are taught properly how to. I mean, that’s like apologizing for having pain and shit to sort through and deal with in the first place.”

Fuck. It made sense.

She placed something flat and square on the table in front of him. Inside it was something shiny and circular. “When you and Sota get back home, ask him for something called a CD player that you can use in your own privacy and ask him to show you how it works. Particularly what’s called the ‘Repeat’ function. And then, when you’re alone, make use of it. Trust me.”

Rina drained the last few swallows of her sake and stood up. “I have to get back to work for reals this time.” She bowed. “Sorry for flicking you on the nose. I needed to get your attention and I just couldn’t think of how else to do that in that moment.”

For the second time, as she started to walk away, Sesshomaru found himself reaching out and grasping her hand for a moment. “Rina, wait.”

“Hmm?”

Shit, why did he do that? What did he want to say? He needed…

Goddammit, he needed to get his brain in gear. He was so tired of feeling lost. It smarted starkly against his dignity.
Rina sat back down with a tired yet patient expression.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said again, feeling sooooooo utterly stupid.

“Do I need to flick you again?” she asked, but her voice carried a gently teasing tone to it.

He found himself unable to resist a smile at the teasing threat. “I’d rather you not do that again.”

“Then I won’t.” She paused for a moment, leveling a hard, studious stare in his direction. “Look, if you want to talk again, I’m at the beach every afternoon. Just come find me.”

The relief Sessho felt at her invitation rather surprised him. He did want to talk to her again. Was it really that difficult for him to figure that out, much less say? Yes, because I can’t think clearly and haven’t been able to since those reptilian bastards took Rin from me.

“Thank you, Rina,” he finally said softly. “I won’t withhold you any longer.”

She gave him a winsome smile before she took her leave.

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The rest of the Karaoke competition wrapped up a little more than an hour later, much to his relief. He’d spent the remaining time staring at the odd object Rina had given him and watching her at the bar. She was clearly tired and yet she still bantered brightly with her customers and the odd yet delightful woman with her behind the counter. Actually, Sessho wasn’t quite sure if they were a woman or not, given the rather prominent bulge in her throat, but he’d heard everyone else refer to her as such and he didn’t see any reason to do otherwise.

But he found it to be quite entertaining watching the two of them cutting up and making each other laugh. It lessened the mountainous weight in his chest to a considerable enough degree that he managed a few small smiles while watching them. It felt entirely foreign, even more than it had the first time Rin had made him smile.

Still, when the competition had concluded and the prizes were awarded, he couldn’t have been
more glad to see Sota come to let him know he was clear to go home. He was absolutely drained from the multiple sharp turns the day had taken ever since he’d first spotted Rina pacing on the beach like something wild that had been caged.

The drive was rather quiet as Sessho stared sightlessly out of the window until Sota broke the silence.

“You ok, Sesshomaru?” He blinked as Sota’s voice brought him back. He looked over as though he hadn’t fully heard Sota’s question. “Was tonight too much for you?”

Sesshomaru considered the question quietly for a few moments before he could answer at last. “In certain aspects, I suppose. Mostly, I think I am still adjusting to your world. It’s overwhelmingly alien.”

He heard Sota huff a small chuckle. “I can only imagine. There’s so much. It’s all so busy and noisy and so many people all in one place.”

“Precisely.”

“So, I saw you and Rina talking earlier,” Sota shifted the topic. “Seems like she really had you hooked when she played her violin.”

Sesshomaru held up the strange object she’d given him. “She gave me this when she brought me more sake and had a drink with me.”

“A CD?”

He shrugged. “I suppose? She told me to ask you for a… ‘see-dee’ player? She said it would be best if I could use in my own privacy and to ask you to show me how it works.”

Sota smiled. “No problem. I’ve got something you can use. I’ll let you use my old Discman.”

When they arrived at the shrine, Sota took Sesshomaru to his room, found his Discman, popped a couple of cylinders he called “batteries” into it, and showed Sesshomaru how to use it. Sesshomaru
was actually relieved that it wasn’t as complicated as he feared it might be. This world’s technology was terribly intimidating.

Finally, he was alone in the guest room they had given him to sleep. It was simply furnished, which he didn’t mind. Though his castle back in his own time was more lavish, it had been his father’s castle. Sesshomaru had never placed much value on material things. There was a mattress, some furniture for storing clothing, a bedside table, and some bookshelves. It was the varying collection of books that Sesshomaru appreciated the most.

Settling back on the bed with one of the books, he placed the “earbuds”, as Sota had called them, into his ears. He spun the little wheel on the side to make sure the volume was low, as Sota had worried over what might happen to Sessho’s highly sensitive ears should the volume be too high. He pressed “Play” and, as he adjusted the volume up to a comfortable degree, he immediately recognized the sweet strains of the piece he’d heard Rina play…

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Sesshomaru waited for Rina at the beach all morning. He couldn’t remember a time where he’d felt so impatient. He contented himself with Sota’s Discman (thankfully armed with extra batteries), a book, and the rather large lunch Mrs. Higurashi had so kindly packed for him, much to his surprise. She wouldn’t even hear a word of protest from him.

“I know you don’t partake of human food very much, but sometimes food can nourish the soul even more than it nourishes the body,” she’d said in that irresistible, motherly voice of hers. He’d found himself completely unable to refuse her after that and had meekly accepted the lunch.

Sesshomaru found some comfortable shade where he could have a fair amount of space to himself away from the more crowded portions of the beach, laid back and closed his eyes. He hit “Play”, and waited, losing himself in the strains of the music once again.

After what felt like an eternity, her scent wafted to him on a gentle breeze. His eyes shot open. Her scent was like an oncoming thunderstorm. Electrifying. Alive. He waited. He wanted to see what she would do.

At first, she found herself a spot nearer the water and seemed intent on establishing herself there. Then she froze and began to look around. Even from this distance, Sesshomaru could see her nose working and he found himself smiling a little. Sure enough, she finally pinned him with her gaze. Her eyes narrowed for a moment, though not with hostility. Apparently, whatever she’d been looking for was satisfied because her face softened into a smile and she waved at him. Then she
grabbed her things that she’d set down on the sand and made her way over to him.

Sesshomaru put the Discman into the backpack that Mrs. Higurashi had given him to use and rose to greet her with a bow.

“You look a lot better today, Sesshomaru,” she greeted him.

Her compliment made him feel ridiculously shy, but he was careful to not let his face betray that fact. “As do you, Rina. Have you felt that strange energy again today?”

Her sigh was that of relief. “Thankfully, no. And my wolves were back to their normal selves today. I’m still rather troubled about whatever that was. I don’t get the feeling that it’s gone. More like it’s hiding.”


“How about you, Sesshomaru?” she asked. “You seem not quite so fractured today.”

He couldn’t help a small, shocked grin at her bluntness. “Tell me, is your audacity your usual setting?”

She arched a saucy brow at him. “You do see the red hair, right?”

“Ah. Fair enough.” This evoked a laugh from her. He realized liked the sound of her laugh, the way her unearthly emerald eyes sparkled. He found he also rather liked her boldness. She didn’t fear him, despite knowing what he was. She should, perhaps. But she didn’t. And he found her particular fearlessness rather refreshing. She didn’t bow, scrape, or seek to fill his ears with what she thought he wanted to hear.

“I’m not really sure how I am today,” he finally answered. “A little more centered, perhaps?”

“You made use of the CD, I take it?”

“I’ve been making use of it since Sota lent me his Discman last night,” he admitted. “I think I’ve
already gone through three pairs of batteries.”

She smiled at his confession, but her gaze was faintly studious. What was she looking for?

“I’m glad you’re feeling more balanced today. It’s certainly a start.” She plopped her backpack down next to his and sat down.

“Hope you don’t mind, but I’m famished. It was a long morning and I didn’t have a chance to eat anything before I had to dash off to work.” She pulled a couple sandwiches from her backpack and a green, crinkly bag. She ripped that open first and Sesshomaru’s eyes about watered as the vapors of something spicy kicked him in the nose.

“What the hell is that?” he blurted.

She stared at him for a moment before she grabbed one of the bag’s contents. “It’s a bag of one of my favorite kinds of chips from America. It’s a flavor called Chile Limón. It’s pretty spicy, but I’m kinda addicted to them.” She laughed as she waved one teasingly at him. “Wanna try one?” she punctuated her question with one helluva cheeky grin that made Sesshomaru want to do something absolutely ridiculous, like tickle her.

“I think I’ll pass,” he said instead, his face softened into an odd smile.

“Aw, c’mon,” she entreated, flashing her big green eyes at him comically. “You don’t know what you’re missing!” She chomped one of the chips down unrepentantly in a manner that would be considered crude and crass in more formal company. Her enjoyment was blissful even as she began to pant.

“Oh, alright, I will try one.” He didn’t miss the mischief on her face as he accepted one of the proffered chips. The first flavors that hit were an introduction of lime juice carrying bold peppers that were definitely foreign. It was actually delicious! Wait… then the heat roared in.

“Holy thit!” he panted, looking around desperately for something to drink. He grabbed a bottle of water from his bag. But the bliss only lasted for a second before the burn came back. Fuck! Was it stronger?!

Rina guffawed at him as she handed him one of the bottles of milk she’d brought with her. “Here,” she chuckled.
Sesshomaru didn’t even think twice. He ripped the top off and chugged. Ahh… He breathed a sigh of relief. The burn was still there but it was very muted.

“Are you ok?” Rina laughed.

“How the hell do you eat that?” he asked her, utterly aghast and exasperated.

“Give it a moment,” she laughed, a knowing grin on her face while she popped another couple of the chips into her mouth.

He stared at her with an eyebrow raised in confusion. “Give what a moment?”

She held up a few fingers and ticked them off like a countdown. Right on cue, the burn subsided and only the initial flavor remained. His mouth watered as she teased him with another chip.

“Want another one?”

He scowled. “Did you work some kind of magic that I’m unaware of?” he glared at the bag before he grudgingly snatched the chip she offered. Sure enough, she laughed harder at his manner. However, her laughter was good-natured rather than malicious or mocking. He found that not only did her laughter warm him, he liked being the one causing her mirth.

“Ok, together now so you won’t suffer alone,” she finally chortled. She counted to three and popped her chip in her mouth simultaneously with him. When the fire surged again, she handed him a fresh bottle of milk. “Not so fast on it this time, ok? A few small sips will quell the heat and it’ll last you longer.”

Sesshomaru chuckled after taking a few sips. “I think I’m good. Those chips are delicious, but I think I’ve otherwise punished my senses enough for one day.” He reached behind him to grab the large lunch sack that Mrs. Higurashi had packed for him. “Sota’s mother insisted I bring this with me today, but I don’t often partake of human food. Would you care to have some?”

“Wow!” Rina said as her eyes took in the generous spread. “That all looks so delicious!”

“Please, do help yourself,” Sessho nudged it toward her.
“Only if you’re going to eat, too,” she insisted. “Look, I understand you don’t often eat human food. I get it, but I wouldn’t feel right taking all this food that Mrs. Higurashi meant for you, ok?”

“Alright,” he capitulated, grabbing one of… wait… two sets of chopsticks? He blinked. Had Mrs. Higurashi known he was meeting someone today? He brushed the thought off as he handed Rina the other pair.

Rina grabbed up an omelette and moaned as the food hit her palate. “Ohmigods, I’d heard that she’s an amazing cook, but I’d never experienced her food firsthand,” she mumbled with delight around her mouthful.

Ordinarily, Sesshomaru would be disgusted by such crass behavior. And yet, where Rina was concerned, he found that he didn’t mind in the slightest, not that he’d even think of expecting her to give a crap about his opinion anyway. Rina reminded him of a Dragon: She did what she wanted, said what she wanted, and any who judged her ill probably risked being burnt to a crisp. He smiled at the thought as he helped himself to a rice ball.

Once they’d eaten their fill -- after Rina had discovered the sweet custard buns and screeched her exuberant delight and had taken all but one at Sesshomaru’s prompting -- they lay back together on the blanket Sessho had brought.

“So… stuffed…” Rina purred, her voice drowsy with relief. She rolled onto her left side, facing him, her eyes closed.

How long had it been since she’d last had such a satisfying meal? Sesshomaru wondered to himself as he watched her breathing deepen into sleep. He recalled her mentioning that it had been a long day. Once she dozed off, however, her guard came down and Sesshomaru was rather startled to realize just how long a day it had actually been. How exhausted she really was. She hadn’t slept at all last night. Not for lack of trying, he sensed. But the circles under her eyes that now caught his notice denoted that it had been a miserable, losing battle.

Unwilling to let anything disturb her much-needed rest, Sesshomaru quietly got up and raced for the nearest beach umbrella so that the sun would not shine in her face at any point during its trek across the sky. Once he was satisfied with the umbrella's addition to their shade, he planted himself silently next to her, maintaining a respectful distance, and guarded her as she slept.

Three hours passed before Sesshomaru sensed the change in her breathing that signified she was
waking up. He carefully positioned himself a little farther away, lest she be disoriented and not recall him at first. He didn’t want to be responsible for causing her any panic, however brief.

Moments later, her eyes opened blearily. “Did I really fall asleep?” she mumbled as she stretched. Finally, her eyes focused on him. “Ugh. I’m so sorry about that.”

“Please,” Sessho scoffed gently. “Do I need to flick you on the nose now?”

She looked momentarily stunned before understanding dawned and she chuckled a little. “Alright. Touche,” she conceded. “I just apologized for being tired.”

“Mmhmm,” Sessho teased in a mock smug manner.

“But, in fairness,” Rina countered, “I was more feeling bad for snarfing through all your food and then crashing.” Her eyes glittered with soundless laughter.

“Ahh, I see,” Sessho pretended to consider, diving headfirst into their comfortable banter without a second thought. “So, you were apologizing for being hungry, eating the food I freely invited you to eat your fill of and then being so tired as to sleep once your hunger was fully sated. Am I understanding correctly?”

“Uhhh…” Rina stalled as she mentally flailed for a reply amidst the giggles that now began to shake her shoulders.

“It seems to me that I am fully warranted to flick your nose now,” he waggled his fingers teasingly in her direction.

“Objection, your honor!” she laughed as his fingers inched closer to her nose.

“Ah, but it is only fair, after all!” He caught both her wrists gently in one hand, but not so tight she couldn’t wriggle free if she wished, all the while wriggling his other fingers closer. The sound of his laugh would only surprise him later upon recall.

“Nope! Nope! Nope! That’s not fair!” she squealed as she did her damnedest to keep her nose out
of his reach. “You’re not allowed to use my methods against me!” She was almost breathless from laughing as she finally resorted to burying her face against his chest.

Sessho’s heart thundered at the unexpected contact and he froze, an even more unexpected tenderness causing his heart to crack open another degree. He froze for just long enough for Rina to pull back and look at him with a sheepish and questioning smile. Perfect. He took that opportunity to tap the tip of her nose lightly with his index finger rather than the flick he’d humorously threatened.

She collapsed back on the blanket with more laughter. “Oh, that was a dirty trick, sir!” she declared in mock outrage. “A dirty trick, indeed!” Rina’s eyes took in Sesshomaru’s unrepentant grin. “Well played,” she chortled.

His smile widened and his amber eyes crinkled in their shared humor. Inside, however, he was still rather shaken at the nearness they’d just shared.

“Are you feeling better, though, Firefly?” The endearment flew out of his mouth before he’d even realized it had formulated in his thoughts.

Her head tipped slightly in curiosity. “Firefly?”

Sesshomaru could only fathom how silly he looked as he felt his face grow uncharacteristically hot. “It just came out,” he stammered. Seriously, what the hell? He, Sesshomaru, did not get bashful and awkward like this!

Thankfully, she let him off the hook. “Actually,” I do feel a lot better,” she admitted.

“After you dozed off, I got the impression that you weren’t able to sleep at all last night,” he said quietly. “I actually found myself wondering if I’d somehow not noticed the dark rings under your eyes or if you had managed to mask them.”

Now it was Rina’s turn to chuckle at his unmalicious audacity. “It’s a little of both, I think?” she replied. “I don’t think I can make them actually disappear, per se. Rather, I think I’m just able to keep them from catching people’s notice. Sort of like a perception filter in Doctor Who.” Then she paused. “And I bet you’ve not watched Doctor Who or much of anything else yet, so I bet you won’t get that reference.”

“The reference, no, but I do believe I understand the concepts you speak,” Sesshomaru affirmed.
“I’ve found your modern technology to be quite intimidating thus far, so I’ve not yet managed to brave very much of it.”

“That reminds me, though. I’ve been meaning to ask you what time you’re from?”

“I’m from what people in your time refer to as the Feudal era.”

Rina blanched. “Seriously?” At his nod, she whistled. “How did you even end up here?”

Sesshomaru hesitated. “That is a long story,” he finally answered, slowly so as to choose his words as best he could, “and not one that I yet feel able to share.” At her confused expression, he tried to clarify.

“The means in which I traveled here is a secret that is not my place to share. It’s not that I don’t trust you, Rina; it’s a secret that’s been carefully guarded for several years now and I could not dishonor the people whose trust I guard.”

Rina nodded. “It’s ok, Sessho. I understand. Say no more.” She grasped his hand in hopes that he’d sense her sincerity. He smiled at her gratefully.

“So, what brought you here? I mean, why did you decide to come here?”

Sesshomaru’s eyes clouded over. “I needed to get away,” he replied softly after several moments. “I had someone who was essentially like a daughter to me. She was my daughter. She was human, but I’d raised her since she’d been very small. She was…” he had to clear his throat so he could try to speak around the lump that had formed. “She died a few months ago.”

Rina regarded him sadly. There was no pity in her gaze. Rather, it was the compassion of someone who understood due to losses of her own.

“I’m so sorry, Sesshomaru,” she whispered. “I can’t even imagine the pain you’ve been enduring.”

He returned her sentiment with a sad smile of his own. He didn’t know what else to say.

At that moment, Rina noted the sun’s position and checked her watch. Her shoulders slumped slightly. “I’m really sorry to have brought up such a painful subject only to have to ditch, but I have to get over to the club and get ready for work.”
“Please, think nothing of it,” Sesshomaru reassured her gently. He stood up and promptly offered his hand to assist her, which she accepted. They packed their respective belongings away, each taking care to shake any lingering sand off, before Rina helped him to gather, shake off, and fold the blanket he’d brought.

“Would you mind if I were to walk you there?” he asked.

She smiled. “Not at all.”

They set off together in a companionable silence, lost in their own thoughts, for the five or so minutes it took to reach the employee entrance of the club, where Rina’s friends Izumi and Ryuka stood smoking their cigarettes.

“Hey, Rina!” they waved to her. And, much to Sesshomaru’s surprise, they greeted him with just as much warmth. “Hey, Sesshomaru! Good to see you again!”

He smiled rather shyly. “You as well, Ryuka, Izumi,” he replied, bowing to each. They returned with bows of their own as Sota came outside, hauling a couple of garbage bags to a nearby dumpster.

“Hey, Sessho! I wondered where you’d disappeared off to today!” he gave a welcoming smile.

“I, uh, spent most of the afternoon in Rina’s company at the beach,” he said awkwardly. It didn’t particularly help his awkwardness when he saw Sota, Ryuka, and Izumi grin mischievously at each other. However, nothing in their manner or scent denoted any malice, only friendly teasing. Still, did they know something he didn’t?

He looked over at Rina whose face had flushed as soon as the other three had grinned their knowing grins. Before any of them could say anything, she turned to him. “I’ve gotta go. I’ll provide the distraction and you run to safety before you get caught in their webs of mischief, ok?” In a motion that seemed as natural to her as breathing, she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Her eyes widened in surprise simultaneously with his, but she turned and fled through the door before anyone could say anything.

Sota, Ryuka, and Izumi, however, gawked at him with jaws hanging open, their eyes dancing with some kind of delight that he was hesitant to question. Izumi chased after her friend, leaving Ryuka and Sota outside with him.
“Dammit, now I’m really sorry that tonight’s not a mixer night!” Ryuka finally crowed. She leveled an apologetic gaze at him. “I’m sorry that I cannot invite you into the club tonight, Sesshomaru, but this club is primarily for LGBTQIA+ ladies most nights of the week with only a couple of exceptions for when we have mixer nights.”

Sesshomaru shook his head. He still didn’t understand what it all meant and he’d forgotten to ask Sota about it last night. However, he adamantly understood that tonight was not a night where males were allowed to join. And he’d come to understand enough last night that this place was meant as a safe haven for people who did not fit the rather restrictive societal norms.

“Please don’t apologize,” he said with a respectful bow. “I would not dream of or dare to infringe on the safety and comfort you seek to give the people who come to your club. I thank you for letting me be here last night, however.”

Ryuka’s smile widened. “I like you,” she pronounced. “I’ll let Sota know when the next mixer will be. Even with you being a hetero, I didn’t hear a single complaint about your presence last night. Everyone I spoke with who’d interacted with you, employee and customer alike, all gushed about how kind and respectful you were.” Her eyes saddened for a moment. “It’s not a kindness often given by heteros that come to our doors.”

Sesshomaru frowned. He almost asked what “heteros” meant until he caught Sota’s expression that plainly said “ask me later”. Instead, he focused on the rest of what she’d said. If “heteros” meant “normal”, at the very least, then he was able to understand that “normal” people were still not so kind to those that weren’t considered “normal”. His heart gave a bitter thump. Humans hadn’t changed all that much in 500 years, he supposed.

“I’m very sorry that you and your clientele are treated such that kindness is still so rare.”

Ryuka graced him with a sad smile. “Thank you, Sesshomaru. I appreciate it more than you could possibly know.” Oh, she’d probably be surprised, just in a very different way. “Anyway, I’d better head in and finish helping set things up for the night. See you later!”

“I’ll be in in a moment,” Sota told her before she disappeared through the door. Turning to Sesshomaru, he said, “It’s a long, long story, and it’s complicated. I’ll explain later, ok?”

“No worries. I think I understood at least enough for now. But thank you for your warning me from asking anything that I shouldn’t. I still forget myself too easily.”

“It’s alright, don’t worry about it. So,” Sota turned the conversation, “what are you planning to do
while I work tonight?"

“I think I’ll remain at the beach for the evening and then ride home with you.”

Sota smiled. “Sounds good. I’ll see you later, then.”

However, as Sesshomaru went to find another space on the beach to settle down at, a whisper of foreboding raised the hair on his spine. Something was wrong. A lick of coming malice on the breeze. He changed his mind and decided he’d stay closer to the club just in case. He went to Sota’s car and put his belongings in the trunk before he found himself someplace to sit on the ocean-side of the retainer wall a short distance away from the club’s front door.

After he got a look at the burly men who guarded the door and smiled at the women they admitted entrance to, Sessho took a deep breath and sank into meditative alertness. It seemed unlikely that whoever was coming with foul intent would actually try to come through the front door. Unless they were a woman, but he did not get that sense. So he spread his consciousness to watch over the other less-guarded entrances. Namely the employee entrance as well as the exit that led directly to the employee smoking area.

As far as he could tell, there were guards posted at the doors to the two customer smoking areas as well, both on the first floor as well as the upper balcony. The first floor was surrounded by tall, thick privacy hedges. If someone were to try to sneak in that way, they’d likely make too much noise and attract the attention of the guards.

“Hey! Hey, buddy!” Sesshomaru was yanked out of his meditative reverie. He quickly clamped down on his instinct to lash out and looked up. It was one of the door guards. He had a suspicious glare on his face. “You’re Sota’s friend, right?”

“Yes. I am Sesshomaru.”

“Yeah, I remember you from last night. You know you’re not supposed to be here, right?”

“I understand. I was going to hang out at the beach until Sota gets off work, but…” he trailed off, not quite sure how to explain to this human. He looked over at the door and was satisfied that it was still guarded by the other guy he’d spotted earlier.
“But what?”

“But what?”

“Please, be at ease. I am no threat. But I am sticking close because I have a bad feeling that there will be someone who comes to try to make themselves a threat. I don’t want to be too far from Sota or Rina should that happen.”

The guard narrowed his gaze at him, not quite sure whether to believe him or not. And that was when Sesshomaru truly and deeply understood what Ryuka had spoken with him about earlier. It wasn’t just that “normal” people were unkind to the people in this establishment. It was that they were dangerous. Deeply dangerous. His eyes saddened.

“I’m not from around here and, you could say, I come from a place very isolated from all this. I know nothing of you people here other than that you are different and generally unaccepted. I had no idea til now how bad it is for you all. Please,” he pleaded one last time and punctuated with a deep bow, for he really did not want to have to force the issue, “please, I swear to you on the grave of my revered father that I mean no harm and only wish to help keep any threats you all face at bay.”

Thankfully, that was enough. “Alright,” the guard relented, though only slightly. He didn’t yet trust Sesshomaru. But he motioned for Sessho to follow him back to the door. “My name is Daichi. This is my boyfriend, Hank. He’s from America but came here to get in touch with his Japanese heritage and family and to go to school.”

Sesshomaru bowed deeply to them both. “It is a pleasure to meet you both.”

“So, tell me about this feeling you got earlier. And how were you helping to keep an eye out from behind the retainer wall over there?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Sesshomaru admitted. “I can go into meditative trances and leave my body. I was looking out over all the available entrances.” He saw Hank raise a skeptical brow at him. But it was Daichi who spoke first.

“Ok, say I believe you, hypothetically. What did you see?”

“Well, I don’t think whoever it is would try to come through the front door unless they are a woman and that just doesn’t seem the most likely. I looked over the downstairs and upstairs smoking entrances for the customers and saw that there is at least one guard at each door. The
privacy hedge would be a fair deterrent and I did not see any particular way for someone to climb up to the balcony without being noticed.

“No, what concerns me are the employee entrances, both the main and the smoking area. So I’ve been watching over those for the past while.”

Hank looked at Daichi for his cue. Finally, Daichi nodded. “That’s still not a lot to go on, but,” he turned to his boyfriend, “this guy didn’t move about very much at all last night, least of all the smoking areas. I’m still rather skeptical, but I think we should trust him. Besides, Ryuka likes him and so does Izumi.” He turned back to Sessho. “As far as I can tell, you’re alright for a hetero.”

Sesshomaru barely heard that last sentence. Not even caring about keeping his yokai nature hidden, he sniffed the breeze, his senses going on high alert. Shit!!

“They’re here!” was all he said before he leaped over the crowd containment wall and raced toward the back. The employee entrance door swung back and forth ambivalently. He only had one thought as he tore through the door. **Rina!**
Great. I just embarrassed the fuck out of myself in front of my friends with Sesshomaru. That's bad enough and I'd so much rather deal with that than some butthurt, trigger-happy asshole getting all bent about his ex-wife being a lesbian. MotherFUCKER, did you just shoot me?! I'll use you for a goddamn pinata, bit--- Oh, shit! Ryuka's a WHAT?!?! How the FUCK did I not ever know this?!

The club was hopping, the dance floor was packed, and Rina had been dashing endlessly between the tables in her assigned section like a bumblebee on crack. *It’s a seriously good thing I was able to catch that nap earlier*, she thought, *otherwise I’d have keeled over before I could even make it through the first hour of service*. It was so busy tonight, still riding off the success of the KFK fundraiser from the night before, that she and Dazz hadn’t even had a moment for their usual banter. She didn’t really mind, though. It meant that it was too busy for people to continue teasing her about Sesshomaru.

They had been merciless for the hour before the doors had opened. Izumi had run in after her, so hot on her heels that Rina was surprised that her shoes weren’t scuffed from the impact. Her face, however, had yet to lose its flush. Even without the good-natured teasing, she couldn’t fucking believe she’d kissed his cheek like that! If she let herself think about it too much, she’d be right back to fighting the impulse to find some pit (or a bottle) she could inchworm her way into for the rest of eternity. Her ears burned and she took a deep breath to try to shake herself out of it. Nobody would thank her if she mixed her drink orders up.

She grabbed the tray with her next orders to deliver, verified the table number, and scammed. The two women sitting there hadn’t budged to the dance floor but were ensconced in conversation. It was obvious they were on a date and had been dating for quite a while. There was an intimacy to their energy that reminded Rina of Izumi and Ryuka. But what really got Rina’s attention was fear and overwhelming sorrow emanating off one while the other tried to lend her support.

The hair on Rina’s neck rose for a moment, but she ignored it as she gently announced her arrival to deliver their drinks.

“Sorry, but is everything ok?” she asked gently. The stressed woman looked up and Rina felt her breath leave her softly as the full force of her emotions crashed over her like a rogue wave. Indicating the chair next to where she stood, she asked, “May I sit?”

The woman looked uncertainly at her companion. Rina recognized her girlfriend, Hiromi, as a regular. Hiromi nodded. “It’s alright, Kazuya; Rina here is best friends with one of the owners and
she’s really kind. They look after everyone here like family.” Rina blushed as she sat down.

“What’s going on?” she asked gently.

Kazuya took a deep, shuddering breath. “It’s my ex-husband, Mike. He’s been stalking me since I figured out that I’m a lesbian and told him I wanted a divorce. It was at least a relief when his regiment had to ship out, but his letters have been getting more and more frightening. And then I received a telegram today that he’s on his way home!

“He’s been getting his very Catholic mother to call me and harass me from the States and she even threatened to come and take me back there by force because she thinks I’m insane!”

Rina blanched. “She can’t fucking do that!”

“I know!” Kazuya’s face was miserable. “It’s not her I worry about, though, even though it’s been quite alarming to see just how unhinged all of Mike’s family is. But I’m scared of him. The last letter he sent promised that he would kill me when he got back and I don’t know what to do!”

“Do you have it with you?”

Hiromi held up her hand for a moment before digging in her purse. She handed it to Rina. “I’ve been holding onto it just in case.”

Rina looked over the English-written tirade. The sincere malice that emanated off the page made the hair on her neck stand up even further. “He stopped taking his medications after you came out, didn’t he?” she blurted without thinking.

Kazuya’s jaw dropped. “Yes, how did you know?”

“I got the sense off his energy that still lingers on the paper,” Rina explained. “Sorry about that. When I get impressions that strong, they often go flying out of my mouth before I can even think to rein it in.” Rina frowned as she sussed out the energy a little more. “His mental health used to be a lot better under control. It’s never been this bad til this.” She looked up. “This is not your fault,” she said adamantly. “He believes it is because your coming out is what triggered it, but he is the one who chose not to get help and to forego his medication.”

Kazuya began to weep. Hiromi and, at Hiromi’s silent nod of invitation, Rina wrapped their arms around Kazuya as she unloaded.
Finally, Rina asked her quietly, “Have you shown this letter to anyone from his regiment?”

“I tried. I called them and told them what the letter says, but they don’t believe me. The person I spoke with said that it was bad enough that I’d lied about being lesbian as an excuse to leave him and then he hung up on me. I’ve tried calling back and never make it past talking to whatever assistants answer the phone.”

Rina clenched her fists. There weren’t many bad apples in the American military stationed nearby, but Mike and at least one of his superiors were rotten to the core.

She looked at Hiromi. “You know, I think this would be the perfect thing to bring to LEAG first thing tomorrow morning, don’t you?” She nodded. “In the meantime, do you two have somewhere safe to stay?”

Hiromi hesitated. “Not really. He knows where my apartment is and we can only afford maybe one night at a hotel. Plus, I think he’s had some buddies following us. We’ve been seeing black vans with American military plates hanging around outside of our work places as well as our apartment. Kazuya moved in with me after he left on his deployment.”

Rina frowned. “Ok. We’ll figure something out.”

She jumped as she felt a tap on her shoulder. It was one of her other customers. “Is everything ok? Do we need to go pick our drinks up?”

“Sorry about that,” Rina said. “Bit of an emergency that they needed help with. When you go up, tell Dazz that I said y’all’s drinks are on me, ok?”

“Hey, no problem. I know how you guys look after us here.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kazuya said, her eyes darkened with misery and shame.

The other customer put her hand on Kazuya’s shoulder. “Really, it’s ok. This is how they do things here. The people that work here are literally allowed to drop everything to help anyone here that needs it. You’re new here, so I know you didn’t know that yet, but they really do emphasize on how we’re all a family here and we look out for each other.”
Hiromi ardently nodded her agreement. “It’s true. It’s why I spend so much time here.”

“Hey, Aimi?” Rina said thoughtfully, “would you happen to know of any safe place that Kazuya and Hiromi could stay for a few days? Kazuya’s being stalked and threatened by her military ex-husband.”

“My brother!” Aimi piped up without hesitation. “He’s a police officer and he works really closely with some women’s shelters. But he built a big house just outside the city for women to go to in dire emergencies. He told me he feels better if he’s able to look after them himself.”

“Can you call him?”

“Absolutely! Let me go grab my drink and I’ll get his attention.”

As Aimi flitted off, Rina turned back to Kazuya and Hiromi. “It’ll be alright,” she reassured them kindly.

No sooner were the words out of her mouth, she felt a lick of black malice race up her spine. She whipped around to try to spot the source. She couldn’t see it, but she knew it was there.

She turned back to them. “Hide! Now!” Their faces paled as they froze in place. “Now!” Rina screamed at them. They bolted and crouched under tables as they made their way to hide under a booth.

Rina was on her feet and trying to peer for the source of the threat. It was Mike. The scent that reached her matched the one on the letter. Suddenly a loud POP! cracked her ears over the noise of the music. The women on the dance floor froze as confusion and disbelief clouded their faces.

Her eyes found him. He was in his uniform. But not combat fatigues. He was wearing his dress uniform. Shit. That’s not good. He doesn’t intend to live through this encounter. And he was holding a gun. What the actual fuck?! How the fuck did he manage to get a gun here?!

“Kazuya!” he bellowed, his voice carried a vague slur of alcohol. “Kazuya, get your ass out here, now! I know you’re here, you whore!”
Rina’s eyes glittered. She pushed through the crowd and faced him. He pointed his gun at her. She made sure her face betrayed no trepidation. If anything, she sought to mirror the hard, stoic expression that Sesshomaru carried so much. She projected her mental voice to Ryuka, who was right behind her. *I’ll keep his attention. You start trying to get people out.* She was actually surprised to hear Ryuka reply to her!

**You got it. Just be careful.**

Rina took a slow step toward the intruder, her eyes emitting a cold emerald fire. “Who the fuck are you?” she asked him in English, her voice an Arctic chill. He cocked his gun. She didn’t flinch but she paused.

“Where the fuck is my wife?!”

Rina forced herself to take a calm breath. She wanted a piece of this sonofabitch so badly she could taste it, but she needed to keep the situation from escalating, especially while he was still beyond her reach.

“You must be in the wrong place, friend,” she said coldly. “This is a place for LGBT women.”

He gave a harsh laugh, his eyes rather crazed. “Well, she decided before my last deployment that she wanted to be some lesbian whore! She told me she even wanted a divorce!” His voiced edged closer to hysteria. “Can you fucking believe that?”

He was so out of his gourd he didn’t notice Rina slowly inching closer. A movement behind him caught her gaze and she was so startled, she wasn’t able to maintain her expressionless neutrality. Sesshomaru! She tried to recover her stoicism but it was too late. Mike had noticed. He started to turn.

Rina lunged then. Too soon! Despite her speed, he had the reflexes of the soldier he’d been trained to be and he managed to turn back toward her and squeeze off a shot. Rina gasped as she felt as though she’d been punched in the shoulder with a hot poker battering ram.

“Rina!” she heard Sesshomaru’s strangled cry.

Her temper exploded. A haze of red descended over her gaze and she felt the poke of her canines
lengthening into sharp fangs.

“You stupid sonofabitch!” she roared. Fuck. Her voice sounded so strange. Mike tried raising the gun at her again but her hand shot forward and grabbed it from him with ease. His eyes widened as she crushed the little Glock in her fist with the ease one crushes a soda can.

“Now’s the part where you piss yourself and run,” she snarled. “Do you wanna play a game, you little cowardly shit? Hide and Seek is my favorite.” She leered at him with an evil grin.

He whimpered and turned to run. Instead of freedom, however, he ran face-first into Sesshomaru’s chest. Sesshomaru’s eyes were blood red with rage as he hauled the whimpering man up off the ground by his throat with one hand. He looked at her, but his eyes went from her own down to where her right shoulder was bleeding and his rage increased.

“Sesshomaru!” Ryuka’s voice cracked with authority. It pierced through the haze of Rina’s own rage. Ryuka? She sounded… strange. “Put him down! This miserable wretch shed blood in my home! In my club! He threatened my guests! My family! Set. Him. Down!”

Rina turned to face her friend and she blanched. Ryuka’s eyes were blazing red with demonic rage and her form had taken on that of a Dragon in mid-transformation.

“Oh my God, what the fuck are you people?” Mike bawled as Sesshomaru dropped him on his ass.

Ryuka strode forward. “You can just wonder that to your heart’s content as you rot in prison, you sack of shit.” She knocked him out with a backhand. Then she turned to Rina.

“Are you alright? Your shoulder,” at Rina’s confused expression, she pointed out her injury.

“Oh,” Rina said dumbly, looking down. She’d forgotten. It had barely even hurt once the rage had taken over. She swallowed. “Yes, I’ll be alright.”

“Good. See to it that everyone else is unharmed. I’ve some damage control to do. Sesshomaru, go with her.”

“Yes, my lady Dragon,” Sesshomaru said quietly before grasping Rina’s hand and gently pulled her away.

Izumi had led the women out to escape through the hedge in the smoking area. There was a
measure of knowing in her eyes when Sesshomaru informed her that Ryuka had disabled the assailant.

“Are you alright, Rina?” she asked worriedly about her best friend, however.

“I think I’m in shock or something,” Rina answered softly, still in a small daze. “It barely hurts.”

Izumi looked at Sesshomaru. “I’m going with the women to the beach. The police are already here. Take Rina back in and get her something sweet from the kitchen. She needs sugar to combat the shock.”

Sesshomaru nodded silently before he turned and scooped Rina into his arms.

Rina sighed as she laid her head over his heart so she could steady herself with the thrum of his heartbeat.

“I can’t believe he had a gun. Guns are forbidden here, especially for any personnel that are off-duty. I’ve never been shot before.” Then she was aware that Sesshomaru’s arms were shaking. “Sesshomaru?”

He didn’t answer her. She looked up at him and, without thinking, reached her palm up to his face. “Sessho,” she said softly as she made him look at her. “What’s wrong? Are you alright? Are you hurt too?”

“I… I was afraid,” he finally said, his eyes screwing shut angrily. “You rushed him too soon! I heard his weapon discharge and I heard you scream and all I could think was how frightened I was that he’d killed you for a moment.” His arms tightened about her as he went into the kitchen.

“Where are these sweets I’m supposed to find for you?” he asked roughly.

Rina silently pointed to a cupboard where there was a junk food stash for the employees. She thought he’d put her down first, but he seemed very unwilling to part contact with her even that much.

“Sesshomaru, it’s ok. You can put me down. You don’t have to carry me everywhere.”

“Do you want me to put you down?”
Rina’s mouth snapped shut for a moment. Did she? Actually, no, she realized with a small amount of surprise. Looking back up at him, she met his fierce, waiting gaze with a small, sheepish shake of her head.

“Good,” was his only reply.

Rina grabbed a chocolate bar out of the cupboard. “Chocolate’s supposed to be the best thing to combat shock,” she said, her voice still sounded far away.

“Katarina Miyazaki?” came an unfamiliar voice. Sesshomaru started to growl until Rina placed a hand on his chest in warning.

A police officer came into the kitchen along with a paramedic. “Ryuka said I’d find you in here. She said that you were wounded by the suspect?”

“I got shot in the shoulder,” she said, the words sounding even more surreal than her voice. “I think it went all the way through? I don’t know.”

Sesshomaru adjusted her in his arms so he could look. “There’s no exit wound, Firefly.”

“Well, fuck.” She took a bite of the chocolate.

“And who are you, sir?” the officer’s voice was kind.

Rina was still too stunned to feel nervous about Sesshomaru’s answer. She was content to just lean against him and eat the chocolate.

“I’m Sesshomaru. I’m Rina’s… ah… boyfriend… as of recently.”

Rina’s heart gave a start of surprise but thankfully, she was too focused on the chocolate to show it.

“Good to meet you, Sesshomaru. Can I get a statement from you about what happened here tonight? This paramedic is going to look at Katarina’s shoulder, but she’s going to need medical care to get the bullet removed.”
Sesshomaru’s eyes took on a hard glint. “I’m not leaving her. Whatever you need to ask me can wait until she has received care.” There was a particular edge in his voice that made the officer take a small step back in alarm. “I’m sure Ryuka will be able to provide a means to contact us.”

When the officer bowed out of the room, the paramedic stepped forward. “Good thinking, Sesshomaru.” He knelt by Rina. “Hey, Rina, I’m Ryuka’s brother.” His voice thick with meaning. She looked at him. A flash of Dragon went across his face. “Just call me Ryuu. It’s easier that way. We need to get that bullet out of you, ok? Can you come with me to my ambulance? Sesshomaru, of course, can come with.”

Rina was starting to feel a little more clear-headed, thanks to the chocolate. Unfortunately, that meant that the pain was starting to come through, too.

In the ambulance, Sesshomaru looked at the scissors Ryuu held out to him. “We need to cut her shirt off. We can’t risk her moving her shoulder ‘cause it could just increase the injury. And I figured, Dragon or no, you’d pretty much rip out my throat if I tried to do it myself, so…”

“Fair enough,” Sesshomaru said tightly. He took the proffered scissors and set about to gently cutting away the cloth of Rina’s shirt. After the ruined shreds of her shirt were removed, Rina reached up to gingerly move aside the strap of her bra.

“Sorry, boys, you’re not getting a free peep show from this,” she teased lightly, her voice not sounding quite so far away. But owwww, she was starting to realize how much her shoulder still burned.

“Rina, I have to look at and probe the wound, ok? And this is gonna hurt. A lot. I don’t know if regular anesthetics would work on you, which is why I didn’t want to let the hospital take care of this. So, would you rather I put you into Hypnosleep?”

“I can take it. Just get it over with.”

“Rina, are you sure?” Sesshomaru asked, his expression tight with worry.

Rina took a deep, steadying breath, and nodded.
Ryuu’s eyes took on an odd form, like a mystic mandala of sorts. “With this sight, I can see the bullet without needing extraneous machinery like normal surgeons,” he explained. He lifted up a pair of clamps. “If you’re going to go without any sort of pain management, then I need you to understand that you need to be absolutely still, do you understand?”

Rina’s eyes locked on Sesshomaru’s amber gaze. “I understand,” she replied quietly. Before Ryuu could employ the clamps, she quickly grabbed the tattered pieces of her shirt and clamped the fabric between her teeth just in case. “Go for it.” She focused on Sesshomaru’s eyes, focused on her breathing. She tried not to flinch when she felt the sterile clamps invade the wound. Sesshomaru stayed quiet, but his hand gently reached up to her face to keep her looking at him.

“Fucking bullet nicked your collarbone on its way in. Deep breath, Rina.” Ryu’s voice pierced her thoughts hazily.

A strangled growl dredged past Rina’s clenched teeth as the clamps worked their way past her cracked collarbone and she felt her canines lengthening as she fought to maintain control. *Breathe. Breathe.* She vaguely felt Sesshomaru grasp her hand in his. He still made not a sound, but his voice thrummed in her head.

*Stay with me, Rina.*

“Tell her to try to relax her muscles. I can’t get to the bullet past her mangled muscle tissue when she’s tense like this and it’s only increasing the damage.”

*Breathe in, Firefly, and now breathe out and let your muscles go limp.* His voice in her head worked like a strange magic and she felt the muscles in her shoulder go more pliantly slack. The clamps went a little deeper.

“I’ve got the bullet. Extracting now.”

*Keep relaxed. It’s almost over.* The words had barely processed in her head before she looked up to see Ryuu holding the offending slug in the bloody clamps. After disposing of the slug into an evidence baggie and washing his hands, Ryuu gently probed the wound, his strange Gaze still activated. “With that bullet out of the way, you’re already healing fast. It looks like your collarbone is already healed. Can you move your arm a little bit? Keep it gentle,” he cautioned, “I just want to make sure things are healing the way they should.”
Rina moved her arm as gently and slowly as he decreed. Sure enough, the pain had already dulled considerably.

“Come morning, your arm should be as good as new. Why don’t you two get strapped in and I’ll drop you off at your apartment? Ryuka just texted me the address.”

While Ryuu pulled away from where he’d parked to operate on Rina’s shoulder, she pulled her phone out of her pocket to call Ryuka herself.

“Moshi moshi? Rina?” came Ryuka’s breathless voice. “Are you ok? I just gave Ryuu directions to your house, but gods, I’m so glad to hear from you!”

“Yeah, I’m ok. What about you and Izumi? Everyone else? What about Kazuya and Hiromi?”

“Everyone’s ok. You’re the only one who got shot. The police arrested Mike and, as far as I know, they intend to prosecute him by Japanese law, though I’m sure it’ll end up becoming a pissing contest between our government and his. I don’t know, nor do I care, so long as that sack of shit never makes himself our problem again.”

“Agreed,” Rina sighed with relief. “Hey, will you let Sota know that Sesshomaru is with me? I don’t want him to worry.”

“Already done, little sister. Get some good sleep and don’t you dare come into work tomorrow, you hear?”

“But!” Rina sputtered, “I’m fine, though!”

“Yes,” Ryuka replied with laughing patience, “but you got shot and people will notice if you’re back to work too quickly, ok?”

“Fuck. That’s true.”

“Izumi and I are going to come see you tomorrow. As I’m sure you’ve realized by now, it seems that we need to have a talk.”
Rina hung up with Ryuka and gingerly tested her shoulder again. She peeked under the neckline of the shirt Ryuu had let her borrow. To her surprise, the only visible sign of her wound was a puckered, fading scar. Now that she thought of it, cuts had always healed quickly for her and she couldn’t recall ever having been sick for more than a day with a fever.

When Ryuu parked his ambulance outside of Rina’s building, he came back to look over her wound one more time. Satisfied with its rate of healing, he handed her a card with his number. “If you need help with anything, don’t hesitate to give me a call, ok? You’re one of my little sister’s best friends and, to me, that means you’re as good as family.” He leaned in and gave her a gentle, brotherly hug as well as a firm, friendly handshake to Sesshomaru.

“She should be fine for tonight, but keep an eye on her, ok?”

“Absolutely,” Sessho replied with a faint smile.

“Thanks so much for everything, Ryuu,” Rina smiled gratefully before she and Sesshomaru slipped out the doors.

Once inside her apartment, Rina collapsed exhaustedly on the couch. “Bloody hell, I can’t even believe the day this has been.” Sesshomaru sat beside her and she didn’t think twice about curling against him and laying her head against his shoulder. She thought she heard him say something, but…

The next thing she knew, she was waking up to the sun shining into her window. She was in her bed and nestled under the covers. Something heavy pinned the covers behind her. A muscular arm slung limply across her hip. Slow puffs of breath against the back of her neck. And then his scent registered. Sesshomaru. He was here with her. He’d lain chastely on top of the covers but he’d been by her side all the rest of the night while she slept.

She turned over carefully, hoping to not disturb him. He looked peaceful, like he finally had some momentary respite from the cares that continued to burden him. His face scrunched slightly as the thought crossed her mind, however. He mumbled unintelligibly before his arm tightened about her and pulled her against him, a couple of whimpers dredging from his throat. “No! Please!”

“Shh, Sessho,” she whispered to him. “It’s ok.” She felt him sniff her hair a few times before he finally relaxed, though his arm did not loosen its grip on her. Whatever nightmare had briefly gripped him seemed to be gone now and he curled his body around her. She couldn’t particularly say she objected, so she nuzzled her face against his chest for a moment before dozing back off.
When next she woke, she could feel a warm hand gently stroking her face. Opening her eyes, she found herself staring into Sesshomaru’s amber gaze. She smiled drowsily at him. She hadn’t felt so comfortable in a long time, so unwilling to move. That feeling only increased when Sesshomaru smiled back at her, his expression a mix of relief as well as a shyness that seemed a total anathema of his usual cool, stoic, self-assured demeanor.

“I’m so glad you’re awake,” he admitted aloud, his voice betraying how deeply worried he’d been. “I know you’ve healed just fine, but…” his voice trailed off lamely as he couldn’t find the words to aptly express the fears he’d been struggling to keep at bay since she’d passed out from her exhaustion. Rina placed a hand gently on his face.

“You were having a nightmare earlier,” she said softly.

“Was I?” his eyes softened. “I don’t recall anything specific, but I think I had to fend off several worst-case scenarios that tried to taunt me last night.” He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Rina’s for the span of several heartbeats. His own thundered in his ears at an increased rate and he could hear hers picking up along with his. Unable to refrain any longer, he angled his face to capture her lips with his own.

Rina whimpered in elated surprise at the feel of his lips against hers for those few blessed moments before he pulled back. Her eyes flew open to see his sheepish expression that rather matched the one she’d worn yesterday after kissing him on the cheek. Was that only yesterday? After everything that happened at the club, it felt like that was ages ago.

When he saw that there was no protest in Rina’s eyes, only a matching hunger, he pulled her closer to him. She took that one movement to close the remaining distance and to bring her mouth to his in a fierce, hungry kiss that left both groaning for more. Rina gasped as Sesshomaru’s arms locked around her like steel bands to crush her against him. His tongue traced her lower lip, begging entrance, and the sound of his moan when she acquiesced sent delicious chills down her body.

He tasted of wild, untouched forests, waterfalls, and the freedom she felt every time she went to the sea. Fireworks exploded behind her eyes as his hand skimmed the length of her body to drape her leg around his hip before cupping her buttocks to pull her tighter against the taut ridge of his erection. Rina gasped against his lips at this first exquisite contact and she arched against him with building desperation. Sesshomaru’s eyes glittered as her unabashed response set his own passion aflame and he growled feverishly as he rolled her beneath him and nuzzled his lips against the pulse beating in her throat.
Suddenly, a sound at the front door crashed against Rina’s ears as effectively as getting doused with ice water.

“Was that a knock?” Sesshomaru stiffened above her for a moment before looking at her quizzically. A voice reached her ears that had her thumping her forehead against Sesshomaru’s chest, ready to weep with unsated frustration.

“It’s Izumi and Ryuka,” she groaned, vaguely recalling that Ryuka had mentioned they would be by today to talk about the events of the previous evening.

Sesshomaru uttered some good-natured grumbling before looking her tenderly in the eyes and kissing her one last time. It was a kiss that made Rina want to pretend she hadn’t heard her friends at the door. It was a kiss that gave abundant promise to pick up where they’d left off at the earliest opportunity, whether that opportunity was polite for company or not.

“Hey, Rina! Where are-- Oh, my lesbian eyes!!” Izumi’s voice shrieked from the doorway, effectively breaking through the intimacy they were ensconced in.

Rina couldn’t help but burst out into sputters of laughter at her best friend’s dramatics. “Well, you could have waited at the door, ya gob!”

“Yeah, but then we clearly would have been kept waiting for the rest of the day,” Ryuka chuckled from the living room.

“Fair enough,” Rina laughed, feeling several levels of stupid as she and Sesshomaru joined them. “I’ll just… er… go make us up some tea, ok?”

“Awww, look at that, Yuka!” Izumi chirped, “Her face is as red as her hair again!”

“Ohmigods, I know! So kawaii!!!”

“Oh my gods, Ryuka, could you please never do that again?” Rina’s baleful voice joined their purposefully melodramatic cacophony.

“What? And pass up the opportunity to tease you mercilessly the way, I seem to recall, you teased us when we finally got together?” Izumi leered at her with the cheekiest grin possible.
“Woman, it’s a good thing I adore you the way I do,” Rina shook her head ruefully as she came back into the living room with a tray laden with tea supplies. She dutifully prepared the tea for the four of them while Ryuka and Izumi continued to cackle and Sesshomaru looked like he wasn’t sure if he should give in to the impulse to laugh or to hide in the furniture.

Ryuka and Izumi both hummed their appreciation for Rina’s tea. “Delicious as always,” Ryuka said with the sated relief that only a nice cup of tea could bring. Izumi and Sesshomaru echoed the sentiment.

Rina bowed her thanks, blushing in particular at Sesshomaru’s praise. Naturally, Izumi and Ryuka saw, but for once, Ryuka intervened.

“Mind, I could spend delightful hours teasing you, but I’d be a lot more comfortable doing so once we address last night and place all our cards on the table.”

“In that case, we should have some food to go with it,” Rina said.

Ryuka considered that for a moment before nodding her agreement. “You are the host, after all. If you feel that food would best compliment the conversation as well as more tea, then who am I to argue?”

“Well, I’d say you’re a Dragon and perhaps it’s ballsy of me to argue with you, but yeah. My house!” Rina cheekily grinned at her as she flounced back to the kitchen. There, she set up a pot of water for some ramen and a skillet with some oil for some dumplings. Lastly, she turned on a steamer pot for some sweet buns, one of her biggest weaknesses.

Peeking out through the bar window, she saw Izumi and Ryuka chatting with Sesshomaru. Ever the introvert, she wasn’t expecting him to be receiving them as warmly as the scene that met her eyes. He was relaxed in their company and he was even laughing at something Izumi said. Either he was really good at putting up a show or Sesshomaru genuinely liked her goofy friends. She had the feeling that he didn’t waste much time or energy pretending to be friendly towards anyone.

She went back to finishing the preparations on the dumplings and the ramen while she checked the sweet buns and started some more water for tea. A moment later, the energy changed in the kitchen and her hair raised on her neck with a delicious thrill. Then Sesshomaru’s arms were embracing her from behind as he laid a teasing nip of a kiss on the juncture where her neck met her shoulder. Her eyes closed in contented bliss and she wished she could just stand here savoring is touch.
“I came to see if you’d like some help carrying things out,” he finally said as he put some chaste distance between them to regain his self-control.

“Yes, please.”

Moments later, the four of them were again seated around the coffee table in the living room with their bowls of ramen, plates of dumplings, cups of tea, and a covered dish containing the steamed sweet buns taunting them from the middle.

“So, Izumi, how long have you known about Ryuka?” Rina asked after getting a few mouthfuls of ramen into her ravenously hungry belly. She knew that Izumi and Ryuka had met in college and it was with the help of two others in their LGBT social group that they had started their club. They had started out as very good friends and Rina had watched with squealing delight as their friendship had blossomed into more. It never failed to delight her when they looked at each other the way that Izumi looked at Ryuka right in this moment.

“Well, she kinda clued me in not long after I asked her out,” she said, her face aflame with a hearty blush. “You remember that night I told you about where we ended up getting harassed by some homophobic assholes on, what was it? Our third date?"”

“Yeah, I remember,” Rina affirmed. “You said that you and Ryuka had a blast kicking the crap out of them when they tried to assault you both.”

“Well, I only took out one or two of the fuckers.” Looking over at Sesshomaru, Izumi explained, “There were about six or seven total. Ryuka handled the rest of them.”

“What happened?” Sessho asked.

“Well, I went all One Punch Man on one of them, but one of his buddies managed to clothesline me and he pulled a knife on me. That was about the time Ryuka went absolutely ballistic and the next thing I knew, the pack of us were looking up at this seriously pissed off Dragon! She KOed like four of them in one hit and I ended up junk-punting the guy with the knife and she smashed him into a tree with her tail.”

“Ku-dos!” Rina whistled. “So were you scared of her or anything?”
“Weirdly enough? No,” Izumi admitted with a shrug. “I mean, come on, maybe it’s because we grew up watching too much anime or something. Plus, she only went monkeyshit on the fuckers who tried to hurt us. She didn’t do a damn thing to me. I think I was too jazzed to meet a real-life Dragon to be as freaked out as I probably reasonably should have been.

“As it was, once everything had calmed down, the first thing she said to me, while looking completely disheartened, was to tell me she understood if I was too freaked out to continue seeing her but also to ask that I at least not let anyone know what she was.”

“What’d you do then?” Rina asked breathlessly, completely unashamed of the heart-eyed sap she was outing herself to be.

“I kissed her, of course! I’d have to be a complete moron to run away from this kick-ass treasure of a woman!”

Rina squealed in unrepentant delight to hear the rest of the details of how her two best friends’ romance had begun.

“So, how long have you known about me, Ryuka?”

Ryuka, who’d been quietly content with letting Izumi tell her tale, smiled at her. “I knew you were some sort of demon when first I met you, Rina, but I never said a word to Izumi, especially since it didn’t seem that you even knew.”

“I really didn’t,” Rina affirmed. “All I’ve known is that I have sharper senses than most people seem to, although it never occurred to me that your nose has always been as sharp as mine, come to think of it. But I didn’t really start cluing into the rest of it until the other day when Sesshomaru saw me beat the hell out of those twerps at the beach.”

“Awww,” Izumi teased. “He saw you go slightly demon and been twitterpated ever since.”

“Something like that,” Sesshomaru said shyly.

“And you, Master Daiyokai? What is your tale?” Ryuka prompted gently. “I can tell by your scent that you are not from this particular time period, are you?”
“No, my lady Dragon,” Sesshomaru confirmed. “I am from the Warring States era.”

“Holy crow!” Izumi gaped.

“And before you ask, no, I cannot tell you the means by which I came to this time.”

“How come?” Izumi questioned.

Rina shook her head. “I already asked him. It’s a secret to protect the people who… ah… made it possible, I guess you could say.”

“Oh! Fair enough,” Ryuka conceded.

“Hey, I forgot to ask,” Rina interjected, “but are Kazuya and Hiromi ok?”

“Oh, yeah, they’re fine,” Izumi assured her. “That officer that talked to you and Sesshomaru in the kitchen last night was Aimi’s brother that she had mentioned to you earlier. She was on the phone with him when that asshole came in and tried pulling his shit and, thankfully, he was only a couple blocks away from the club. So, he was the first on scene and the first to radio for backup.

“After Ryuu took you guys to his ambulance, Aimi’s brother personally took Kazuya and Hiromi to that shelter house and told them they can stay for as long as it takes for them to feel safe enough to go home. But, considering that Mike’s buddies from the American military have gotten involved, it could be a while.”

“What about the letter that Kazuya had where Mike threatened to kill her when he got back? She said that his superiors kept blowing her off about it.”

“It was collected as evidence and Aimi called me to let me know that it had been processed and seen, so they will not be able to deny its existence or the fact that it’s indeed Mike’s handwriting. Charges have already been filed against Mike for his attempted murder as well as for his so flagrantly disobeying the gun ban here. And there is an investigation in progress against his superiors for their negligence.” Izumi paused long enough to wolf down a dumpling and to take a drink of her tea, which Rina refilled for her.

“Naturally, there’s the expectation that the US government will raise a stink, but there’s not much they’ll likely be able to do about it much less willing to do once they see just how staunchly we’ve got them by the short ‘n curls with this shit.”
Rina’s grin was one of evil delight. “Good.” She still itched to sink her fangs into Mike’s carotid for the shit he pulled last night. Instead, she contented herself with sinking her teeth into one of the steamed custard buns.

“So, Sesshomaru,” Ryuka popped in to change the tide of the conversation again. “I imagine as a full-blooded inu daiyokai, your full demon form must be immense!”

The four of them bantered about like this for the next few hours as well as filled Sesshomaru in on his questions about the LGBTQIA+ community and their cause.

As Ryuka and Izumi prepared to leave, Ryuka mentioned that she and Izumi had decided to let the club stay closed for a few days.

“Even though gun violence isn’t really a thing here, I guarantee you that not a soul in that place last night wasn’t heavily thinking of the Pulse shooting in the States a few years back,” Ryuka said soberly. “We’ll give people a few days to recover and then open back up next Friday with a big bash. We’ll text you guys the details, ok?”

“You got it, boss,” Rina said affectionately as she gave both Ryuka and Izumi hugs and bid them a good evening. She then set about picking up the dishes. She smiled when Sesshomaru set about to help her. And he did so without thought or complaint, something she hadn’t really thought to expect of someone who was a prominent yokai lord in his own time.

His own time.

The words resounded hollowly in her ears and her heart ached with a sudden intensity that shortened her breath. *Why am I being so dumb? I mean, I have no business getting attached to this guy, first of all. Whatever it was that brought him here, he’ll have to go back eventually. I’d be so fucking stupid to let myself fall for him, especially since I’ve only known him for, like, two frikkin’ days."

And yet, she couldn’t help the pang of loneliness she felt at the thought of him not being in her life. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Stop it, she thought fiercely at herself, just stop it.*

“Firefly? Are you alright?”
Her eyes opened to his concerned expression. She tried to smile. “Yeah, sorry, I’m fine.” His eyebrow arched as he silently called bullshit. “I’m just… I dunno… I’m just thinking stuff that’s stupid. Fretting about things I don’t really have any right to fret about.” She shrugged and avoided his gaze, feeling at least 10 levels of stupid.

He touched her face to make her look up at him and he studied her eyes quietly for a few moments before sadness glinted in his golden eyes and he leaned down to kiss her deeply. He crushed her to him, drawing a gasp from her. When he drew back, the sadness remained. “You are Wolf. I am Dog. Our love and loyalty is not always freely given, but once someone earns even a crumb of that from us, it’s wholly given, whether we wish it to be or not.”

Her heart ached as his words spilled forth. In the few moments he’d looked into her eyes, he’d sussed out what was troubling her and now it troubled him too.

“I can’t explain why I feel this way about you already, Firefly,” he continued. “I don’t think the normal human rules really apply to us, do you?”

Rina smiled a little and shook her head. “No, I don’t suppose they do.”

“All I really know is that you, in the brief, mere two days I’ve known you, have brought life to me that I’ve never really known, not in all my 900 years of life. And, for me, that’s all I really need to know. We’ll figure the rest out as we go along, ok?”

“Ok,” she whispered, feeling much more soothed as he drew her back into his arms. He leaned in to kiss her again when she gasped in horror. The malevolent energy she’d felt a couple of days ago, the same energy that had her wolves in such distress, washed over her.

“What the fuck is that?!” she hissed.

“I don’t know,” Sessho growled, his eyes starting to turn red as he looked at her. “This is the energy that had you so agitated the other day, isn’t it?”

Footsteps hurriedly thundering up the stairs had them rounding on her front door with their fangs bared. Ryuka and Izumi rushed back in.

“Something’s wrong!”
A sudden pain split Rina’s skull and she fell to her knees, howling, as the other three looked on in horror. “My wolves!” she screamed. “Something’s wrong with my wolves!”
Back Through the Well and Met with Despair

Chapter Summary

Those slimy, rancid bastards hurt Rina and took her through the Well! But first I must check on my family, just in case... Oh, gods, no!!! Please, not her!!! InuYasha, little brother, it's time to rage and to hunt, because I made a promise and I'll be DAMNED if these vile Reptile fucks take ANYONE ELSE from us!!

Sesshomaru couldn’t shake the look on Rina’s face nor the sound of her voice as she’d screamed in pain for whatever was happening to her wolves. He clung tightly to Ryuka’s back as she flew across the city and he tried to bring himself back to the present moment, but the scene that had unfolded kept playing on a horrid loop in his mind.

“Something’s wrong with my wolves!” Rina had screamed, holding her head in agony as though her skull were being crushed by invisible hands.

“Sesshomaru, with me!” Ryuka had immediately barked. “Izumi, stay here with Rina!”

“No! I need to come with you!” Rina had keened. “I need to see that they’re ok and if they’re not, then I need to rip apart whatever has hurt them!” She’d tried to stand, but had been driven to her knees by another wave of pain.

“Rina, you can barely stand,” Sesshomaru had tried to reason with her. “Let me go with Ryuka and I swear to you, I will make sure they’re safe and exact vengeance if they’re not.” She’d tried to interrupt him to argue, but he shook her slightly. “Besides, if they’re not ok, then trust me, you don’t want to see them like that. Please believe me.” He’d been unable to mask the pain that permeated his gaze as he tried to make her understand.

Tears flowed from her darkened eyes as the weight of his words and the pain behind them crashed through to her comprehension. “Alright,” her voice had finally grated with her compliance.

He had followed Ryuka as she’d raced up the multitude of stairs and shoved her way through the door that led to the rooftop of Rina’s apartment building. She’d looked around for a moment, though Sesshomaru was not sure for what. She seemed to spot what she was looking for and had reached her hand toward it. The contraption she reached for sparked and turned sideways.
“Security cameras,” she had explained, though he didn’t really understand, but he hadn’t been about to question her further. Once she was satisfied that they were otherwise unobserved, she began to transform into her full Dragon form. She was an absolutely beautiful, enormous, lithe serpent with scales the color of cut sapphires interspersed with jewel-toned spots that reminded Sesshomaru of peacock feathers. She had four thin legs that ended in talons not dissimilar to large birds of prey. Get on, she ordered him.

He didn’t hesitate. Steadying himself with a grasp of her mane, he leaped lightly onto her back. As soon as his seat was sure, she warned him to hold on and took off at a blazing run to the edge of the rooftop. Though she did not have wings like the Dragons of European lore, she glided effortlessly into the air and lost not an inch of altitude.

“Won’t we be possibly spotted by the humans below?” he’d asked her.

Don’t worry. I can camouflage myself from their sight. All they’d see if they looked up and looked hard enough would perhaps be a little wavering of the stars at most. And yes, I have had that confirmed through Izumi’s observations.

So Sesshomaru had stayed quietly in his thoughts, the vision of Rina playing horribly through his mind over and over again. He hadn’t felt this much fear since the night Rin had died. He felt absolutely sick to his stomach. There was nothing but this sickly energy permeating the air all over the city.

At last, a thought managed to drag him fully to the present where he needed to be. “How is it that we’re sensing this malevolent energy but we’ve yet to detect a scent?” he murmured quietly to himself.

I don’t know, but I’ve found that rather troubling myself, Ryuka responded, letting him know that she had, indeed, heard his question. I’ve lived for two centuries thus far and my family taught me how to camouflage my scent as well as my body. I’m not familiar with any other species capable of such aside from higher-level reptilians as well as Dragons.

“That’s how neither Rina nor I detected what you are until you revealed yourself,” Sesshomaru mused. “I’d never, to my knowledge, encountered reptile Demons or Dragons back in my time who could completely hide their scent.”

That’s the trick, though, Lord Sesshomaru; you’ve only knowledge of the ones whose scent you could detect. You might be surprised at the number that existed even back in your time.
that you undoubtedly encountered and never realized it.

“Reptilian demons are what murdered my daughter,” Sesshomaru whispered. A cold lick of dread raced up his spine. This couldn’t somehow be related, could it? Surely those Demons would not have been able to follow him to this time, could they? He wasn’t even aware that he’d whispered his thoughts audibly.

Stay with me, Sesshomaru, Ryuka said urgently. We’re almost there. If this incident is in any way related to what happened to your daughter, we need to deal with that as it comes. For now, just stay with me. I masked our scent and energies so that hopefully whomever we encounter will not be fully aware of our arrival.

They were on the outskirts of the city and coming upon a mountain. Ryuka gracefully threaded herself amongst the thick copse of trees to touch down to the ground without having broken or bent a single bough on the way. She quickly transformed back to her human form.

We must be absolutely silent. Speak only with your mind, do you understand?

Yes.

We’re up the mountain from the wildlife sanctuary Rina works at, where her wolves are. I will mask the sound of our movements as best I can, but take care with your steps. I’m having to expend a lot of energy to keep your scent masked along with mine.

Sesshomaru nodded. Don’t worry. I can move quickly while maintaining myself as light as a feather. It’s how I am also able to fly. Let’s get going.

They serpentined their way down the mountain as silently as ghosts and Sesshomaru gave himself over to the thoughtless silence of his instincts. Before long, however, the sounds of snarls reached his ears. Then the smell of blood. He froze for a moment as the night of Rin’s death crashed back onto him. No! He shook himself fiercely. No, he could not go back to that night. Rina needed him to be here now and he’d be damned if he let her down the way that he’d…

Stop it! Rin manifested beside him, a fierce glare spearing into his eyes. He nodded at her and kept going.
Rina had described her wolves to him earlier that day while they’d been visiting with Izumi and Ryuka. There were twelve of them, total. His heart clenched as he now counted only eight to still be alive. He couldn’t see the creatures that continued to stress and harass the wolves remaining, but he knew they were there.

_Fuck!_ Ryuka swore silently as she took in the scene. _There’s five of them. Do you see them?_

_No. I can’t see them. The wolves’ behavior tells me they’re still there._

Thankfully, the wolves seemed able to see or sense their assailants. They banded together in a circle around one of their wounded and their snarls filled the air. Ryuka put her hand on his shoulder and all of a sudden, Sesshomaru’s already-sharp vision was heightened. He reeled for a moment from disorientation.

_I’ve given you my ability to see with thermal vision_, she explained quickly. _You can now see the heat signatures of anything living._

Sesshomaru quickly identified the wolves by their bright orange outlines. And in the direction where they faced their approaching attackers, he spotted reptilian shapes outlined in cold blues. They were approaching slowly, taking a sick delight in the mounting anger of the remaining wolves. He quickly looked about for the best approach for attack. _There! A lower spot in the fence directly behind the reptilians!_

He silently raced around to his chosen entry point and he felt a mounting satisfaction that his prey did not sense him coming. He leaped over the top of the fence and descended on them, a specter of Death. The Demon nearest the pack leaped toward the nearest wolf and Sesshomaru plowed into him in mid-air, snarling in satisfaction as the creature’s spine snapped under the impact of his feet. He whipped around to face the other four oncoming, the wolves whimpering in confusion behind him.

_I’m a friend!_ he thought to the Alpha female, projecting Rina’s scent and visions of himself with her. He felt their relief increase with Ryuka’s arrival. She’d clearly been here many times with Rina and they knew her as a friend already. She moved to stand by the wolves and to examine them for injuries.

The reptilians were so shocked by his and Ryuka’s appearance that their hold on their scent-masking gave way and Sesshomaru bellowed with rage. These were the same pack of demons that
had murdered Rin! His eyes locked onto the one at the rear. “You!” he howled, recognizing the particular stench he’d never been able to forget. He advanced as the vile creature uttered a sickening, hissing laugh. The two at the forefront lunged at him, trying to engage him in a pincer move. They were fast, but not fast enough. Sesshomaru snarled out a laugh dripping with evil delight as he lashed his claws out at them. Not a reptile had yet been born whose venom could match his in potency or lethality and not a reptile had yet been spawned who could withstand his poison.

He grabbed the first one to reach him by the throat and dug his claws in, unleashing every ounce of venom he possessed, and the other was treated to finding itself gutted in mid-air. It screamed as it fell into the pile of its own entrails that hit the ground before it did. A flash of movement on his left caught his eye as one of the others tried to streak past him to Ryuka. Sesshomaru tried to bellow out a warning, but it was unnecessary.

Ryuka rounded on the vermin and roared as she began to change. It screamed and tried to stop its forward momentum.

“You’re one of the Royals!” it screeched as it plowed itself into the ground to bow before her. Sesshomaru’s gaze shot back to the one waiting at the back, the one who’d killed Rin. Its eyes were wide open in true terror now as it beheld Ryuka’s massive Dragon form.

“Forgive us, Majesty! We did not know!” it bawled, also prostrate.

Ryuka, however, would not be pacified. She snatched up the nearest one into her dagger-like talons and ripped him in half before she consumed him. She advanced on the other, her fangs bloody and bared, letting it get a good look at the tattered viscera of its comrade that still clung to her jaws. She desperately wanted to end him but she restrained herself and changed back to her human form.

“Please, have mercy on me, Majesty!” it bawled at her feet in utter terror. It tried to grab onto her feet in a desperate show of reverential fear. The fear-scent that billowed off of it was absolutely putrid. Her lip curled in disgust and she kicked the creature away from her, sending it flying a good 15 feet before its body collided with the earth with a sickening, bone-crunching impact. It screamed as some of its bones shattered and it cried more pitifully than Sesshomaru had ever heard from any Demon, including Jaken.

“Lord Sesshomaru!” she called, her voice cracking with rage and authority. He advanced to her side in a lethal lumbering stride that promised absolute agony to Rin’s murderer if given the chance and the creature’s pitiful wails increased in intensity.
She motioned for him to walk beside her to where it lay. “Your name!” she demanded in an enraged hiss.

“Hiroki!” he shuddered.

“What are you doing in this era, Hiroki?” He looked up at her momentarily in surprise at the question. “Answer me!” she roared and the creature flinched but still did not answer. Ryuka uttered a chilling growl as she grabbed him up by the back of his reptilian neck and lifted him effortlessly, her claws digging into his scaled hide.

“It is my understanding that you are responsible for the murder of Lord Sesshomaru’s human adopted daughter. Is that so?” She shook him menacingly.

“It’s true, Majesty,” he grudgingly answered through gritted teeth.

“Why?”

“We bear a grudge against any and all related to the Inu Daiyokai scum, Toga, who sealed our lord, Ryukotsusei, and his half-demon bastard son, InuYasha, who ultimately slew him! We demand their suffering and, ultimately, their demise! Without Ryukotsusei’s guidance and protection, we have suffered abundantly and have been driven near to extinction!”

Ryuka’s eyes flashed a blaze of red at Hiroki’s words. “Ryukotsusei was long before my time, but my parents and grandparents well remember the abundant suffering and terror that he wrought! He more than deserved his fate as do your kind for seeking to perpetuate his terror and tyranny!” She threw him to the ground and put her hands on his head.

It took Sesshomaru only a moment to realize that she was invading Hiroki’s memories and seeing his crimes and the crimes of his brethren for herself. Tears began to stream out of her sapphire eyes and she at last released the creature’s head from her touch with a strangled cry of horror and disgust. She locked her stricken gaze with Sesshomaru’s for a moment before she turned away to retch.

She at last regained her control and approached the cringing reptile, her face pale with fury. “You—you killed that innocent human girl! Sesshomaru’s daughter! You cut her throat, spread her blood through the village, you tore her to pieces, and you predated upon her! And all for your sick sense of revenge?!”
Sesshomaru wanted to clap his hands over his ears to drown out Ryuka’s words, and yet he did not dare to move. Instead, he focused on the face of his daughter’s murderer. “You sacrificed your own to lure them away so you could attack the vulnerable and you sought to also do the same to the mate of Sesshomaru’s half brother. And you watched when Sesshomaru found Rin’s body! You watched as he and the girl’s beloved went insane from grief! And you LAUGHED!” Hiroki shuddered uncontrollably in the face of Ryuka’s mounting fury as she pronounced every cruelty he’d committed. But she wasn’t finished.

“And then you managed to follow him to this time and wreak your bullshit vengeance onto my best friend’s wolves?! Why?!”

Hiroki was shaking violently now and his voice echoed the tremors. “Because he’d fallen for the Wolf woman and we sought to make her and those she holds dear to suffer as well. We had no idea that the Wolf woman was in any way tied to you, Majesty.”

Sesshomaru’s rage spiked at the Demon’s words and he shook from the effort to refrain from bursting into his full Inu Daiyokai form. “Rina and her wolves sensed your malice before she and I even met!” he roared. “Why is that?!” Hiroki spared him a venomous glare and snarled at him.

Ryuka backhanded him. “Answer him!” she snarled in a voice that was lethally quiet.

“The threads of her fate intertwining with yours led us to her!” he finally answered, but his eyes were locked onto Sesshomaru. “We are capable of seeing auras with more skill than any Miko, you insolent mongrel!” Hiroki spat at him. “So long the Bone Eater’s Well called to you, yet you, in your prideful stupidity, were too dense to put it together! So, we waited! For all those months we waited and we began to think you were too far gone to ever think of the Well’s call, but at last, you went through! And we were able to follow! Your ties to the human family at the shrine were too thin for us to bother with, but her! Ah, the Wolf woman! She was why the Well let you through! The aura of her was tied so strongly to you and you didn’t have a clue! But we who could See?” Hiroki sneered a malevolent smile, having seemingly forgotten Ryuka’s presence. “We found her and her wolves with little effort. The Wolf woman and her wolves sensed us near and were practically driven to madness! The only reason we did not yet do anything was because you had not yet met her and thereby her suffering would have meant absolutely nothing to you!” He cackled then, his fear having disappeared into his madness.

“And still you don’t learn from the past, do you, you imbecile of a mutt!” With one final cackle of malicious glee, Hiroki bared his throat and fell upon his own claws.

Sesshomaru shook in rage and desolation that he’d been denied giving Rin’s killer the deathly blow. He fell upon Hiroki’s dying form, intent upon ripping him to indiscernible shreds. He was only vaguely aware of someone grabbing at him and calling his name as he ripped Hiroki’s head free from his body.
“Sesshomaru! Stop!” It was the panic in Ryuka’s voice that broke through the haze of his rage. She grabbed him by the face and made him look at her. “We have to go! Now!”

The full horror of Hiroki’s final words finally slammed into him at last. **Oh gods, no. Please, no.** “Rina!” he gasped hoarsely.

Ryuka exploded into her Dragon form and leaped in the air, giving Sesshomaru only a fraction of a second to jump onto her back and hang on for dear life. **Ryuu! Ryuu, where are you!** Ryuka called to her brother in desperation.

**Yuka?! What’s wrong?** Sesshomaru was slightly startled to be able to hear Ryuu’s alarmed reply.

**How far are you from Rina’s apartment?!!**

**Like, maybe five blocks, why?**

**I need you to get over there immediately! She and Izumi are there! I don’t have time to explain--** her voice cut off as Ryuu pulled her memories in a matter of microseconds.

**Oh my gods,** his mental voice sounded breathless with horror. **I’m almost there!** There was an odd, disembodied wailing sound in Sesshomaru’s ears. It took him a moment to realize he was hearing the screaming siren of Ryuu’s ambulance through the older Dragon’s ears.

Ryuka tore through the night, flying as desperately fast as she could toward Rina’s apartment building. As soon as they were close enough, Sesshomaru leaped from her back to plunge toward the rooftop. As he fell, he spotted Ryuu’s ambulance below. He realized that Ryuka must have cut off his ability to hear their speaking and even though he understood why, he wanted to rage at the Dragon for it.

The instant his boots made contact with the roof, he blazed through the door and raced down the flights of stairs. He vaguely felt the energy of Ryuka changing to her human form and racing in behind him. He reached Rina’s floor and tore around the corner to her door. The first sight that greeted him was that her door had been ripped off its hinges. Then the scent of blood.

**No!! Oh gods, no!!**
Ryuu caught him in his arms with unbelievable strength. **Sesshomaru, I need you to keep it together. There are already cops here. Apparently there was such a ruckus that several people in the building called the police.** Ryu’s mental voice barely pierced through the fog of panic. Cops?! Why the fuck should he care about these puny human lawmen?! Where’s Rina?! Suddenly a blow to the back of his head rendered him falling bonelessly to his knees and into the arms of oblivion.

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He could hear sounds of weeping amidst the throbbing roar in his head. Ryuu was holding Ryuka as she wept helplessly against him. He blearily looked around and saw blood slashed all over the walls. A cop leaned over him and shone a bright light into his eyes. It was Aimi’s brother from last night.

“Sesshomaru, do you remember me?” His voice was still kind. Sympathetic, even. How strange.

“Detective Kanagawa,” he finally whispered.

“Yes, that’s right. Good. Can you sit up?”

Sesshomaru’s eyes went back to Ryuka and her brother. His heart clenched in cold dread. “Izumi?” he asked hoarsely.

“Izumi was gravely injured. She’s in critical condition and is already in hospital being operated on. But she may not make it,” Kanagawa answered, his voice grave and sad.

“Rina? Where’s Rina?”

“Miss Miyazaki has not yet been found, I’m afraid.” Sesshomaru looked up at the detective’s tired and worn face and back up to the blood on the walls. Kanagawa followed his gaze. “Forensics have already collected samples from all the blood patterns, but we’re still waiting on the results to see if any of them are from Rina.” He looked behind him for a moment. The other officers were stoically going about their business and nobody seemed to be paying attention to them over the ongoing clamor.
“Sesshomaru,” he said quietly, “I work rather closely with Ryu and have been acquainted with his and Ryuka’s family a long time. Ryuka was one of my sister, Aimi’s first friends in college before she ever came out as a lesbian, long before she and Izumi established their club.” He paused so Sesshomaru could try to let his unspoken meaning sink in.

“You mean, you know?” he finally asked cautiously.

“That they are, in fact, Dragons?” he said even more quietly. “Yes. I’m one of the only police officers who know, actually. As far as I know, anyway.” He paused for a moment as a couple more officers re-entered the apartment. “Listen,” he whispered, angling his head slightly in their direction.

“So far, all I’ve got are witnesses who insist that the suspects were some kind of mutant reptile,” said the first of them as she approached her comrades to compare notes. “Not ‘humans dressed in some sort of fucked up lizard costume’, mind you. They all insist these were actual humanoid reptiles.” She flipped her notebook closed and put her head in her hands. “I don’t know what to make of this.”

“I don’t either,” said her partner, who seemed equally baffled. “Nor do I know what to make of all the claw marks around the building. It looks like, whoever these perps were, they tried to get in at some of the residents who spotted them. Maybe they used knives?”

“Yeah, but how could so many people swear they saw these mutant lizards if that’s not what they saw?” asked one of the officers who’d already been in the apartment when Sesshomaru had come to. “I mean, however much we’d like to pass shit like this off as being some sort of mass hallucination, how often does that actually check out?”

Kanagawa drew Sesshomaru’s attention back to him. “See what I mean?” he asked quietly.

Sesshomaru nodded, still stunned and disoriented.

“You know what creatures these were, don’t you?”

He looked up at Kanagawa’s face again. “I do,” he grated hoarsely.

“This will be completely off the record, ok? But I need to know everything that happened. First,
though, let’s go get some air. Can you stand?”

Sesshomaru’s legs shook and his head pounded, but he rose off the couch with angry determination.

“Woah, boss, are you sure he’s kosher?”

“He’s fine,” Kanagawa answered tightly. “He needs some air, so we’re going to go talk on the roof. Please do not disturb us until we come back.”

“You got it, boss.”

Ryu and Ryuka looked up from where they’d huddled. Ryuka’s eyes were bright with grief. “Izumi--” she choked out. Sesshomaru couldn’t stop himself from kneeling by the distraught Dragon to gather her in his arms.

“She will be alright,” he whispered fiercely. “I swear to you, she will be alright.” He looked over to Ryuu. I know that some of your kind have healing abilities. Given your vocation, do I assume correctly that you possess some of those abilities?

Ryu acknowledged his question with a slight nod. Way ahead of you, brother. We’re waiting for the call that she’s out of surgery. I haven’t told Yuka this, but my essence has been in the surgery room with her. Izumi has flatlined a couple of times, but I’ve managed to get her heart restarted from here and keep it going until they finish repairing the damage. Once we get the call, I’m going to go see her and finish stabilizing her. Not even Ryuka knows that I have this ability, so keep it quiet, ok?

Sesshomaru answered with a small nod of his own. “I’ll be right back. The detective has some questions for me and, as he said, I need some air.” He saw that Ryu and Ryuka caught the weight of what he hadn’t spoken and they nodded. Sesshomaru gave Ryuka one more embrace before he stood and nodded to Kanagawa that he was ready.

Kanagawa led him to a set of metallic doors and pushed a button. “Sorry, but I’m way too wiped to take the stairs,” was all he said. Sesshomaru’s expression was confused for only a moment before he forced his expression back to his usual stoicism. He heard some sort of machinery behind the doors and moments after it stopped, the doors opened. Inside was a very small room. Kanagawa stepped inside and motioned for Sesshomaru to join him. Then he reached out and pushed a button
on the wall as the doors closed.

“Don’t speak yet,” he murmured. “Security cameras in here. Don’t need security officers overhearing. Also,” he added as the room lurched, “you might want to hold on to something if you’ve never ridden in an elevator before.”

Sesshomaru tried to make his reach for the surrounding railing as casual as possible, but that belied the moment of inward panic. This room was so tiny! And it was moving! What the fuck?! Finally, the movement stopped, but it felt like it took forever for the doors to open again. Once they did, Kanagawa led him around a corner to the last flight of stairs that led to the roof access door that still swung listlessly the way that he and Ryuka had left it.

“Did Ryuka disable the security camera up here?”

“That thing?” he nodded slightly at the contraption he’d seen Ryuka reach her hand toward earlier.

Kanagawa nodded in satisfaction as he closed the roof door behind them. “Alright,” he breathed at a more normal volume.

“I know what you are, Sesshomaru, because Ryuka clued me in last night. Don’t worry,” he hastily added, “she would not have told me if I could not be trusted, I swear to you. And while you were unconscious, I was able to speak with her and Ryuu in private and she filled me in on how you’re not even from this era.”

“Do you have any questions, then?” Sesshomaru asked tiredly, his head aching. “I need to be done with this so I can track down the creatures who did this and find Rina.”

“Just tell me what happened. Like I said, I’m not writing any of this down and none of this is going on the record. We already have at least a dozen witnesses on Rina’s floor alone who attest that these creatures were of the non-human variety. It would look even odder if I came back with an official statement from someone who can identify those creatures more thoroughly when it was already established that you weren’t here at the time the attacks took place. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Sesshomaru affirmed. “They are creatures from my time. Demon reptiles. They managed to follow me here to this time.”

“Why did you and Ryuka leave Izumi and Rina here alone?”
“Tomorrow morning, detective, you are probably going to hear about a call coming in from the wildlife center where Rina works with her wolves. We were here visiting with Ryuka and Izumi when Ryuka, Rina, and myself sensed a malevolent energy. Right after we sensed it, Rina started screaming like she was in pain and she said something was wrong with her wolves. Ryuka and I told Rina and Izumi to stay here while we went to go check. Ryuka brought me up here to become Dragon and she flew me to them.

“When we got there, four of Rina’s wolves had already been slaughtered by these creatures. They were terrorizing the remaining eight. There were five of the despicable vermin there.”

Kanagawa listened intently as Sesshomaru explained how he and Ryuka had dispatched them all and how the last one had been the one to murder his daughter back in his era.

“Jesus,” he whispered, his eyes blazing with sorrow and compassion. “I’m so sorry, Sesshomaru.”

“Before he killed himself, he said that I didn’t learn very well from the past. Ryuka was the one to figure out his meaning first and she flew us back here as fast as she possibly could and she called upon Ryuu to come and check on Rina and Izumi because he was closer in his ambulance. We got here, Ryuu grabbed me, and that’s the last thing I remember.”

Kanagawa nodded. “Ryuu was the one to render you unconscious. I was there as he did so and I’m glad he did because you were starting to change. Luckily, none of the officers nearby noticed aside from me.” He raked his hand through his hair. “I’ll listen for the call from the wildlife center. I’ve got some friends who keep me informed whenever anything unusual occurs as well as when there’s women who need help escaping a domestic violence situation like the ladies last night at the club.

“Meanwhile, you and I need to head back down so that the others can see me dismissing you and then you’re free to go do what you need to do to catch these malignant bastards. Are we clear?”

Sesshomaru nodded. “Let’s get going. I’ve wasted far too much time as it is.”

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After enduring the elevator ride, the rigmarole of Detective Kanagawa’s dismissal, and hugging Ryuka one more time while telepathically assuring her again that he would find the rancid bastards responsible, Sesshomaru followed the scent trail that the reptilians hadn’t even bothered to hide. Thanks to what he’d learned from Ryuka, he now knew that this was purposeful. It was monumentally difficult to keep his panic in check as he noted that spatters of Rina’s blood dotted the trail, which led directly back to the Higurashi Shrine.
He looked in the house without gaining anyone’s attention. They were going about their night completely unaware that anything was amiss. That was a relief anyway, knowing that the reptilians hadn’t decided to attack the Higurashis after all.

He followed the scent trail to the Well, a feeling of dread stealing over his heart. Why the fuck would they take Rina back to the Feudal era?! He raced down the steps and leaped over the Well’s walls and gave himself to the strange energies that delivered him back to his time.

His feet had no sooner touched the soil at the bottom before he launched himself back out to the natural silence of his world that now felt ridiculously foreign to him after being in the modern era for the past two weeks. The scents led away from the village, but Sesshomaru wasn’t about to continue without making sure that everyone remained unscathed. He wouldn’t put it past these bastards to distract him with one scent while disguising the rest in order to kill InuYasha, Kagome, and everyone else that had come to mean anything to him.

As he neared the village, his heart gave a sick flop. The sounds and stench of battle reached his senses. His eyes began to turn red and his fangs began to grow and a moment later, he exploded into his full Inu Daiyokai form.

InuYasha was in a rage. There were about 30 of the reptilian demons terrorizing the village and InuYasha battled them alone. His scent was pungent with rage intermingled with grief and fear. So much blood. There was so much blood and Sesshomaru couldn’t separate any singular scents.

Sesshomaru’s roar shook the landscape as he landed in the middle of the village. He saw InuYasha’s Tetsusaiga several yards away from where his half-brother fought to keep from being overwhelmed by a pile of the lizards who sank their fangs into his body and unleashed their venom. Those lizards now looked at him with the same fear that Hiroki had bestowed to Ryuka a mere two hours and a lifetime prior.

“Get off my brother, you rancid swine!” he boomed at them, the words sounding strange coming from his elongated canine muzzle. InuYasha took advantage of their hesitation to explode out from the pile with snarls of rage, seemingly uninhibited by the venom that had been pumped into his body. Sesshomaru caught at least five of the reptiles in mid-air that had been put to flight by InuYasha’s explosion and he chewed them to literal pieces and flung their putrid, quartered corpses to the winds.

Some were trying to clamber their way up Sesshomaru’s enormous legs. Some had been smart enough to climb up in places that were out of his easy reach. He felt tiny stings as they sought to inject him with their venom through the thick barrier of his fur and he laughed at their paltry efforts with a malevolent bark. He reached the ones he could and dispatched them with his monstrous fangs and, sure enough, InuYasha leaped to take out the ones he couldn’t reach, ripping
them to pieces with lightning speed. Then they looked around for the rest. There were about 10 remaining and they had scattered to try to flee.

“Sesshomaru!” InuYasha snarled in his rough, gutteral, and wholly demonic voice.

Sesshomaru inclined his enormous canid head in acknowledgement. Let us hunt, brother. He punctuated the projected thought with a leering, evil grin that screamed with unspent bloodlust.

He raced off in one direction and InuYasha the opposite, herding the scattered demons together in the middle until the remaining 10 found themselves caught between the two enraged dog demons. Sesshomaru changed back to his normal form for this. At an unspoken signal between him and his brother, they lunged forward for the final attack and effectively decimated those that remained. None were left alive and all were completely dismembered by the time the brothers finished dispatching their foes.

As InuYasha’s demonic rage subsided, he took a couple of steps and collapsed. “Sesshomaru,” he moaned before he lost consciousness.

“InuYasha!” Sesshomaru gasped in alarm. His brother’s rage had held the venom at bay for as long as it could, but now it began to ravage his body unhindered by InuYasha’s inner demon. Sesshomaru snatched up his brother’s unconscious body and ran full-tilt back to the village. He found the Tetsusaiga where he’d last seen it and grabbed for the sword without thinking. He snarled from the pain of Tetsusaiga’s rejection as it pierced his body.

“Tetsusaiga, please!” he pleaded with the sword in desperation. “I only seek to reunite you with my brother, I swear! Please! He needs you! I swear that never again will I ever raise a hand to you to seek your possession! You belong to my brother and I accepted that years ago! I’m sorry! But I can’t lose InuYasha now!” He waited for the span of two heartbeats before he tried again. Still, Tetsusaiga reamed him with punishing force. He gritted his teeth and held on, wrenching the blade from where it had become stuck in the wall of one of the huts and placing it in the cradle of its scabbard that was still firmly attached to InuYasha’s belt.

He tried not to wince from the severe burns Tetsusaiga had left blistering his hand and halfway up his arm as he gathered his brother to him once more. He looked about the village again. No one was here. He whipped his head to ascertain the scents. Sure enough, they’d gathered at the cave haven again. He raced off toward the cave’s entrance and didn’t stop until he ran smack-dab into the sacred barrier that concealed it. He screamed as the barrier punished his battered body and hurled him and InuYasha away.
Sesshomaru’s ears rang deafeningly as he struggled to recover. He didn’t remember the last time the barrier had felt so viciously strong. Then a voice pierced the haze.

“Sesshomaru! Oh my gods! Sesshomaru, are you ok?” It was Kagome’s voice. And then she was beside him, tears streaming down her face as she saw the extent of her mate’s injuries. Then she started to look him over, but Sesshomaru dazedly refused.

“I’ll be alright. See to him. Their venom-- they bit him many times.”

“Help me get him into the cave!”

Sesshomaru gathered his brother to his chest again and followed Kagome into the cave and right to where she kept an emergency stash of her herbal remedies and other healing potions. As she focused her ministrations on her mate with shaking hands, Sesshomaru looked around to assess the rest of the villagers. There were about 10 people, four of which were children, covered with sheets. Sesshomaru was afraid to look.

“Sesshomaru,” whispered a soft voice.

“Miroku!” Sesshomaru knelt by the injured monk, who was laid next to an unconscious Sango. Both were grievously injured.

“Uncle Sesshy!” came the mewling whimpers of their children, who came out of hiding when they saw that he really was there. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt such abject relief as he gathered the little ones to his chest.

“Thank the gods you’re alright!” he whispered, hugging them tighter than he’d ever deigned to before.

“I’m glad you’re back, Sesshomaru,” Miroku’s weak voice reached him again. He turned back to kneel closer to the man he’d never dared to outwardly call a friend but who, he now realized, he’d increasingly thought of as such since Naraku’s final destruction.

“Has Kagome treated yours and Sango’s wounds?”
“Why, Sesshomaru, do I detect concern in your voice?” the monk weakly teased him. “You’ve changed a lot in the past couple of weeks. It seems that your time in the modern era indeed did you a lot of good.”

“Look, Monk, you should be resting and don’t you dare tell me that this is you trying to say deathbed goodbyes, do you understand me?” Sesshomaru said gruffly.

“No, my dear Sesshomaru, you’re not so lucky to be rid of us yet. Not all of us, anyway.” Miroku’s dark purple eyes were almost black with grief. Sesshomaru’s heart froze as he hastily checked Sango, who was still breathing, albeit fitfully. Her ribs had been taped.

“No, my friend,” Miroku grasped his hand. Tears escaped as he looked toward the covered bodies. “Kaede is among the fallen.”

Sesshomaru fell onto his backside from his crouch as the devastation from the news hit him full force. Kaede. Kikyo’s little sister. Kindly Kaede who had convinced him to let Rin stay with her. Kindly Kaede who, like Rina, had never bowed or scraped or treated him any differently than her residential charges. His eyes stung as he forced himself to walk to the covered bodies. He could smell her now. He lifted the shroud away from her face and touched her weathered, cold cheek tenderly.

I’m so sorry, Kaede.

He wasn’t surprised to feel warmth next to him. Rest easy, Sesshomaru, her grandmotherly voice said, warm and tender. If it helps, know that I did not suffer. The shock of the attack took me before the venom could do its foul work.

You didn’t deserve to die like this.

And what would ye know of what I deserve, child? He couldn’t help a small, tearful chuckle at her calling him “child”. It used to grate his nerves. But the more he’d gotten to know her during his visits to see Rin, the more tenderly he’d felt towards the wise old woman.

We are not gods, Sesshomaru, that can know fully what one deserves and what they don’t. In the end, it all comes down to simply what is. Evil is not always granted the miserable death we feel it deserves. Neither is good always granted a peaceful passing in their sleep. Let go of what’s “deserved” and ye’ll be better able to accept what simply is.
Yes, my lady. I’ll try.

He gently placed the shroud back over her face and rose to his feet, wiping away the few stray tears that had made it past his guard. He felt a small hand grasp his own and he looked down to the wearied face of his sister-in-law.

“She was the first,” she whispered. “And the children who were with her gathering herbs.” She nodded at the four smaller shrouded bodies next to Kaede as her voice broke. Sesshomaru was immediately aware that Kagome had not yet allowed herself to cry. He gathered his sister-in-law into his arms and carried her back next to InuYasha’s unconscious form.

“It’s alright, sister,” he whispered gently, “go ahead and let it out.”

She buried her face against his chest and unloaded her grief into the fabric of his t shirt. How odd. He’d gotten so used to the modern clothing, he’d completely forgotten his robes and armor back at the Shrine where Kagome’s family still remained unaware of all that had transpired there and here.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to do this without her!” Kagome wept, unaware of Sesshomaru’s own thoughts and turmoil. “I’m not ready!” He felt her panic start to rise and he pulled back.

“Yes, you are,” he said firmly, taking her face into his hands so as to make her look at him. “Kaede has taught you everything she knows this past decade and she will continue to reach out to you whenever you need her, I promise.”

“You think so?” she wiped a couple of tears as Sesshomaru kissed her chastely on her forehead.

“I know so, little sister. Tell me, how long were you watching me with Kaede’s body before you walked over to me?”

“From the moment you approached her. Why?”

“What did you see?”

Kagome’s brow knit with confusion. “See? I saw you kneeling next to her.”
“Yes, I know, but think. What did you see?” he looked in her eyes with a sad smile. “What did you see?” He emphasized his repeated question with a gentle tap to the middle of Kagome’s forehead.

She paused as she closed her eyes to replay the scene in her mind. Finally she gasped and her eyes flew open. “I saw… I saw Kaede standing next to you, speaking with you as you told her goodbye.”

Sesshomaru nodded to her. “Yes. Exactly. And I know you’ve seen many ghosts since you first began traveling to this era. Hell, you probably saw many even before you first came here and didn’t yet realize it.

“You are a Priestess, Kagome; always with one foot in the world of the living and one in the land of the dead. Just because Kaede is now there instead of here doesn’t mean that she will abandon you when you need her most.

“Besides,” Sesshomaru continued, “even without Kaede here physically, you are still not alone. You are surrounded with family who would die for you and advise you whenever you feel lost. You have my brother -- your mate,” he nodded at InuYasha’s sleeping form, already almost cleansed of any lingering scent of venom. “You have Miroku and Sango. Miroku, the little lech, is nevertheless very powerful and wise in the way of spiritual matters and their relevance in battle. Sango, your very best friend aside from InuYasha, protects this village even more fiercely in the years since she became a mother.

“You’re not alone, Kagome. I’ve only named the base foundation for the support you have here. I’m sure you can name many more on top of that.”

Kagome nodded with a shaky, hiccuping sigh. “You’re right.” She hugged him gently again. “Thank you, big brother.”

“Anytime, little sister,” he replied softly. He laid her down next to InuYasha and reached for a blanket to cover them with.

“Worry not. InuYasha is almost completely recovered from the venom. Get some rest. I will look after everyone and wake you if the need arises. But you need your strength.”

He smiled faintly as he realized that she had fallen into an exhausted slumber, curled tightly against InuYasha for comfort, before he’d even finished speaking. His heart ached as he watched them, remembering how Rina had curled against him just so only one night previously.

He longed to go back out and follow the scent that had carried her away from the Well. But he could not leave until he was assured that the survivors would be alright. Neither Rina nor Ryuka
nor Izumi would forgive him if he abandoned his family just yet. He knew that in the deepest core of his heart that had only begun to fully waken under her unearthly emerald gaze.

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“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?!” Kagome cried out at him the next morning. She and InuYasha had woken an hour ago and after she’d looked after the villagers and ministered further healing aid where needed, InuYasha had pulled her and Sesshomaru aside to talk in a little more privacy outside of the cave. Miroku was a little more recovered and had promised he was able to look after the villagers and call out if he needed Kagome’s assistance.

Then InuYasha had asked him what had brought him back to be able to so effectively render aid in the crisis of the reptilian attack. Sesshomaru filled them in as concisely and in as few words as possible about the attack upon Rina’s wolves, what he and Ryuka had been able to suss from Hiroki, and how he’d tracked the reptilians and Rina through the Well. He didn’t bother to explain much more than their names. There just was not any time to fill them in on the deeper details.

“That was when I’d decided to check the village to make sure that they hadn’t masked the scent of any of their numbers in order to level an attack and that is when I found you, InuYasha, in the midst of your battle.”

“But you don’t yet know where those others went with Rina?” InuYasha had asked.

That was when Kagome cried out her distressed rebuke.

“I couldn’t leave you all,” Sesshomaru answered her quietly. “I just… I couldn’t.” His eyes pleaded with them to understand. “InuYasha, you were injured and Kagome, you were trying to hold everything together for everyone on top of having to deal with Lady Kaede’s death. I couldn’t leave you in the middle of all that.” His head bowed. “I just couldn’t.”

Kagome reached for his hand, her eyes welling with compassion. “We wouldn’t have blamed you, Sesshomaru.”

“I would have blamed me. And, quite frankly, I know that Rina, Ryuka, and Izumi would have taken turns kicking my ass if I had done so.” He looked back up at Kagome. “Can you really tell me you’d do any less to InuYasha if he were to abandon family even for your sake?”

Kagome’s eyes lowered sadly. “No, you’re right, Sesshomaru. I’d have ‘sat’ him so far into the
ground he’d have needed mountain climbing gear in order to see daylight again.”

“Right.” InuYasha abruptly stood to his feet. He turned to Kagome and kissed her tenderly. “Kagome, do you think you can manage to help everyone get back to the village or would you rather stay in the cave for a little longer?”

“Don’t worry about us,” she answered, her eyes blazing with determination. “You go help Sesshomaru find Rina and deal with what remains of these miserable fucks.”

InuYasha’s ears twitched in surprise at Kagome’s uncharacteristic use of profanity. He dipped his head in acknowledgement. “I love you,” he said to her fiercely as he crushed her to him. “I love you so much and you are the most incredible woman in the world to me.”

Sesshomaru looked away to give them a modicum of privacy as Kagome pulled InuYasha’s face down to hers to kiss him breathless.

“Any room for one more?” Miroku’s voice inquired. At the baleful looks that greeted him, he smacked his forehead. “Not like that! Gods, and you all call me lecherous!”

“I mean to ask, InuYasha and Sesshomaru, if I may join you on this hunt?”

“Monk, last night you could barely speak and I thought that you may be at death’s door,” Sesshomaru pointed out in a disapproving voice. “What makes you think you’re capable of this undertaking?”

“You forget the potency of Kagome’s healing remedies, many of which she’s managed to concoct to mimic the remedies of her native era.” He flexed and moved about so as to prove his limber capabilities. He was still rather sore and stiff, but he appeared fine otherwise. Sesshomaru was still decidedly baffled and skeptical.

“Miroku, I don’t want to be the recipient of Sango’s Hiraikotsu if you overextend yourself,” Sesshomaru warned. InuYasha nodded and barked his agreement.

Sango walked up at that moment just in time to catch that comment. “Don’t worry, he already checked with me and he’s got additional remedies in his rucksack should he need them. But he overheard your tale, Sesshomaru, and he wants to help. Will you have him along?”
“I’m coming too!” Shippo came running out of the cave. No longer a Kitsune pup the size of a human toddler, Shippo had grown into a strapping, muscular boy about the size that Kohaku had been when first Sesshomaru had become acquainted with him.

Sesshomaru blanched in surprise. He had never really interacted much with Shippo over the past 10 years. More often than not, the little Fox Demon had been away to take more exams and to further his training whenever Sesshomaru had come to visit Rin.

Shippo looked up to Sango. “Don’t worry, Sango, I’ll help look after Miroku and knock him silly if he overexerts himself.” Sango smiled and ruffled the young Fox’s hair. Shippo looked next to Sesshomaru. “Please let me come too, Sesshomaru! I’ve gotten a lot stronger! I just reached 3rd rank in the Fox Demon exams!”


“He really has become a very capable and cunning little squirt,” InuYasha interjected as he ruffled Shippo’s mop of red hair. Shippo glowered balefully at InuYasha’s cavalier treatment.

“InuYasha,” Sesshomaru said in that quiet, grave tone of voice he had so often used back when he and InuYasha could barely get along. “It doesn’t seem that Shippo appreciates your not taking him seriously.”

“Hmph!” Shippo glared at InuYasha, puffing up a little under Sesshomaru’s quiet validation. Then he stuck his tongue out.

Sesshomaru had to hold his breath to keep from laughing while InuYasha pointed at Shippo with a glare. “You see that? That’s why I don’t take him seriously!”

Sesshomaru looked back to Shippo’s face. “Sorry, Shippo. I tried. You know how it goes with brothers.”

“Brothers?” Shippo asked him wonderingly. 3rd rank Fox Demon though he was, he was still such an innocent little chap.
“Brothers,” Sesshomaru affirmed with a nod. “I am not well acquainted with you, but it’s clear to me that you and InuYasha have always gotten along about as well as proper brothers. You fight all the time but, unlike mine and InuYasha’s history up until recently, you always make amends. And I can tell that you are both fiercely loyal to each other, like proper brothers.”

He looked back up to InuYasha whose expression was one of grudging affection. He stood back up to decidedly end that particular conversation.

“Sango, may we borrow Kirara? Miroku should save up his strength and Shippo would probably benefit from her aid as well.”

Sango nodded at him before she turned her head to emit a sharp whistle. Kirara, in her tiny housecat form, came running out of the cave and transformed with a ball of flame a short distance away.

“We know we can count on Ah-Un’s help if we have need.” Sango then turned to her husband. “You’d better be careful, Miroku. If you’re not, it’s you who will face my Hiraikotsu.” The tenderness on her face belied her fierce words and she pulled him to her to kiss him soundly.

Sesshomaru busied himself with getting Shippo seated on Kirara’s back and stroking the purring two-tailed firecat, thanking her for her aid, while InuYasha and Kagome also reaffirmed their goodbyes.

At last, Miroku pulled himself onto Kirara’s back. “We’ll follow you,” he confirmed before Kirara took to the air.

Sesshomaru and InuYasha exchanged a silent, knowing glance and then they were off. The scent of the reptilians and Rina’s blood was still quite strong by the well where they’d emerged. Once assured of the scents’ direction, Sesshomaru ran at his topmost speed to follow the trail, InuYasha effortlessly keeping up with his pace.

After a few hours, they came upon a spot where the reptilians had holed up in a cave. Sesshomaru could make out the markings of where they’d bound Rina and deposited her in the dust. His eyes darkened in anger and yet he felt indescribable relief at the knowledge that she was still alive. At least, by this point in the journey she was, he reminded himself. He was too afraid to assume she was still alive lest he find her otherwise at wherever this trail ended. Yet, he knew that his attempt to armor his heart with pragmatism was foolishly in vain. No matter how much he prepared himself for the possibility, he knew he would be lost again in mindless devastation if he were to find her dead.
Their stop at the cave was brief, resting only long enough to let Kirara drink some water and eat some food and to check on Miroku’s wellbeing.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine,” he said firmly. “As soon as Kirara is ready to go, so am I.”

Kirara, in response, had stood to her feet and glared impatiently at Miroku and Shippo until they were again on her back. With a last look at Sesshomaru and InuYasha, she took to the air again and they were back on the hunt.

Where are they taking her? InuYasha’s voice wondered fretfully in Sesshomaru’s head after another two hours. The trail had started north from the point of the Well until the cave. After that, it had taken on a bizarre, winding course that made absolutely no sense before finally streaking in a consistently eastward direction. It’s like they’re taunting us!

They’re taunting me, Sesshomaru silently corrected his brother without letting InuYasha hear his thoughts.

Suddenly, Sesshomaru slowed warily until he finally came to a complete stop. InuYasha stopped by his side and looked to his brother with a questioning frown. Above, Kirara circled as she waited for their next move.

Miroku, can you see anything up there? Sesshomaru projected the question to the monk. He watched as Miroku guided Kirara in their aerial reconnaissance before finally swooping down to land.

“There’s a hidden village up ahead, but it looks deserted.”

“Did it appear to be a human village?”

Miroku stroked his chin thoughtfully as he sought the words for his answer. “Maybe it was at some point? But it’s soaked through with a demonic aura. I think this is a village where demons have been living for a long time.”

Sesshomaru frowned as he considered their next move. His impatience was trying to ride roughshod over his more tactical instincts.
“These creatures see better at night than they do during the day and we’re already approaching dusk. We need to seek shelter for the night and we need to be where the wind will not risk carrying our scent to them.” He looked to Kirara. “Do you know of a place that will suffice?”

Kirara growled in answer and motioned for them to follow her. She led them to a shallow cave where it would not be possible for them to be flanked. Once they settled inside, Miroku erected a barrier to conceal their presence without obscuring the cave’s entrance.

“It’s likely they know that this cave is here,” he explained quietly to them. “If any scouts were to come this way, it’s likely that they’d notice if the cave entrance were missing.”

“Good thinking, Miroku,” Shippo piped up. Then he offered his own contribution. “I’ll go back out there and mask our tracks and our scents just in case.” Without awaiting further comment, he transformed himself into a simple fox form and skulked out quietly. He returned after about 20 minutes.

“It’s a good thing I went,” he whispered to them. “I almost ran into a couple of scouts that were returning. They almost caught our scent, but I masked it just in time and disguised myself in a bush. But then they got more concerned with the village up ahead and they took off running.

“I was going to try to follow them and see what had them so upset, but I thought the better of it and came back here.”

Sesshomaru nodded. “You did right, Shippo. If you had followed them, there’s no guarantee your fox trickery would have kept you from catching their notice. They have ways of seeing through illusion magic and if they had spotted you, we wouldn’t have been there to help you. You did exactly right by coming back.”

Shippo sighed with relief. No sooner had the sigh escaped his lips, they heard bone-chilling howls in the distance. Shippo shrank next to InuYasha and clung to him. “That’s them!” he whispered.

Sesshomaru frowned as his senses went on high alert and he motioned for the rest of them to be silent as they listened to the keening howls that emanated in the distance. They were of distress. Despair, even.

Unbidden, he found his heart actually panging in an ache that sympathized with whatever grieved them. Fucking seriously?! he scowled to himself. Why should he bear any sympathy or pity whatsoever with any of the bastards who had killed Rin, killed Kohaku, killed Kaede, injured Izumi, and taken Rina?!
“Listen,” Miroku whispered as he listened to the timbre of the voices. “Those are females we’re hearing.”

“Don’t tell me you’re gonna have some lecherous need to comfort them,” InuYasha grumbled at him with a roll of his eyes.

“No,” Miroku hissed impatiently. “Think about it. Every single one of their kind that attacked us? They were all males. Never once were we attacked by any of their females.”

“He’s right,” Sesshomaru whispered as he finally understood why he had any sense of pity for the pain he heard in those voices. “They may have been complicit in what their mates have done, but they were never directly involved.”

A light to his left gleamed softly and he gasped quietly to see Rin standing there, a gentle, encouraging-yet-sad smile on her face, and then she was gone without a word.

“Wait here or follow me, but be quiet.” He stood to his feet and strode out of the cave. Miroku and Shippo stayed behind, but he was unsurprised when InuYasha followed him.

They followed the sounds of the keening wails in silence until they came to the edge of the hidden village. The sight that greeted their eyes filled them with a horror they did not expect.

Sesshomaru’s eyes instantly found the dismembered bodies of the reptiles responsible for taking Rina. But it was so, so much worse. Dead females had been ripped apart. Fed upon. And so had their young. Sesshomaru found himself driven to his knees as he took in the overwhelmingly horrific sight. This was slaughter beyond brutality. There was rage and malice everywhere. And the children. The children had not been shown any more mercy than their parents had been.

“Oh my gods,” InuYasha breathed beside him, his expression echoing the horror that Sesshomaru felt.

The keening stopped and enraged shrieks took their place. This only occurred to Sesshomaru a split second before he found himself thrown back by several feet and then pinned by one of the enormous females.

“Is this how you wreak your vengeance?!” she screamed, her voice awash in agony. “Is this how
you avenge your woman?! Your daughter?!” She snarled in his face as she awaited an answer. At Sesshomaru’s prolonged silence and his lack of effort to fend her off, her face contorted with rage and she smashed a fist into the ground next to his head.

Sesshomaru was only vaguely aware of InuYasha leaping away and dodging the attacks of the other female but he, too, refrained from lashing back at her in any way.

“We’ve only arrived in the area within the past hour.” Sesshomaru finally spoke to her, his voice hoarse. “We only began tracking Rina here this morning after we had to deal with your men’s attack on our village.”

“Liar!” she screamed at him.

“Stop! Please! It’s true!” Miroku’s voice pierced through the cloud of her rage and grief as he ran up closer to them.

“We’d only just found a cave to hole up in for the night and you two almost caught me trying to mask our scent!” Shippo added, his young face a mask of alarm. When he caught sight of the slaughter just beyond, however, he fell to his knees and burst into horrified tears. “Oh my gods, the children!” he shrieked in abject horror as Miroku grabbed him up and hid his face.

The females both looked across their collective faces.

“Truly?” the female who’d pinned Sesshomaru finally asked. “You truly did not do this?”

“Lady, I wholeheartedly admit that we did exactly this to your men that attacked our village last night, but we would never do this to children!” InuYasha barked, his voice thick with outrage. But he was still looking at the slaughter. He’d been unable to look away even when racing to keep a healthy distance between himself and the lethal claws of the other female. His outrage was clearly not meant for the female who questioned them.

Still, she looked down at Sesshomaru, awaiting his answer. “I swear to you by the grave of my daughter, whom your men murdered almost a year ago, I swear to you that we had no part in this and would never take our vengeance out on innocent children. Your men, however, have twice murdered children in our village, including four last night.” He sat up with a fierce, angry glare and forced her to back up. “So, consider that in your calculations of our character.”
Her face fell. “No,” she whispered. “No, please tell me it’s not true!” She hid her reptilian face in her clawed hands and wept. “Please tell me they did not slay children in their raids!”

“They always swore that they never hurt any children!” the other female broke in.

“I’m so sorry!” The first female crumpled into sobs. “I’m so sorry! We didn’t know!”

Sesshomaru felt his throat tighten and he placed a hand upon her quaking shoulder. “I believe you,” he said gently. She looked up at him, misery and grief emanating from her yellow eyes in a breathtaking wave. “I believe you,” he said again and he gently put his arms around the sobbing female. The other female staggered to them and fell on her knees to join him in embracing her sister.

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They sat together, the six of them, around a fire that Shippo had produced with his Fox Fire before collapsing into a troubled, fitful sleep.

“Leave it to the men to fuck everything up,” whispered the female who had pounced on Sesshomaru. Her name was Hiromi, like one of the women whom Rina had gotten shot protecting. Sesshomaru had smiled wistfully upon hearing her name and being reminded of Rina.

“We females are larger than they are,” Hiromi continued in her soft-voiced rant, “and yet they get to be the ones who call the shots with their small-brained idiocy. How the fuck does that make sense?”

Her sister, Shizuka, had curled unconscious next to Shippo and whimpered in her sleep.

“We stay close to home, we mother the young together, and we hunt close by to provide food for them. We’re not given any sort of voice or choice in the foolish pursuits of our males. Even our sons look down upon us when they are grown, no matter how we try to raise them to think better than this.”

Miroku, InuYasha, and Sesshomaru exchanged sad glances but they otherwise sat quietly and listened to Hiromi speak.
“I don’t recall life being any better before your father, Toga, sealed our lord Ryukotsusei away,” Hiromi’s voice ground out bitterly. “He didn’t offer any protection or anything of the sort to us. As far as I could tell, we were just a lesser species to him. ‘Dragon wannabes’, I recall him saying at one point. Yet, to keep the loyalty of our men, he convinced them that they could become Dragons.” She scoffed now at this. “The rest of us knew better. We women knew better. And yet we suffered hell if we even dared to point out that not even Ryukotsusei himself was a real Dragon. He was a powerful Draconic Demon, to be sure, but he was no true Dragon.

“All this suffering because of a baseless grudge against your family. So much death. And all we wanted was for our men to be content with the power they already possessed. To stay with their families and help us to raise the younglings. It’s what so many other tribes of Demons did, reptilian or not.

“Do you know how many times I’d encounter families like Otter Demons down at the river and see the fathers teaching their sons how to fish?” She gazed among their faces.

“Our daughters and sons, all dead. Your children dead. All for the naught of our men’s pride and greed and unjustifiable hate.” Hiromi drew in a shuddering sigh.

“The one thing they feared of our wrath was for the slaughter of children. We are mothers by nature. It does not set well with us to harm children. And no amount of beatings or admonishments or punishment would quell our rage. A century ago, not long after their grudge against the Inu Daiyokai began, we put them through an uprising.

“It had come to our attention that they had slaughtered an entire village, including the children there. Our rage would not be pacified. But they finally swore that they would never slay a child again. We stupidly contented ourselves with that much. We never should have let them stay in power!”

Sesshomaru was silent for a long time as Hiromi’s rage seethed anew. Finally, he spoke. “Empathy and compassion are still new emotions for me. When we heard you and your sister weeping in the village, I didn’t understand why I felt any sort of compassion for me whatsoever. It was Miroku over there,” he nodded toward the monk, “who realized that never had we seen an attack with any females involved. It was Miroku who made me realize that, however complicit you may or may not be, that you were not directly responsible for what we have suffered.”

“Aren’t we?” Hiromi challenged him softly. “We had the strength to resist. We had the power to. But we chose to settle for false promises to maintain our peaceful compliance to their will.” Her yellow eyes blazed. “I will never let myself be held under such power ever again!”

“Were you here when your remaining men came to the village with Rina?” Miroku asked her quietly.
Hiromi nodded. “They arrived with the Wolf woman late last night. She had been wounded and uncared for. I and Shizuka were charged with her care. We bathed her, tended her wounds, fed her. They intended to sell her.” Her eyes met Sesshomaru’s, deep with sorrow. “Do you know of the Bear Demon, Kumayomaru?”

Sesshomaru and InuYasha simultaneously sucked in a horrified breath. “No!” Sesshomaru ground out, his voice hoarse with desperation. “Please, gods, no!”

Hiromi’s eyes screwed shut with shame. “Simply because he hates your family worse than even they did.”

Sesshomaru’s breaths became ragged and shallow as panic and despair grew within him. Ryuka had been wrong and he’d been stupid to not think of it until now. Dragons and high-level Reptile Demons were not the only ones who could disguise and camouflage their scents. Shippo and other Kitsune could mask such with illusion magic. But Kumayomaru was a rare caliber of Bear Demon who could make his scent vanish without a trace or change it to something else entirely. Oh gods. If Rina had been delivered into his clutches, how would he ever find her in time?!

“I’m so sorry,” Hiromi’s tearful voice broke through his thoughts.

Sesshomaru leaped out of the cave that now felt more claustrophobic than even that tiny elevator had. He screamed his rage and despair in a deepening bellow that turned into a howl as his fully demonic form exploded forth. He ripped up trees until his mouth was bloody. He leveled nearby foothills until he was surrounded by nothing but his wrathful destruction. And yet his rage was nowhere near spent even though his body shook with exhaustion. He collapsed momentarily to the ground before raising himself back up to his haunches and then he threw his great head back and howled until darkness finally claimed him.
The Sanctuary of Madness

Chapter Summary

There's only so much one can take...

When the demons came, Rina sensed them approaching, though with only a matter of minutes to spare. There was no scent of them approaching, but the malevolent cloud of energy that had first focused on her wolves seemed to wait until Sesshomaru and Ryuka had been gone at least 10 minutes before it suddenly advanced towards her apartment building at an alarming speed.

“Izumi, you need to hide!” she hissed.

“Where?” she asked with a frightened squeak.

Rina looked helplessly around her tiny apartment. Typical as tiny Japanese apartments go, there weren’t a lot of options for hidey holes. Then she remembered the attic nook behind her bookshelf. “Hurry!” She carefully yet quickly edged the bookshelf out of the way while trying not to scuff the floor or leave any sort of indication that her bookshelf had been recently moved for any reason.

She pushed Izumi into the small space. “This attic space goes just about everywhere in the walls of the apartment. Stay as close to the farther walls as you can. Sorry, but there are some moldy blankets over there. It’s gross, but it may be enough to hide your scent. Do not come out, no matter what you hear.” Then she’d shut the door and placed the tall bookshelf exactly where it had been.

They were close. Oh, gods. Whatever they were, they were close. The evil aura clung to the air she breathed like tar and her anxiety threatened to spike out of control. She closed her eyes to breathe and find her calm. For a moment, a moment that did not last nearly long enough, she was with Sesshomaru.

They were in her kitchen where he pinned her against the wall to ravish her mouth. They were at the beach where she tormented him some more with her spicy chips while they collapsed together in laughter. They were racing through a deep forest side-by-side for no other reason than just to feel the unadulterated freedom that felt like it was meant only for them. They were in her bed tangled in the sheets, tangled in each other, as their bodies strained together in gasping ecstasy. They were--

Rina’s eyes snapped open as a bang at the door ripped her away from everything she wished that
could have been. The now-familiar red haze came over her vision as the door to her apartment splintered off the hinges with enough force that she had to quickly roll out of the way before it could hit her where she had crouched. Leering at her in the doorway was a creature that looked like a sentient, humanoid Komodo Dragon. They were about 6’ in height, their teeth reminded her a little of the T-Rex from Jurassic Park, and the claws on their upper limbs sprouted in length at will. But the scent that finally hit her was a fetid, lethal stench. Oily. She immediately identified the reek as being not only their horrendous breath but, worse, it was the fetor of potent, noxious venom.

Yet, she felt so dangerously calm. It was odd. She likely didn’t have the skills to hold her own against the 5 creatures that stalked their way into her apartment and moved to surround her, and yet she felt as calm as though she were floating in the arms of the ocean. Her senses were on high alert and as her eyes glazed, her mind went blank and her widespread focus heightened. She saw every twitch even from the two who flanked her peripherals. Every breath they took became as loud as sandpaper scraping against wood.

The one on her left sucked in a breath and she exploded into mindless action, ducking under his swinging fist to upper-cut him in the throat.

Turning to dance out of the way of the dagger-claws of the one that had moved directly behind her and using his momentum to bury his claws into the chest of the one next to the one clutching his throat.

Pirouetting to knee him sharply in the back so that he fell hard against the comrade she’d forced him to wound.

Spinning with the force of the meaty sledgehammer-like fist that struck the right side of her face, she swept out her right leg to knock the feet out from the monster on her left, the one she’d first throat-punched.

Following through, she spun on her knees to drive her elbow into the fallen reptile’s throat again and she felt his windpipe dislocate.

Spinning on her knees again, she reached her coffee table and shoved it violently into the shins of the one who had punched her. He staggered back as the crack to his shin bones immediately preceded his howl of pain. As he howled, she wolf-leaped onto the coffee table and springboarded off of it to drop-kick him in the chest. She landed in a crouch as he toppled backward over her couch and land in a tangled heap against her wall.

A whistle in the air behind her. She rolled to her left to avoid the slash of 8-inch claws and arched her leg behind her to kick this attacker in his lower back, upsetting the balance of his momentum. As he staggered forward and his arm over-extended, she grabbed his wrist to spin him around with her until she could chicken-wing him and force his claws into his own throat before she released him on his still out-of-control axis and kicked him in the backside, causing him to collapse against the creature that had been made to impale their other comrade.
But as she pirouetted to face the next sound behind her, she was backhanded so hard across the face that her empty-minded, instinct-driven focus was shattered.

Rina gasped as her neck cracked from the force of the blow and she landed face-first on the edge of the coffee table. Blood gushed as her nose broke from the impact and she rolled limply onto the floor, completely stunned and rendered defenseless. She couldn’t even move when her assailant grasped her by the throat and raised her up over his head.

She deliriously gazed about at the walls. She stared with dazed fascinated at the streaks of blood spatters she’d caused before she had been felled and she uttered a slurring chuckle of amusement. “I made a Jackson Pollack painting with your blood,” she rasped around the tightening grasp of her attacker.

“Break her fucking neck, Hibiki!” wheezed the one with the dislocated windpipe.

“Seriously, if you’re going to kill me, then just get it over with. I ain’t got all fucking night.”

“No,” Hibiki purred. “I think not. We were going to kill you, but I think we’ll take you to him after all.” She snarled at him weakly before she managed to spit her blood into his eye. The last thing she was aware of was first the odd sensation of flying through the air as he hurled her like a rag doll and then the crunch of her body as she went through a wall.

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Her swollen eyes blinked blearily as she struggled to awaken an indiscernible amount of time later. Gradually, she realized that they were still in her apartment. Every molecule of her body hurt. She couldn’t move without agony. Everything was fuzzy, especially her hearing, so it took several long minutes for her to separate the roaring and ringing in her ears from the shrieks of terror that slowly began to register, followed by the peals of evil, sadistic laughter emanating from the remaining three reptile demons. She couldn’t understand anything they were saying, but their voices continued to taunt…

Izumi! Rina’s labored breath caught in her broken ribs. Her eyes stared at the hole in her wall and she finally understood it had been her hurled body that made the hole that allowed them to find where Izumi had been hidden in the first place. And now her lifelong best friend was trapped among the three vile lizards who looked at her like she was a snack.
“Rina! Rina!” she screamed as she ducked through the legs of one of them, trying to reach Rina’s still-broken body.

“Izumi!” she whispered, her voice hoarse and weak, as she tried to move but could not break through the barrier of agony that still held her immobile. Tears of rage and sorrow stung her swollen eyes as one of the lizards lunged forward to grab Izumi by the hair and lifted her several feet off the ground.

“I’m feeling like shish-kebabs are on the menu tonight, lads!” Hibiki’s voice guffawed over the keening of Izumi’s agonized and terrified screams.

No!! Rina’s mouth was agape with her silent scream. NO!! Goddamn you--

Her thoughts cut off as Hibiki ran Izumi through the length of her torso with every dagger-claw his free hand possessed. His gaze leered at Rina’s helpless form as the only sound she could make was a hissing, voiceless wail of rage and grief. She dragged in a ragged breath, now oblivious to the pain of her shattered ribs, but she projected the bean sídhe decibels of her mental anguish. I’LL KILL YOU!! I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU ALL!! YOU ARE ALL DEAD!! I CURSE YOU AND I VOW THAT YOU WILL NOT LIVE TO SEE THE NEXT SUNRISE!! There was an odd feeling of power that blasted from her as she projected each and every word to them.

Hibiki dropped Izumi and he and his remaining companions instinctively tried to block their ears from the shattering intensity of Rina’s piercing mental wail. It, of course, did nothing to block her siren scream as his ears and those of his companions began to bleed. Rina’s physical agony drastically faded as her eyes turned the most intense shade of blood-red before they flashed to a soulless black. Her fangs lengthened and she began to change form into that of an enormous wolf, explosive howls of mindless rage caused every window in the building to shatter.

She didn’t know what hit her until she fell, her transformation interrupted by a deep, lashing blow from Hibiki’s powerful tail that split her scalp and bared her skull. She whimpered as she began to lose consciousness, her eyes unmoving from Izumi’s fallen form.

The last thing she heard before everything went black was one of the remaining lizards who, as he grabbed their two fallen, lifeless comrades, shrieked, “Hibiki! We gotta go now! They’re coming!”

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Rina’s head still hurt when she came to. She was bound and gagged on the floor of some cave. It felt like they’d just tossed her down to the ground like a sack of potatoes. One of her legs was trapped painfully under her body and the back of her head ached from where it had struck a rock and gashed open. Her body had otherwise healed of her previous injuries while she’d been unconscious. She didn’t care. The pain that remained in her body was nothing compared to the black hole of numb, insurmountable grief.

Over and over, she saw Izumi impaled on Hibiki’s claws. She had no will to try to escape. The thought of making her way back home only to have Izumi’s death confirmed to her… the thought of having to face Ryuka with the knowledge that she had failed to protect the one who was dearest to them both…

She laid there in an empty, disconnected state. Everything felt so far away. She felt like she was floating above her body even though she could feel the cold floor beneath her, the ache of her muscles protesting her bondage. Nothing felt real. Everything looked as though it were a million miles away down a long tunnel even when the logical part of her brain could tell that they were mere inches or feet from her face.

Her heart hurt too much to fight the dissociation as it washed over her and the world faded from her conscious like the way old TV screens blacked out to a final pinpoint of light when they were turned off.

Good. She didn’t want to be “On” ever again.

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Of course, she didn’t get her wish. Sight returned to her as she was callously deposited from one set of arms into the arms of an immense female demon who dwarfed the males by at least 3 feet.

“Clean her up, Hiromi,” Hibiki ordered in a voice that was not unlike a highborn noble speaking down to his peasant-born servants. “I want her ready for when Lord Kumayomaru arrives.”

“Yes, my son,” Hiromi quietly assented. Wait, her son?!

“Get Shizuka to help you, also.”
“Yes, my son.”

Rina looked up at the female who cradled her with a surprising level of gentleness. However, she uttered not a word as she was carried through… a very primitive village? The entire population consisted of her captors’ species. Yet there weren’t many males around. Most of them were women, working together to keep the numerous youngsters together in smaller, more manageable groups.

Next, she noticed their clothing. Rough fabrics encased their muscular bodies in styles Rina had only seen in local SCA groups. What the fuck was going on?!

Her nose twitched as she tried to understand what was so strange about the scents that came to her. It wasn’t until Hiromi and Shizuka deposited her into a bath that was contained in a crude wooden tub that Rina finally realized what was so strange about the air: there were no traces of city odors in the air. None whatsoever. No smells or sounds of cars or other machinery even in the farthest winds she could detect. No bullet trains. No airplanes. Nothing. Nothing but the musky odors of reptiles and various animal manure.

She was only vaguely aware of the lizard women’s scrubbing ministrations. Her mind was still too numb from trauma and shock to ascertain what any of this meant. All she really knew in this moment was that she was very far away from home, horribly disoriented, and growing more and more afraid.

“Wolf woman. Wolf woman!” Hiromi’s voice broke through the barrier of her uncomprehending dissociative state. Her voice was a little impatient but was not otherwise unkind. Once Rina’s eyes finally focused on her, she informed her that her bath was concluded and offered her a rough towel to dry off.

She rose from the water to robotically accept the proffered cloth and wrapped herself in it, barely registering the cold night air.

“Next we are to see to any remaining wounds you may have,” Hiromi intoned to her, sounding every bit as listless and hollow as Rina currently felt. Hiromi and Shizuka led her into a small hut where a fire already blazed. Rina could feel the heat emanating from the flames and permeating the little hut, yet it did nothing to cut through the chill that had encased her since first waking up in that cave.

She didn’t even flinch when Hiromi and Shizuka probed various places of her flesh to palpate any remaining wounds and injuries. The pain was there, but it just didn’t matter.
Finally, she was made to sit at a table near the fire and a bowl of coarse stew was placed in front of her. She felt so nonexistent that she couldn’t even find any will to eat despite being aware of the demanding growls of her stomach. No amount of cajoling or threats from the two females made any difference to her. She was so entirely depleted of fucks to give, in fact, that she finally just backhanded the bowl of stew away from her.

“A picky, uppity lass, are you?” Shizuka cried in astounded outrage.

“No,” Rina replied stoically, feeling absolutely nothing. “I just simply don’t care to eat your disgusting stew, nor would I if it were the most decadent and artfully made dish in all the land. I don’t give a fuck.”

Hiromi knelt next to her quietly and studied her face. Finally, she sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

Rina blinked as confusion finally gave a little life to her expressionless face. “Beg your pardon?” She stared at the female.

“I saw your memories.”

“Stay the fuck out of my head!” Rina snarled. “I gave you no such permission!”

“I know.” The sadness in the reptile female’s voice left her stunned.

Finally, Rina’s brain clicked. The females here, though so much larger than their brutish male counterparts, were lesser citizens in their society.

“Is Hibiki really your son?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Rina was now thoroughly aghast. “But… but the way he spoke to you!”
Hiromi responded with a bitter snort. “That’s the way it is in our world. We birth sons and daughters, but we become enslaved even by our male offspring.”

Rina’s heart ached. The kaleidoscope of her emotions had effectively drawn her out from the seemingly bottomless depersonalization she had given herself over to.

“You didn’t have anything to do with what those fuckers have done, did you?” It really wasn’t a question. She knew the answer.

“No. We’re just forced to go along with it. We’re punished if we don’t. Every male here has more rights over us and our bodies than we’ll ever have.” Hiromi’s dull, saddened eyes were so very far away. “Hibiki was one of my favorite children because he was always so sweet and kind and respectful to us, his mothers and his sisters, when he was small. I had so hoped that he would manage to be different. That my teachings would somehow stay with him once he was taken into the packs in his adolescence.”

“Instead, you ended up with Joffrey Baratheon,” Rina murmured without thinking.

“Who?”

Rina shook her head. “I have the feeling that you wouldn’t understand even if I tried to explain.”

Hiromi’s eyes grimaced with offense. “I’m not stupid, Wolf woman!”

“Fuck. That’s not what I meant,” Rina said, the apology in her voice surprising even her. “It’s a fictional character from stories told where I’m from. That’s literally the only way I know how to explain even though it’s so much more complicated than that.”

Hiromi considered her words for a moment. “Fair enough,” she decided at last.

Rina sighed. “So, I’m guessing that, if I don’t eat, you’ll be punished?”

“We’re the only two currently in charge of you and yet every female here will be made to suffer.”
“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“I wish we were.” The bitterness in Shizuka’s voice could have felled a tree or even obliterated a mountain.

Rina looked over at the mess of stew that she had rejected. She got up and walked wearily to the bowl. She rinsed the dirt off of the bowl in a nearby basin, and ladled a small portion of stew from the bubbling cauldron.

“Double, double, toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble,” she muttered with a humorless chuckle.

“What was that?” Shizuka questioned.

“Some stupid line from a Shakespeare play,” she shrugged as she sat back down with her bowl.

“It’s not as much as you previously gave me, but I don’t think I can eat even this much. In fact, I feel like I very well may throw up.” She gave them a listlessly apologetic frown. It was the most she could manage. “But I don’t want you to suffer because of me, so I will try my best. Will that be enough to spare you?”

“Yes. We will manage.”

“Alright.”

Once she’d choked down the little bit of stew she could manage, she was led to a different hut where another pair of females waited.

“Shizuka and I must leave you now. These two are charged with getting you clothed,” Hiromi said softly. Her immense, scaled face was drawn, tired, and sad. “I meant it, you know. When I looked into your memories. I really and truly am so sorry. For what happened and…”

“And what’s going to happen?” Rina finished when Hiromi trailed off, trying to quell the dread that began to churn in her stomach.
“I’m so sorry about your friend. I’m so sorry for everything they’ve done.” She turned away and began to depart.

“Hiromi.” She paused to look back at Rina. “You and your sisters have the power and strength to overthrow the fuckers. You know that, right?” Hiromi turned away and wordlessly left the hut with Shizuka in tow.

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The sky was only beginning to show the faint tinge of the coming dawn when Rina was marched out in a line of other humans trussed up and awaiting the arrival of the Lord Kumayomaru. Hibiki stood in front of Rina and the other humans while the rest of the females and younglings stood several paces behind. Rina stood silently and assessed the humans on her left and right. Some stood frozen, their eyes empty, numbly awaiting their fates. Others trembled uncontrollably. Some wept with fear and hopelessness. Rina stood in silence, lost in her own thoughts. She couldn’t bear to think of Izumi or Ryuka right now. She could never make up her failure to them both.

No, she wanted to think of Sesshomaru right now. She needed his strength. No, that wasn’t it. She needed to be stronger, like him. She closed her eyes, trying to recall the sound of his voice, the golden hue of his eyes, the feel of his taut, muscular body curled around her, the feel of his lips and the taste of his silken tongue claiming her. The way he’d growled in ravenous delight when he’d pulled her against him so intimately before…

She sensed a sudden spike in the tension around her. She forced herself to breathe calmly as she sensed an intense, malignant evil approaching. It was terribly difficult to keep from trembling the way the others were. Never before had she encountered such a profoundly sinister presence. It was the stuff of every child’s night terrors, the dreaded monster under the bed or in the closet but still so, so much worse. And when she first beheld the deceptively beautiful face of Lord Kumayomaru, Rina was certain that the deepest and most nightmarish pits of hell -- the levels reserved for the unspeakably worst evildoers -- had been collected together and shaped like cursed clay to create the creature that now stood silently before her. She kept her eyes averted, wishing she could blend in for once, wishing that her looking away would mean that he would not take any notice of her. Yet she had the horrid feeling that this was what Hibiki had had in mind when he decided to keep her alive instead of finishing her off.

And for him to bring her specifically for Lord Kumayomaru, there could be only one explanation: Kumayomaru was one of Sesshomaru’s fouler enemies, far more than even the reptiles had ever been.
She could see him approaching her in her peripheral vision. The whimpers and sobs of some of the other humans grew in intensity as he drew near. Rina tried to keep herself from shuddering. She felt like one of those characters in a horror movie who tried to keep so still in hopes that the approaching creature would not spot them and rip their face off. And Kumayomaru was definitely large enough even in his human form to be the villain in a creature feature. He had to be at least 6’8”.

Oh gods, he was sniffing her. A thin whimper of shuddering revulsion dredged itself past her tightened throat. The oily black of his aura fell over her like a tidal wave a moment before he roughly grasped her chin to force her to look at him. His eyes were black like one of those demons from “Supernatural”. It was hard to imagine the Winchester brothers standing before this one, though.

“Your scent reeks of that dog, Wolf woman.” His voice was deceptively smooth yet it roiled over her like tar. Still, Rina made not a sound even as she found she couldn’t tear her gaze away from his awful black eyes that held her in a terrible thrall the way a viper could thrall a mouse. “But your scent also reeks of something else.” His lip twitched into a snarl.

“Hibiki!”

“Er… yes, my lord?”

“I ordered you to bring me the Wolf woman once Sesshomaru fell for her, did I not?” Those words doused Rina with an icy bucket of horror that sank into her soul like a thousand needles.

“Y- yes, my lord.”

“Did you really think I would not perceive that you almost killed her instead? And are you and your pathetic pack really so stupid as to think your petty, delusional grudge against Toga and his filthy sons supersedes my own?”

*Well, at least you admit that your grudge is also petty and delusional,* Rina quipped silently to herself as she listened to the exchange.

However much she already loathed the repulsive Kumayomaru, she couldn’t help but relish the increasing terror of the demon who had murdered her best friend.

“She killed two of my comrades!” Hibiki hissed in one last moment of insanity.
“Oh. Is that all it takes for you to do something as incredibly stupid as to cross me?”

In a movement that was faster than Rina was currently capable of perceiving, Kumayomaru flashed to Hibiki’s last two remaining comrades and ripped them both in half. He paused long enough to look Hibiki full in the face before he exploded into the colossal form of his true Bear Demon nature. Rina shrank back as she beheld his incomprehensible size. Everything was still for the space of maybe two breaths and then everything exploded into terror and chaos.

Kumayomaru turned and swung one massive paw at the nearest bystanders as Rina looked on in horror. In one swipe, he dismembered or eviscerated a group of frightened females and the younglings they’d tried to guard. And then his rampage began for real. To her shame, Rina was too frozen with shock to do anything but stare slack-jawed at the violence, the level of which she had never beheld before now. He mercilessly went after everyone in his sight and he spared no one. He saved Hibiki for last and, despite what Hibiki had done to Izumi, Rina couldn’t bear to look at the special attentions Kumayomaru gave the bastard before he finally granted him death. All she knew as she trembled from where she’d mindlessly scrambled amidst the carnage was that Hibiki screamed for a very long time before he was finally silenced.

She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. All she could do was clamp her hands over her ears as she rocked mindlessly back and forth and alternated between retching and her increasingly uncontrollable hyperventilating. Too much. Too much. Too much. Too much.

Too much had been thrown at her in the span of a mere couple of days. Too much fear. Too much pain. Too much otherworldly horror she’d previously believed only happened on TV and in movies. This shit wasn’t supposed to be real. Couldn’t be real.

Jumbo jet-sized bears weren’t supposed to be real.

Jumbo jet-sized bears who butcher sentient children as casually as one cuts vegetables for stir-fry weren’t supposed to exist.

Monsters were only supposed to exist in fables.

Monsters were only supposed to be human -- something she could look at and still palpably comprehend and look down on with the knowledge that she could likely take them out should they try any bullshit with her.

After what David had done to her, she’d done her damnedest to train and make herself the baddest thing around so she would never again have to feel so helpless. There was nothing in the world that could have prepared her for horror of this magnitude. Not a goddamn thing.
Finally, her brain shut down and the world around her faded to white.

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She had no idea how long she’d been catatonic. The world had been green at her last memory and now it was white and cold…
The world of dreams is such a strange place, I'm almost glad I've never previously been permitted there. But that's nothing compared to the strange goddess I meet. Who are you, Lady Raven, and what is your relation to Rina? Holy shit! Who is that huge, emerald-eyed wolf at your side?!

Sesshomaru had searched the surrounding area madly, desperately, for three days, growing increasingly despondent when, sure enough, he could find no trace of where Kumayomaru had taken Rina. Now he poised himself on the precipice of the Well, about to return to Rina’s era briefly. He needed to see Ryuka, check on Izumi, and let them know what was going on. He needed to collect his things from Sota. And he needed to get back post haste so he could resume his search for Rina. However much he had to fight back the deepening despair, there was no way in hell he would give up.

She was still alive. He was sure of it. He didn’t know how he knew, but his beastly senses knew beyond a doubt all the same.

Still, he felt so lost now. It didn’t matter where he was -- here in modern-day Tokyo or back in his era -- without her and without having any idea where she was or if she was alright, he felt truly lost. It was an odd dichotomy. He felt more lost now than he had even when Rin had been murdered even though he was definitely more functional now than he had been back then.

He gazed across his current view of the city. It kept bustling on, oblivious, even without this part of him that had come to be so vital to him in such a short amount of time. It didn’t seem right and it was terribly surreal. He realized he didn’t even know where to find Ryuka. Not sure what else to do, he made his way to the club. Of course, it was completely deserted and the signs on the door simply said it would remain closed until further notice.

Next, he went to Rina’s apartment building. He dreaded going back in there, though. The memory of the damage, the evidence of the violence that had taken place there… he wasn’t sure he could take it. All the same, he trudged up the flights of stairs up to her floor. He didn’t remember the damage being this extensive, though that was hardly surprising. Turning toward the still-splintered doorway of Rina’s apartment, he saw that it was blocked off with the yellow ribbon that denoted an off-limits crime scene. He didn’t care. He wouldn’t be deterred.
He stepped easily through the gaps in the tape and had to force himself to not be driven to his knees at the sight of all the blood that still streaked the walls. Wait… had he been so out of it as to not realize that most of the blood reeked of reptiles? No. No, he was certain that was not the case. The scents had been masked. And, of course, with the reptiles responsible being thoroughly dead, of course, the spell had worn off. He turned and went into Rina’s bedroom.

A deep, profound ache clawed at his heart, however. Her room, her bed, the sheets, all were still awash in her scent. He limply crawled onto her bed and unashamedly clung to the pillow that had her scent the strongest. Breathing her in, the cracks in his heart split deeper and deeper, breaking down to the core of him. His breathing grew ragged as the pain brought him ever closer to a precipice he’d never really known was there and had never dared to stray too near. He’d always resisted any and everything that had ever tried dragging him to this place. Now, he was helpless to stop it.

He had kissed her here for the first time, tasted the honeyed sunshine of her skin, held her in his arms and felt the way she fit against him and him against her so perfectly. He’d tasted the first sweet sips of her passion and had been warmed by the flames of her bold responses to him. Their chance to finish what they’d started had been stolen from them for the time being. Maybe even forever, if he was unable to find her. That was only a sand-grain of the pain that wended its way to his core and dragged him by the hair to do what he’d never done before.

A shuddering breath wracked his chest as the first sob tore past his throat. Never see her face again. He curled in on himself to shut out the world to bury himself alone with the pillow that contained her scent and now received the outpouring of his misery. Never hear her voice again. Never hear the music of her laugh. The dam had broken and he was carried helplessly along on the tides of 900 years of pent up emotions. Never feel her touch again. Never hold her in his arms again. Never witness her rage or feel the awe at the grace and temerity with which she handled herself. Never feel the warmth of her flames.

His mind continued to spin with all the cruel “Never”s that spilled forth, refusing him any respite from the tidal wave of his grief and rage until it had been thoroughly emptied from him. Hours later, the only sound that dredged from Sesshomaru’s throat was an occasional hiccup. He was so exhausted, he could barely move. He felt as though he’d experienced every battle he’d ever been involved in all over again and all at once. At last, with one last shuddering sigh, he slipped away into sleep.

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He didn’t normally dream. Not even after Rin’s death. But were dreams supposed to be like this? He looked around him, but there was nothing. No light. No darkness. No environment of any kind. Just… empty zero-space. The Dog in him whimpered uneasily. This wasn’t natural at all.
Suddenly Rin was next to him. She was a little girl again and looking up at him with a serious expression more like how she sometimes would when she had been nearly a woman grown. Then she smiled gently at him. “I knew you could do it, Father.” She took his hand. “Come with me.”

The zero-space around them became a cave. Or had it always been one? He wordlessly followed his daughter. Or he thought he did. His feet were moving and yet he wasn’t going anywhere and Rin was starting to leave him behind. She turned around with a frown.

“Father? Father, I need you to focus.” She was before him again, but this time she was the woman he remembered before she’d-- No!!! No, don’t see that! Her wounds had started to reappear. She grabbed him urgently by the face and forced him to look into her eyes.

“Father, breathe. Look at me, just me, and breathe.” She breathed along with him for a few moments as he tried to match the slow and easy pace she set. “I know this is all terribly disorienting. The dream world can be overwhelming like that. But it becomes what your thoughts are, so I need you to focus and I need you to let me drive it, ok?”

“Rin,” he finally spoke her name hoarsely. “Are you really here?”

She smiled at him then. “I am really here, Father. I watched over you while you finally took the step you’ve been needing to for so long and I came with you when you finally faded into sleep and brought you here to the dream world.”

The more she spoke, the more the world began to take shape.

“Demons of your caliber don’t often come here. It’s dangerous. The dream world is a world of infinite creation and it can magnify the powers of demons like you to a dangerous degree that can actually affect the waking world. But I brought you here because the dream world can be used to find those who have been lost.

“Rina’s still alive, Father, and the dream world will prove it to you.”

“I know she’s still alive,” he said quietly to her.

“I know, but if we can find Rina in here, she may be able to tell us where she is.” She took his hand. “Now, follow me and just go with it. Try not to overthink, ok?”
This time, when his feet moved, he actually made progress. The cave came out into a house. Rin shoved the door curtain aside and they found themselves in the reptile village again. It was completely empty, unlike the last time Sesshomaru had seen it. A small whimper caught his right ear and he whipped around, trying to find the voice’s origin.

Out of habit, he tried to smell, but there was nothing at first. Then a faint, ghostly scent of her came through. Her scent but it was sodden in the salt of tears. It was all around him no matter which way he turned.

“Father, stop. You’re smelling her on your pillow. You’re not going to be able to tell what direction she’s at that way.”

He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm. He breathed in her scent again, this time willing himself to focus on the essence of it rather than the literal scent of her that surrounded him. There!

A row of bushes by the outer wall of the village! He started over there and then felt dizzy as he was there before he’d even taken two steps. He shook off the dizziness as he saw her huddled behind the bushes, trembling, rocking back and forth, and covering her eyes.

“Rina!” he called to her, reaching out with his hand. She didn’t hear him, though! His heart cracked open in despair. She was only a few feet away from him and yet no matter how he reached for her, she was miles away.

It can’t be real! It can’t be real! her inner voice repeated over and over, overcome with hysteria, as she continued to sway.

A terrible roar behind him caused Sesshomaru to whip about in alarm. Kumayomaru was in his full Bear Demon form and every bit as monstrous as Sesshomaru remembered. Thus he witnessed the horror that had occurred to the village in the hours before he, InuYasha, Miroku, and Shippo had come upon it. His heart roared in rage when, upon completing the slaughter of everyone there, Kumayomaru shifted back down to his still-towering human form and walked toward Rina, his black eyes glittering with sadistic amusement at her traumatized rocking.

“Now, what to do with you, Wolf woman?” He knelt in front of her but her rocking did not let up or hesitate. Sesshomaru looked at her eyes and saw that they were empty and she was silent. “Shall I kill you now or shall I take you back to my island and enjoy you for a while before I leave your broken body for Sesshomaru to find?” Kumayomaru reached out to touch her and gasped when Rina’s eyes suddenly turned completely white, her face changing horrifically to a creature Sesshomaru couldn’t quite recognize. Her energy spiked and snapped, exploding when
Kumayomaru’s hand made contact with her rapidly-expanding aura.

“You will not lay a hand on her!” An unearthly, unfamiliar, terrifying voice shrieked as Kumayomaru was sent sprawling. The creature that now rose to her feet where Rina had once been was a towering, unbelievably tall woman with knee-length black hair, a cloak of raven feathers, and a huge raven perched on her arm. She was clothed in armor that Sesshomaru recognized as being of the Ancient Celts. She wielded an impossibly large Celtic claymore in one hand as if it were of no greater weight than a child’s toy sword. Next to her stood an equally-impossibly large black wolf. A dire wolf?!

Wait, is that… Rina?! Sesshomaru gasped as he recognized her unearthly emerald eyes set in the face of this wondrous beast! In her basic dire wolf form, she stood as tall as some of the warhorses Sesshomaru had heard about in other countries. She definitely gave some of the wolf demons of this era a run for their money. And this was just her basic form, Sesshomaru could sense. In her full-blown form she could likely give Kumayomaru “a heckin’ big concern”, as he’d heard Izumi say prior.

As it was, even with the size she was now, she’d already given Kumayomaru a hefty amount of pause and given a similarly hefty chill that wended up Sesshomaru’s spine. As she stood beside the tall warrior woman with the raven on her arm, her eyes never left Kumayomaru’s still-prone form. Her lips were curled back from dripping fangs and the snarls that emitted from her throat promised the bear demon an abundance of apocalyptic pain if he gave even the smallest of provocations.

The woman didn’t take her seething, demonic black eyes from Kumayomaru’s face either. “I can’t stop you from taking her to wherever it is you intend, but I can promise you that if you harm her in any way, I can make her embody your deepest nightmares. You may be a demon, you puny bear, but I suggest you not get on the bad side of a goddess.” She brandished her claymore at him with an easy skill that bespoke the truth of her words.

Given what Kumayomaru had already put Rina through, Sesshomaru could not help the immense smug enjoyment he felt in seeing the black-eyed bear demon look like he was on the verge of shitting himself any second now. But… nothing else happened.

To Sesshomaru’s surprise, everything else in this world stopped as if time had been frozen. Everything except him. He looked around in confusion. What the hell had happened? When he looked back at the gigantic woman, he found that she was staring right at him!

You are him -- the one her thoughts dwell on. Her voice resounded in his head and his heart skipped a beat. Then the towering woman walked toward him and knelt down until she could look him in the eyes.
Who are you? his thoughts stammered.

Until Katarina knows who I am, it’s not for me to tell you. For now, however, you may simply call me Lady Raven.

Sesshomaru knelt before her without hesitation. My Lady Raven, can you tell me where Rina is now?

She is right there.

But--

Lady Raven shook her head at him. You don’t understand. When you entered the dream world, it took you back to this moment in time as this particular instance happened. You basically came back in time and witnessed it firsthand. Wherever she is at the moment in time you came back here from, I cannot say because I do not yet know, myself. I may be a goddess but, unlike what humans and even some demons think, we’re not omnipotent or infallible. I cannot tell you what you and she will endure on your separate journeys for the time being. Just know that I will do everything I can to ensure her safety until the time lends itself most fruitful for your reunion.

Sesshomaru inclined his head respectfully to the unknown goddess before him. His heart ached, although he didn’t really want to examine the why of it right now. But there was a comfort that accompanied the ache and it was for that he expressed his thanks. I thank you for your promises to keep her safe in the meantime. If you can, can you just tell her… As much as he wanted to finish that sentence, he wanted her to hear it straight from him for the first time, not through someone else. Tell her that I won’t give up. That I will find her. Can you do that for me, please, Lady Raven?

I will tell her, young yokai. She will know that she is in your thoughts every bit as much as you are in hers.

A piercing flash of light exploded at her words and Sesshomaru hid his face. When the light faded, the woman was gone and Rina was leaning against the wall. Her rocking had ceased and her eyes looked sightlessly into the distance. She practically looked dead and Sesshomaru had almost
thought she was. No, he recognized this look, he realized. It was similar to how Kohaku had looked after--

A hand on his arm interrupted him from having to finish that thought. It was Rin. This time Kohaku was by her side, holding her hand and looking at her with that tenderness that Sesshomaru now thoroughly understood.

“She’s not going the way I went, Sesshomaru,” Kohaku spoke to him. “After Rin died, I gave up.” Nodding his head toward Rina, where Kumayomaru carefully grabbed her up to sling her over his shoulder -- clearly not wishing to provoke the Raven woman again -- Kohaku continued. “Rina’s not giving up. Her brain just needs a break for a while. She’s witnessed more horror than she would normally have to see in her time, but she’s not giving up. Come on, Sesshomaru,” he added, turning back to him, “you’ve only known her for two days, but you already know her better than that. Do you really think that audacious redhead would give up on getting back to you and her friends?”

“No. You’re right, Kohaku,” Sesshomaru answered softly. Then he tried to move so as to follow after Kumayomaru and try to find where he’d taken Rina, but he couldn’t! He was literally rooted to the spot as the world around them faded to white and he, Rin, and Kohaku were left standing in the zero-space.

“I think that was about the time that he cloaked their scent and their whereabouts so they could not be followed,” Rin speculated softly, her chocolate eyes saddened. “I was afraid of this.”

Sessomaru nodded, feeling an aching emptiness. Yet, he spoke. ”It’s alright, Rin. At least you were able to bring me here and show me what actually happened. And I know she’s alive and not entirely unprotected while in that motherfucker’s captivity. And right now, I’ll take every shred of hope that I can get.”

“Good. Then, it’s time to wake up, Father.” Her voice sounded strange, like someone else’s voice spoke the same words in unison with her, for the most part. Wait. Was someone shaking him?

Sessomaru! Sessomaru, wake up!”

His eyes opened blearily. He still felt so exhausted and his eyes felt like someone had grated upon them with shark skin. He felt another shake and he looked over. “Ryuka,” his voice croaked.
“We’ve got to go, Sessho,” she said kindly.

He looked around. It had still been daylight when he’d come here, but now it was deep in the nighttime. “What time is it?”

“It’s only about midnight. But I sensed you when you returned to this era and I’ve been trying to find you. Come on. We gotta go before anyone realizes that you’re here.”

“I’m surprised that hasn’t happened yet,” he said as he wearily stood up. He looked around Rina’s room and felt a pang. He didn’t want to leave. Didn’t want to leave her smell even though he knew he must. “Fuck it,” he hissed. He drew back the comforter of her bed and snatched the middle blanket.

“You’re not supposed to remove anything from a crime scene,” Ryuka chided him with gentle, understanding amusement.

“As if this would so terribly impose on their investigation that can’t ever really go anywhere,” he scoffed. He spotted Rina’s backpack and stuffed the blanket in it before strapping it to his back. “I’m ready.”

As they stepped out of Rina’s apartment for the last time, Sesshomaru made note of something that he waited to ask Ryuka about til they reached the roof. “Where is everyone here?”

“They cleared out the residents on Rina’s floor as well as some of the surrounding ones where some of the lizards tried to attack them.” Then she transformed into her Dragon and waited for Sesshomaru to settle himself on her back.

Izumi? He asked simply. He felt her relief even before she replied to him.

Izumi is just fine, she replied to him. She’s been home since two days ago.

He uttered a sigh of relief. Thank the gods. Oh, Ryuka, I’m so glad.
He felt her smile at him. **Me too. I’ve never been so terrified in all my life**, she admitted and he felt a pang go through her heart that he was, by now, all too familiar with, himself.

Does she remember anything of what happened?

A bit, though she didn’t witness much before that sonofabitch found her and ran her through. **Rina was able to hide her away in her apartment’s attic space. They didn’t find her until Rina got thrown through the wall.**

Sesshomaru flinched. Then Ryuka filled him in on the other goings-on that had occurred in the past few days of his absence. Detective Kanagawa had, indeed, gotten the call about the attack on Rina’s wolves. Ryuka had gone herself to make sure that the four who had died were given proper burials the way Rina would have wanted. They were buried with other members of their pack who had died before them.

The workers at the wildlife center were sworn to secrecy about the bodies of the lizards that had remained but after that, Ryuka had taken the extra step to alter their memories so they wouldn’t remember that the lizards had been demonic in nature. **There are just some memories that humans shouldn’t have to live with.**

Wait, when you said that you had to do some damage control at the club the night Rina was shot… Sesshomaru let the question hang in the air.

**Yep. There were a few customers and some staff not in the know who witnessed me, you, and Rina starting to change. Sota was one of them, but I already knew he knew about you, so all of his memories are intact and now he’s practically glued to me and Izumi.**

Oh, and he and his family know about what happened to Rina and they want you to go see them as soon as possible, so make sure you look in on them before you head back, ok?

**I will surely do,** Sesshomaru promised. **I was going to anyway since I didn’t have the chance to tell them anything before I went back to my era.**

At last Ryuka landed at the cottage she and Izumi shared to the east of the main city and transformed back to her human form. Before they went in, Sesshomaru asked, “So, how is Izumi doing?”
“Dude, Ryuu did such a good job of healing her the rest of the way that at this point, you can barely tell she was wounded at all, much less at death’s door. Obviously, she still deals with some mental trauma about it, though. She’s had nightmares every night since then.” Ryuka smiled sadly at him. “You know, I’ve found myself thinking I never should have let her ask me out. That maybe she’d have been better off and safer if I’d kept her away.”

“Now, you know better than that,” Sesshomaru chided her roughly. “Look at who her best friend has always been even before she knew you existed. And look at who, apparently, her best friend was fated to be intertwined with.” Sesshomaru touched her cheek with sad, brotherly affection. “This was not in any way your fault, Ryuka. If anything, her being with you is what saved her life, right? If you had turned her away, then your brother would not have been there to save her life when this inevitability took place.”

He smiled as Ryuka considered his words and her manner became thoroughly less burdened. “You’re right, Sesshomaru. I hadn’t thought of that.” She smiled at him and he was stunned to see tears in her eyes. “This has just been so hard. I thought that two centuries of living had prepped me for everything, but…” her voice choked off with a shuddering breath.

Sesshomaru quickly yet gently drew her into his arms so she could cry quietly and cast off the buildup of worries and fears from the past several days. “If it makes you feel any better, my lady Dragon, I wasn’t any better prepared for this and I’m a little more than 900 years old.”

She gave a sniffling chuckle at his words. “I’m not sure that does make me feel better, actually.”

“No, I don’t suppose it would. But you’re doing well, my lady. Far better than me, in fact. I only found out what it means to really and truly cry earlier this evening before you found me.”

Ryuka looked up at him as she wiped her sapphire eyes. “Really?”

“Truly,” he affirmed. “I’ve never really known how to. The closest I came was rage-crying after my daughter was murdered, going catatonic, rage-crying some more when my mother pulled me out, and that was about it. I never really knew what it meant to actually just cry in grief or sadness. And now that I think about it, I think that’s what Rina was trying to get me to do when she gave me that CD…” his voice trailed off as he remembered how she’d studied his face the next day at the beach. *My cunning Firefly. She knew that if she brought it up, I’d fight it, so she trusted me to figure it out.* He smiled sadly at the thought.

“Yuka? Are you ok?” Izumi came out of the door. She ran up to both of them and didn’t hesitate to throw her arms tightly around Ryuka and Sesshomaru.
“I’m alright, Yumi,” Ryuka answered her, nuzzling her face into Izumi’s neck. “I guess I just needed to cry a little bit more. That, and I needed a bit of a reality check, for which Sesshomaru was most helpful with as well as the brotherly shoulder.”

“Can I get that in a written statement?” Sesshomaru asked wryly. “I’d like to see the look on my little half-brother’s face.”

Izumi and Ryuka stared at his dry expression before breaking down into snorting giggles of amusement. “Ah, so you’ve been one of those types of brothers,” Izumi teased.

“More than you know, little sister,” Sesshomaru snorted. “You know, the night of the Karaoke, I heard someone telling their companion that their family put the ‘fun’ in ‘dysfunctional’ -- quite sarcastically of course. Well, not to make it a pissing contest or anything, but with mine and InuYasha’s fractious history up until a decade ago, we weren’t ‘fun’ dysfunctional. We were straight-up ‘fucked’.” He shrugged. “But, that was entirely my fault for looking down on him for being a half-demon and looking down on my father for falling in love with a human.”

Izumi and Ryuka both squeezed his arms affectionately. “Well, it only took you 900 years to grow up. I guess that means there’s hope for the rest of us,” Ryuka teased him gently.

“Of course there is, my lady Dragon,” Sesshomaru smiled.

Her head cocked to the side. “Why do you call me that, anyway?”

“It’s a habit. It’s how my father addressed the Dragon Royals in our time. It doesn’t matter that you’re about 1,200 years younger than me, technically. You’re a Dragon and Dragons ruled over all in my time.”

“This is all very fascinating, but can we please come back to this later?” Izumi asked in a manner that, Sesshomaru noted with amusement, reminded him so much of Rina. “I need to know what’s happened to Rina.”

Sesshomaru couldn’t help himself. “First, may I just give you one more hug?” he asked awkwardly, not used to actually requesting the physical contact he was normally so averse to. When she nodded and opened her arms, he crushed her to him, hoping to convey just how relieved he was that Rina’s best friend was ok and wishing he could find a way to let her know. He felt
Ryuka’s arms about him and he lifted an arm to hug her against him as well. These people meant
the world to Rina. Therefore, they meant the world to him.
“I’m so glad you both are alright. I’m so relieved that you survived, Izumi,” he whispered.

At last, they made their way inside. Ryuka ordered Izumi to get comfortable on the couch again
while she bade Sesshomaru to sit wherever he liked while she prepared some tea.

As they drank their tea, Sesshomaru filled them in on the events that had taken place after he’d left
to track the lizards through the Well. They expressed their saddened condolences when he spoke of
Kaede’s passing. And when he got to how he, his brother, and their friends tracked Rina to that
village only to discover the plight of the females that had remained after the horrific slaughter of
their village, Izumi and Ryuka’s jaws dropped in shock.

“I can’t believe it didn’t occur to me that no females were involved,” Ryuka whispered.

”I was closer to this situation, Ryuka, and I didn’t even realize it until Miroku pointed it out,”
Sesshomaru said gently.

“Where are Hiromi and Shizuka now?” asked Izumi. “Are they alright?”

“When I left to come back here, they were helping Kagome and the villagers to recuperate. They
swore to help defend the village in my absence and they swore themselves to Kagome to serve in
any way she needs. They wish to atone for what their men had done even though Kagome tried to
tell them it wasn’t necessary. But they wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer, so Kagome accepted their
oaths. Kagome, in turn, swore that we would help them in any way we can to get revenge for their
fallen sisters and children.”

“I feel so bad for cursing them all the way I did,” Ryuka hid her head in her hands.

“Yuka, I don’t think your curse had anything to do with it. You merely told them what they
deserved just from what you saw them doing to Rina’s wolves,” Izumi pointed out. “Besides, I hate
to say it, but I think it was Rina’s curse that carried a fuck-ton more weight.”

“Say what?” Sesshomaru asked.

Izumi told him what she could remember of the attack after she’d been found. “And when that
bastard, Hibiki, ran me through with his claws, Rina went absolutely nuts. I wasn’t sure if I was
remembering things right when I woke up in the hospital, but Ryuu helped me to piece together what I could remember.” She took another swallow of tea.
“Rina became… something else. She wasn’t just a Wolf, she was something else that was far scarier. Her eyes went blood-red like how they did at the club that night, but then they flashed completely black. And gods, the way she screamed.” She shuddered. “I never want to hear that sound again. It wasn’t even a vocal scream. It was in our heads and it was the most horrifying thing I’ve ever heard. She told them that she’d kill them all. Then she flat-out said she cursed them all to die before the next sunrise.”

Sesshomaru’s jaw dropped. “So, she wielded witch-magic?” he asked.

“And then some. It was far scarier than any witch-magic I’ve ever read about. I don’t know if they saw it, but when she spoke, there was this black pall that hung about them. That’s the last thing I remember.” She shuddered again at the memory.

Ryuka frowned. “And you said she made this proclamation in that voice? That scream?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Ryuka’s frown deepened. “Hold on. Let me get my computer real quick.” She left the room and returned momentarily with a large, rectangular device that she opened on her lap, sort of like a book. Sesshomaru wanted to ask more about this device but now was not really the time. Instead, he just quietly finished his tea and poured himself a refill while Ryuka’s fingers flew over the buttons.

“Sorry, Sesshomaru, I know you’ve got questions, but just gimme a bit.”

“I’m not even worried about it. I just want to know whatever it is you’re looking for.”

Finally, Ryuka seemed to find whatever she was seeking. “Ok, I remembered that Rina once told me that even though she was born in America, as far as she recalls, her ancestry is Celtic. Her father was Scottish and her mother was Irish. Mind you, I could already smell the Wolf on her, though it wasn’t anything I was particularly familiar with.
“But what you said about her scream, Izumi, that rang a bit of a bell about some stories my mother had told me of spirits she’d encountered in her travels before she’d settled down to marry my father. She’d traveled to Ireland once and she’d seen spirits that would wail for people who would end up dying not long after. They weren’t curses, mind you, they were just death omens. They were called banshees.”
She turned the computer around so Izumi and Sesshomaru could see pictorial depictions.

“Holy shit,” Izumi breathed as she pointed to one particular artistic rendering of a banshee. “That looks an awful lot like what I saw coming through Rina when she lost her shit.”

Sesshomaru noted the captioning that claimed the drawing to be from the 16- or 1700’s and it said that the person who had drawn it had claimed to have done so after actually spotting one of the terrifying specters. Then something else caught his attention. “Wait, can you show me a larger version of this picture?” he asked as he pointed to Ryuka what had caught his attention.

She clicked on it. It was another depiction of a banshee, but behind her stood a woman with a raven on her arm and a wolf by her side. The hair on his neck rose.

“Who is that supposed to be? The woman with the raven and the wolf?”

“That is a Celtic goddess called The Morrigan. She is a goddess of war and destruction.” Ryuka turned the computer so she could read the information with greater ease. “She was known to fly into battle in the shape of a raven and terrify the enemies of her chosen with her cries. Sometimes she would run beside her chosen soldiers into battle in the shape of a huge wolf and surrounded with a pack of wolves, who were the souls of her fallen soldiers that desired to serve her beyond death.

“It was considered an ill omen for any who spotted her at a river where it was said she washed the clothes of the dead. It’s how she also came to be known as the Washer Woman or The Washer at the Ford. She was a goddess known for shapeshifting. But it’s also said that it is she who ruled over the spirits known as the banshee.”

“I’ve seen her,” Sesshomaru whispered as he recalled his dream from earlier.

“Excuse me?” Izumi asked him, stunned.

He explained to them how Rin had come to him after he’d fallen asleep earlier in Rina’s apartment before Ryuka found him and how she’d guided him into the world of dreams, how he’d found himself in the reptile village to witness the carnage Kumayomaru had unleashed.

“Rina was sitting there, rocking back and forth and slipping away into catatonia. I couldn’t touch her, couldn’t reach her,” Sesshomaru whispered, his heart aching. “But when Kumayomaru came to her, he’d said something about what he should do with her, pondering if he should go ahead and
kill her too or if he should take her with him and…” his throat closed with retching disgust, “and ‘enjoy her for himself’ before killing her so I could find her body.”


“But when he reached out to put his hands on her, she changed. She snapped to and looked right at him, but it wasn’t her. Her eyes went completely white, she screamed at him that he would not touch her, and then, in her place, stood that woman,” he pointed at the picture on the screen. “She looked vastly different than this depiction, but I know it was her. She wore Celtic battle armor, she had black hair as long as mine, and she had a cloak of raven feathers. But she had a raven on her arm just like that and the wolf at her side was Rina!”

“Ohmigods, are you serious?” Izumi whispered.

“She was huge! And I got the sense that this was just Rina’s basic Wolf transformation. But she was still enormous! So was the woman, actually. She was at least three times my height and Rina’s head towered over me by at least two feet. She looked like a dire wolf but she was at least the size of the big warhorses I’ve heard tales of from other countries.”

Ryuka tapped buttons on her computer a little bit more before showing him a picture of a large, thick-boned horse standing next to a human male for size reference. “Like the size of one of these?”

He nodded.

“Jesus. That’s intense. And you’re sure it was Rina?”

“Absolutely positive,” he affirmed. “I recognized her eyes. They were that same otherworldly green.” Then he told them how the woman had stopped time to look at him after she’d thoroughly scared the shit out of Kumayomaru. “She recognized me as being the one who was so much in Rina’s thoughts,” he said, a soft yet sad smile playing over his face at the memory. “She wouldn’t tell me who she was, though. She said that it wasn’t for me to know until Rina knows who she is, so she told me to just refer to her as Lady Raven.” Then he told them of how Lady Raven explained to them that when he’d entered the dream world, he’d traveled back in time to the moment that Kumayomaru massacred the village and, therefore, she could not yet tell him where Rina had been taken after that.
“Jesus, that’s a mind-fuck,” Ryuka pronounced.

“I’m still having trouble fully wrapping my head around it myself,” Sesshomaru agreed. “But she promised me that she would do everything she could to keep Rina safe. She said she did not know how long our journeys would diverge like this, but that she would do what she could to keep Rina safe until then.”

The three of them sat in silence for several moments while Izumi and Ryuka processed what Sesshomaru had revealed to them.

“So, she’s gone, for now, gods only know where, and with no real recourse in finding her because Kumayomaru is capable of cloaking his scent the way that Dragons can,” Ryuka surmised softly. “But she’s tied to an ancient Celtic goddess of death and war who will at least make Kumayomaru’s life a living hell if he tries any shit against her.”

“Yes. I suppose that does about sum it up.” Sesshomaru felt a wave of hopelessness wash over him. “And I have no idea where to begin looking for him to find her.”

“Sesshomaru, do you think it’s possible I might be able to travel back with you through the Well?” Ryuka finally asked, a thought coming to her.

“I honestly don’t know. It was a shock when the well opened to me in the first place since it had closed for so long after we succeeded in destroying the Shikon Jewel that had seemed to open it initially.”

“I’d like to at least come with you to the Shrine. I want to get a look at this Well. Those Reptilian bastards were right about one thing and I have this in common with them: I can see auras, too, though I don’t walk around with that Sight turned on all the time the way they did. Maybe I can figure out why the Well opened to you and see if it would be open for me for at least long enough for what I have in mind.”

“Ryuka?” Izumi asked, her voice frightened. “What if you go and you can’t come back?”

Ryuka knelt before her, her sapphire eyes blazing with fierce passion and promise. “I will make sure that Ryuu looks after you. And if I go and do end up trapped there, then I promise you, my love, that I will still make my way back to you even if I have to go the long way. Dragons live even longer than the Inu Daiyokai and I will walk through the fires of history to be with you again if
that’s what I have to do.” At Izumi’s tearful nod, Ryuka pulled Izumi to her to kiss her with ravenous promise.

Sesshomaru’s heart ached and his throat closed as he witnessed the love between these two women. Gods, how he wished to hold Rina like this again.

“Let us rest for the night and we will go see the Higurashis at first light,” he said softly. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll leave you two to your privacy and go sit beside the lake I saw outside.”

“Are you sure? We do have a guest room,” Izumi offered when she, at last, came up for air.

He smiled at them. “Yes, little sister, I am sure. I need to clear my head and meditate for a while. And I don’t want to be a reason as to why you two might feel the need to… ah… restrict yourselves.” He bowed with a gentle smile and took his leave.

As he walked around the lake, lost in his thoughts, he could hear the unrestrained keenings of their passion. Ryuka and Izumi made love through the night as though it just might be their last. He felt himself harden with longing as he found himself imagining what it would be like to elicit those sounds from Rina. He seated himself beside the lake to try to focus his thoughts better.

Instead, he found himself with her back in her kitchen, kissing her breathless, reveling in the way her head dropped back at his ministrations and her mouth, swollen with his kisses, hung open with gasping ecstasy. He found himself with her at the beach as she teased him with more of those heinous-yet-delicious spicy red chips, eating one before she kissed him and passed the fire on to him with her tongue. He found himself running with her in unfettered, delicious freedom through the forests near Kagome’s village. Running for no other reason than the joy of being free.

His eyes opened. He’d felt her there in all of them! Not just as a fantasy! Rather, it was as though her mind had reached out and found him in those places before. He could sense, underneath it all, she had been striving to calm herself before a storm of hell had broken open before her. And when he’d found her there, she’d guided him through everything she had envisioned and wished for.

One last vision broke through to him and his eyes closed again. He found himself with her in her bed. Sheets tangled about them as their bodies entwined. Her hooded gaze searing up at him as he moved within her. The sounds of her moaning his name as she moved her body against his before drawing him down to rain kisses all over his face. The feel of his fangs puncturing her neck and the taste of her blood as he laid upon her the mark that would make her his. The feel of his body roaring in release as she laid her mark upon him in return…
The next morning, Sesshomaru took a deep breath to steel himself before he and Ryuka began their ascent of the stairs leading up to the Higurashi Shrine. Ryu had come at Ryuka’s request to assure that he would guard Izumi with his life should she not return and he’d bade his little sister success and safety if she were, indeed, able to pass through the Well with Sesshomaru. Then Izumi had kissed Ryuka soundly one last time before reminding Ryuka of her promise and expressing her faith in her Dragon to come back to her.

Now, as they walked up the steps, Sesshomaru spotted Sota, who had his backpack slung over his shoulder. He must be heading out for his college classes. Sota, however, pulled up sharply as his eyes beheld Sesshomaru and Ryuka’s approach.

“Oh my gods, Sesshomaru! You’re back!” he flung himself down the few steps separating them and grabbed Sesshomaru in a tight, brotherly hug before bestowing the same upon Ryuka.

“Sota, are your mother and grandfather here?” Ryuka asked with a bow of respect.

“Yeah! They’re still having breakfast.”

“And you are off to university, yes?”

He ardently shook his head. “Fuck that! I’ll go tomorrow. I want to know what’s going on with Rina!” He turned and ran back towards the house with Sesshomaru and Ryuka following close behind him. He threw open the door with a loud crash and hollered for his mother and grandfather, announcing Sesshomaru’s return.

Once they had recovered from the fright Sota had caused them and once they had welcomed Sesshomaru back with hugs and condolences as well as welcomed Ryuka to their home, Sesshomaru brought them up to speed on everything he’d thus far been able to find out, right up through his visit to the dream world.

“And Ryuka accompanied me today because she hopes to be able to travel with me back through the Well. She wants to find her Dragon ancestors and see if they may be able to lend any help in tracking Kumayomaru down,” he finished, at last, feeling rather out of breath.
“Do you think it’s possible?” Mrs. Higurashi asked, rather breathless herself. Sesshomaru knew
where her thoughts additionally were even though she didn’t speak it. “And do you think they
would be able to break through his ability to erase his scent the way your kind does?”

“I don’t know,” Ryuka answered gently. “But we don’t know until we try. But first, I must look at
the Well and see what I can suss out in the first place.” She paused for a moment as though she
wanted to say something else but then thought the better of it. “So, shall we get started?” she asked
instead. At the affirmative nods of everyone present, “Then lead me to the Well.”

Once there, her eyes took on a strange mandala shape much like Ryuu’s had when he’d extracted
the bullet from Rina’s shoulder, though the shape was markedly different. She reached out to touch
the wood of the Well and frowned. Then, wordlessly, she turned to walk up the steps and out of the
well house and walked toward the Sacred Tree, Goshinboku. She approached the tree and regarded
it silently but intently. Even though he couldn’t hear her, Sesshomaru knew she was speaking to the
great Tree. Finally, she laid her hand reverently against the Tree’s trunk and gave a nod that echoed
of humble thanks.

When she opened her eyes, they were back to their normal form. “Goshinboku is what is known
among my people and among demons as a Tree of Ages.” Her eyes found Grandpa Higurashi’s
when he nodded his confirmation. “And the Bone Eater’s Well was made with wood given by
Goshinboku.” Another nod. “Trees of Ages are rare sentinels of time. But Goshinboku is the rarest
of them all because he is the only tree to have had a portal unwittingly crafted from his body. He
told me that yes, the Well was activated by the power of the Shikon no Tama, but it’s been within
his power ever since to open the portal or close it at his discretion.

“But in Sesshomaru’s case, he was ordered by the Lords of Time to open it because Sesshomaru’s
destiny could not be fulfilled otherwise.”

“Lords of Time?” Sota blurted. “Like the Timelords on Doctor Who?” Sesshomaru couldn’t help a
small smile at the mention of what he now knew was a TV show, which Rina had offhandedly
mentioned the day they had spent together at the beach.

Ryuka herself couldn’t resist a laugh either. “No, I’m afraid not, Sota. The Lords of Time,” she
explained, “are an ancient race, much like the Greek Fates, who guard the threads of fate and
ensure that, essentially, things go the way they’re meant to. And sometimes, on their watch, there
are people whose fates must cross the varying streams of time in order to keep things flowing the
way they’re supposed to.

“Goshinboku can open the portal at his discretion, but in Sesshomaru’s case, he was decreed to
open the portal for him so as to allow the events of fate to play out the way the Lords of Time
informed him of.” Here, she sighed. “I am not one of the ones decreed passage through the portal
by the Lords of Time, so he refused to grant me passage by his own discretion. And I understand
why. In delicate situations like this, it’s like having too many chefs in the kitchen and my passage
may end up throwing things out of balance rather than maintaining them. But he asked me to give
him some time to petition the Lords for their guidance in the matter.”
She stood up then to pace restlessly. “That being said, Goshinboku spoke to me of Kagome. When the Sacred Jewel was at last destroyed, the portal was closed. That was another situation in which the Lords of Time decreed his obedience. He was not allowed to open the portal for her again until after she’d come of age. But her destiny still lay with InuYasha in the past. She just had to wait for a little while before she could next take her place in that destiny.

“She is still not allowed to come back through yet. Not until this situation with Sesshomaru and Rina is more resolved. But he did promise me that eventually he would be able to open the Well for her to come and see you all again.” She looked at Mrs. Higurashi. “So do not worry, my lady. You have not yet said your last goodbye to your daughter.”

Mrs. Higurashi burst into tears at Ryuka’s words. “Oh, thank you!” she sobbed. “I’ve missed her so much! Of course I wanted Kagome to be happy! I still do, but I miss my baby!”

Everyone gathered around her to give comfort as Kagome’s mother unloaded 7 years of unspoken heartbreak and longing.

Then an energy called through the house, causing Sesshomaru and Ryuka to look at each other knowingly. “Goshinboku calls for me,” she said simply before she turned to go back outside to the Tree. Sesshomaru followed her and retained a respectful distance as Ryuka spoke silently with the great Tree once more.

Finally, she approached him, shaking her head. “The Lords of Time have refused my passage, but they did say that I am on the right track. You’ll need to find them, Sesshomaru. Goshinboku was able to procure their permission for me to send a letter along with you to explain the circumstances. They would not guarantee that my Dragon ancestors would acquiesce to help you, but this is part of the path you are meant to take.”

Sesshomaru nodded. “Then that’s all I need to know.”

“Not quite. In your time, my ancestors were in hibernation. They’d grown weary of the turmoil of the Warring States era and they went to sleep, leaving my great-grandfather to watch over them in stone-stasis as they slept the deeper Sleep.

“Go back today but try to be back in no more than two weeks’ time. I need to consult with my mother and see if she will tell me where you can find my great-grandfather to petition the help of the Dragons.” She gave him one last hug.

“I will see you and Izumi again soon,” Sesshomaru promised.
“Oh, also?” Ryuka gasped, thumping herself on the head. “Tell Kagome’s family that Goshinboku will permit her to send letters through the Well. All she must do is drop it into the Well in her time and they will find it on the floor of the Well here. And vice versa.”

“I will tell them. Thank you.”

Ryuka smiled. “I’m off to go reassure Izumi that she needs not fear my going through the Well after all.” She gave him one last hug, truly this time, and took her leave.

Once she was out of sight, Sesshomaru made his way back into the house to apprise the Higurashis of what Ryuka had been able to ascertain from the spirit of the Sacred Tree. When he spoke of Goshinboku opening the Well enough for letters to be sent back and forth, Mrs. Higurashi couldn’t help an ear-piercing screech of glee that about made Sesshomaru go swirly-eyed from the assault on his ears. Before he could say another word, she scampered off, hollering at him to wait so he could take her first letter to Kagome with him when he went home.

He couldn’t resist a smile. When he’d first come through to this time and knocked on the door, Mrs. Higurashi had been close to hitting him with a frying pan to his face -- something that was more and more at odds with her sweet, motherly nature the more he’d gotten to know her since -- until he’d mentioned that he came bearing a letter from Kagome. It hadn’t been until she’d torn open the letter and beheld her daughter’s neat, scholarly handwriting that she’d relaxed, burst into tears, and then hugged him in the fiercest hug he’d yet been dealt. Of course, at that time a mere three weeks ago, he’d been too broken to know what to even do with such a voracious display of affection. Now he more understood how she felt and he couldn’t help but gain a wistful satisfaction that, shitty as this current situation was, at least it was reuniting people who were living with a different kind of loss entirely.

“Hey, Sesshomaru?” Sota’s voice broke through his thoughts. “You left your stuff in my car after Rina got shot and I know you had to leave back to the Feudal era rather quickly after that. But I’ve got your stuff in my room if you want it back.”

“Yes, please. I’m afraid I’d forgotten all about it again when I came back to find Ryuka and Izumi and I apologize for taking so long to let you all know what had happened.”

Sota waved his apology off as he led Sesshomaru back to his room to give him the backpack and to help him collect his usual robes, armor, and swords from the guest room where he’d been allowed to stay. “Don’t even worry about it, Sessho,” he said with a gentle smile. “You forget, we got pretty used to this time travel stuff with Kagome. At this point, we’re pretty much an old hat with it.”
Sesshomaru opened the backpack that Mrs. Higurashi had lent him to move a few things that belonged to him from there into the backpack he’d taken from Rina’s apartment. Then he came across Sota’s Discman, still containing the CD that Rina had given him. His throat closed viciously tight at that moment and he closed his eyes to maintain his composure as best he could.

“Take it with you.”

He looked over at Sota with an unsure expression. “Are you sure?”

Sota nodded ardently. “Look, I barely use it anymore anyway, not since they came out with MP3 players and I got my iPod. Eventually, I show you how those work and we’ll upgrade you. But for now?” He paused long enough to scamper out of the room for a few moments. When he returned, Sesshomaru’s eyes arched to see that Sota carried what Rina would call a “metric fuck-ton” of batteries. “Mom said you could take every bit of the AA’s in the house to tide you over for a while. But she asked me to tell you to not dispose of them back there. Keep the dead ones in a bag so you can throw them away the next time you come to visit. She said it wouldn’t be a very good idea if things from the modern era like this end up discarded in your time.”

“That makes sense,” Sesshomaru acknowledged with a grateful smile as he packed the batteries and the Discman away into his backpack, nestled among the blanket that still carried Rina’s scent. His heart clenched all over again.

“Are you alright, big brother?” Sota asked quietly.

Sesshomaru acknowledged the sentiment with a gentle smile of genuine affection for the boy. It was still hard for him to open up to other people, though. Still, even he knew that Rina would want him to keep progressing in his journey of emotional growth, however awkward it was. “I just really miss her and I think the time it’s going to take to be reunited with her is going to feel quite long before it’s over.”

Sota responded to his words with a sad frown. “Well, however long it takes, I hope that it flies by quicker than you think it will.”

A knock at the door heralded Mrs. Higurashi’s arrival. She’d finished her letter to Kagome at last and was ready to release Sesshomaru to return to his own time. She’d also taken the time to pack several lunch boxes for Sessho to take with him.
“I used to do this all the time for Kagome so she could take food with her to share with her friends.” Her smile was bittersweet as she spoke. “I actually forgot how much I missed doing that. It was sort of like one of those rituals that became comforting because I knew I would see her again. And it was nice to be able to partake of that ritual again with you.”

Sesshomaru leaned forward to give her a gentle embrace. “Thank you very much, Mrs. Higurashi,” he said softly. “I will make sure that Kagome and the others have their fill and then some. I’m sure it will be a great comfort to Kagome to taste your food again.” When Kagome’s mother burst into tears again at his words, he patiently maintained the embrace until she signaled that she was ready for him to release her.

“Well,” she said, sniffling and wiping her eyes. “The longer I keep you, the longer it will be before these things reach her. Thank you so much for all of this, Sesshomaru.” She placed a motherly hand on his cheek. “InuYasha has an amazing young man for his older brother and I hope he knows that.”

“I don’t believe I have yet earned that with him, to be honest, Mrs. Higurashi. Rather, I’ve been getting to learn what an amazing little brother I’ve had and always scoffed at, scorned, took for granted, and hated for far too long. I can only hope I’ll be able to make everything right with him with whatever time we are granted from this day forward.”

The Higurashis accompanied Sesshomaru out to the well house to bid him a proper goodbye and he promised them that he’d be back in two weeks’ time at the most. Then he stepped off the Well’s edge and waited with frayed patience for his feet to reach the soil of his time.
The New Moon Audience

Chapter Summary

3 months feel like forever, but at last, we're able to meet with Ryuka's ancestors to petition their aid in finding Kumayomaru. But how can this be the only way? Please, Lady Kaguya, please don't do this...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To Sesshomaru’s stark surprise, InuYasha was waiting for him when he leaped out of the Well. He was so startled by InuYasha’s unexpected presence, he immediately assumed the worst.

“InuYasha! What’s wrong? Is everything alright!?”

InuYasha held his hands up in a placating gesture. “Easy, big brother. Everything is just fine, I promise. Well,” he amended thoughtfully, “as fine as they can be, given recent circumstances, anyway.”

Sesshomaru’s brows knit in confusion. “Then, what are you doing here?” The words came out with more hostility than he’d intended. “Shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound like that.” InuYasha’s arch stare became one of uncertainty.

“What?” he groused when InuYasha felt his forehead for a fever.

“I’m just not used to you apologizing is all,” InuYasha replied with a dubious frown.

Sessho tipped his head in a sideways gesture of concession. “Fair enough. However, I’m not used to you waiting for me for the helluvit and, thanks to the aforementioned recent events…” his voice trailed off.

InuYasha easily caught his elder brother’s meaning. “You automatically thought that I’d only be here if something bad was going or had gone down,” he finished soberly. “Touché, brother. That’s more than fair.” He fell into step beside Sesshomaru as they set off toward the village.

“So, why were you waiting for me, little brother?” Sessho asked curiously.
“Because I’ve been worried about you,” was InuYasha’s simple reply. Of course, his scent declared the truth of those words, not that InuYasha had ever been dishonest with him anyway. No, the brothers, rather, had a long history of being honest with each other in ways that were more than brutal.

Which was exactly why the more gentle honesty of InuYasha’s answer was so unexpected. “Really?” Sesshomaru blurted, his stunned voice betraying his incredulity and doubt. Fuck! He sounded like an ass again! The look on his little brother’s face confirmed that as well. He paused his stride, closed his eyes like he’d seen Rina do, and took a deep, slow breath to steady himself.

“I’m sorry, little brother. Truly, I am,” he spoke with sincere contrition. “I swear I’m not meaning to be such a shit.”

“Old habits, is it?” InuYasha grumbled at him. Oh crap. Sesshomaru couldn’t blame InuYasha for thinking that this was something that hearkened back to his prior scorn and hatefulness. But Sesshomaru, now so different than he used to be, had meant every word he’d spoken to Mrs. Higurashi about the regard he now had for InuYasha.

“No, brother, not anything like that,” he spoke with honesty and conviction as he put his hand on InuYasha’s shoulder. “I truly have no desire to keep our old wounds and cycles going the way I did for so long. And it was all on me, little brother. For being 900 years old, I know I was never as mature as I thought I was, so high and mighty and looking down on you for everything you never asked for. Taking my anger at Father out on you. Being so petulantly obsessed with possessing Tetsusaiga. So much childish behavior from me, it’s really quite embarrassing when I think back on it. No wonder Father was always so exasperated with me.” He passed a penitent smile to his brother.

“Sesshomaru…” InuYasha looked positively gobsmacked by his brother’s confession.

“I know I was quite out of it, to put it mildly, after Rin was killed,” Sesshomaru continued as if InuYasha hadn’t spoken. “But I do very much remember how you so stubbornly stuck by my side, even when I didn’t want you to, even when I tried to push you all as far away from me as possible. I think I understand, now, why I did so.

“I lost my daughter, one of the only people I ever really allowed myself to love. And when you, Kagome, and, to my surprise, my mother -- hell, everyone in the village; you all stuck by me, bore the weight of my grief on top of your own to a level that none of you were obligated to? It cracked my heart open in a way that terrified me. I was afraid that if I let you all close to me, let myself love any of you, that I would only suffer more. Rin’s death was more than I could bear as it was. I was afraid because losing any of you after that, I felt, would have shattered me even more entirely.” He frowned, unaccustomed to expressing his feelings like this. “Does that make sense?”
To InuYasha’s credit, he’d managed to disguise his earlier shocked expression in place of a more serious one. “I think it does, brother. It’s… terrifying… to be open like that.” He paused thoughtfully. “To be open to the possibility of pain. To be vulnerable. It’s easier to just keep people away on your terms rather than have them taken from you.” He shrugged at Sesshomaru, struggling to put his feelings to words a little, too.

“It’s why I was so caustic and hateful toward Kagome when I first met her, back when I still thought Kikyo had betrayed me. Even when she started worming her way into my affections so soon after meeting her, I tried to treat her like I hated her guts because it was easier to keep her away and treat her like shit so she’d never like me than to face the possibility that maybe she’d end up doing the same thing to me all over again.”

They nodded at each other in silent regard for a moment. Then the silence became a little awkward.

“So, are we done with this… er… heart-to-heart for now, or do you need a hug or something?”

Sesshomaru couldn’t help the snorting chuckle of amusement at InuYasha’s awkward, sardonic question. He shook his head and they continued their walk back to the village… during which he reached over to place a very Ryuu-esque noogie on InuYasha’s head in a moment of even more uncharacteristic, brotherly mischief and affection…

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Kagome greeted them first, for which Sesshomaru was grateful as he immediately delivered Mrs. Higurashi’s letter to her and briefly explained what Ryuka had discovered in her communion with Goshinboku. Kagome had burst into tears and flung her arms around him, blubbering her thanks. She informed them that they would be gathering for dinner with their group that night and then promptly raced off to pen a reply to her mother.

That evening in Kagome and InuYasha’s hut, Sesshomaru filled everyone in more thoroughly on all the events that had led up to this point. He hadn’t had time to fill anyone in as to who Rina was before he’d gone to the reptile village.

He began with a brief summary of his first week or so of being in Tokyo before he met Rina. There wasn’t much to tell beyond elaborating on the Higurashis’ kindness toward him and how he’d contented himself to stick close to the Shrine and help Grandpa with chores. The contemplation he’d done as he worked had been far less intimidating than trying to foray out into the city. In fact, until Sota dragged him to the Karaoke that fateful night, he hadn’t set foot outside of the Shrine.
They listened with rapt, soft-faced attention as Sesshomaru spoke of seeing Rina for the first time, watching her beat the shit out of the two fuckweasels that had harassed her, becoming acquainted with her in the club and asking her about her then-unknown non-human status. That created a fair amount of uproar among the group as they tried to throw their questions at Sesshomaru, who held up his hand and asked them to be patient.

Then he spoke of the feelings she’d evoked when playing her violin, the way she’d flicked him on the nose for apologizing for the way his mood had affected her, which drew a fair amount of laughter from the group and hoots of approval from InuYasha. He told them of how she’d handled the man with the gun and had gotten shot, how Ryuka had turned out to be a Dragon and how her brother had removed the bullet from Rina’s shoulder.

He kept his eyes averted from them as he spoke of holding her while she’d slept. He could sense their soft approval as his feelings for her became more evident, but he wasn’t ready to face the potential teasing. It would hurt too much to be teased about his budding relationship with her when he wasn’t even sure if he would ever actually see her alive again. Still, when he spoke of how he’d kissed Rina the following morning, the only audible reaction he heard were a couple of soft squeals from Kagome and Sango. They reminded him of how Rina had reacted to Izumi’s tale of finding out that Ryuka was a Dragon.

On and on the story poured out of him. The emergence of the foul energy that Rina had previously spoken of. Her screaming for her wolves. His and Ryuka’s flight to save them and their battle with the reptilians. Finding out that they were the very same ones who had killed Rin. Ryuka dragging the information from Hibiki as to how they’d followed Sesshomaru. Their panicked flight back to Rina’s apartment once they realized that they’d been tricked into leaving Rina and Izumi vulnerable. The terror he’d experienced upon seeing the carnage and wreckage of Rina’s apartment and realizing she was missing while Izumi was close to death.

And then he told them of his journey into the dream world with Rin as well as the discoveries he’d made with Ryuka and Izumi about the identity of the Lady Raven.

“Holy shit,” InuYasha breathed at last. He was the only one who spoke. Everyone else was far too stunned and they let everything Sesshomaru told them sink in in silence.

Kagome stood up from her cushion and approached Sesshomaru. She still said nothing but, instead, quietly encircled Sesshomaru in her arms. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered at last. “I’m so sorry you’re being put through all this. I’m so sorry for what Rina’s been put through. I can only imagine…” her words cut off as her voice thickened with the tears of her empathy.

“So, who is this Kumayomaru, anyway?” Miroku asked at last. Sesshomaru was grateful for the monk’s usual sensible good timing.
“I was wondering the same thing,” InuYasha agreed. “I mean, I’ve heard of Kumayomaru, of course, but why’s he so dead-set on you, Sesshomaru?”

Sesshomaru gathered himself with a deep breath. “Kumayomaru’s grudge against us goes even deeper than that of the reptiles and even farther back.

“Many centuries ago when I was still a child, our father went to war with a bear demon who had invaded from the east. He was originally from the continent but he wanted to challenge the Demon Lords here to rule over all of Japan. He’d conquered the lands to the east and had gotten our father’s attention. Perceiving Kumayomaru’s growing threat, Father gathered all his forces and entreated with neighboring lords to face the Bear head-on.

“Kumayomaru had already defeated Demon Lords he considered to be more powerful than the Inu Daiyokai. When Father and his forces came to him, Kumayomaru terribly underestimated Father’s power and skill and was utterly decimated and sent away from Japan in utter humiliation. That was only the beginning of Kumayomaru’s vendetta against our father and our family. And the more Father foiled him, the deeper his grudge ran.” Sesshomaru paused long enough to drink a few swigs of the sake that Miroku had brought.

“When Father was ultimately felled by Ryukotsusei, I’d heard rumors that Kumayomaru went completely mad, enraged that a Draco had accomplished what he’d repeatedly failed to achieve.” Sesshomaru’s eyes settled on his brother then. “After that, I did not hear much of anything regarding the Bear Demon but vague and very occasional whispers.”

“And, of course, none of which gave any real indication of his base’s whereabouts,” Miroku affirmed with a well-educated assumption.

“Correct, monk. And when he pursued his grudge against Father, he never seemed to stay in one place for very long, either.”

“Did you ever battle him, brother?” InuYasha asked.

Sesshomaru frowned as he realized his memory felt very thready. Vague. He could remember seeing Kumayomaru in his full Bear form before. The earliest memory had been when he was still a small child. He could remember feeling the mindless terror of seeing the demon looming before him. And yet it, like all the other handful of memories, was very isolated. He couldn’t recall anything that had taken place prior to or directly after. And when he expressed as much to answer InuYasha’s question, everyone’s expressions took on concerned frowns that mirrored his own.

“So, what’s our next move, then?” Sango questioned.
Sesshomaru brought them the rest of the way up to speed with what Ryuka had discovered in her communing with the Sacred Tree and her plan to help Sesshomaru seek out and contact her sleeping ancestors.

“So, it’s a waiting game for now,” Sango sighed.

“Yes,” Sessho replied, feeling just as much the weight of impatience that hung over them all. “We watch, we search as much as we can, and we wait.”

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At last, Sesshomaru was alone. He was exhausted. It had taken the better part of four hours to tell his tale to the group as well as answer their questions, field their reactions to the details about Rina (which still made him blush), and come up with whatever flimsy course of action they were stuck with for the next couple of weeks until he was due to go back to see Ryuka.

Meanwhile, after the meeting had concluded, InuYasha had led him over to Kaede’s empty hut and informed him that it was now his if he wanted it. “Kaede and Rin would have wanted you to have it,” he’d told Sesshomaru quietly. “At the very least, it gives you someplace of your own to crash whenever you’re here. I know how stifled you get when you have to be around people all the time without your own space to decompress.”

Sesshomaru chuckled quietly. “Apparently, I’m what’s called an ‘introvert’?”

“Huh? What’s that?” InuYasha blinked in comical confusion.

Sessho shrugged. “It’s something Rina had told me.” He arched a brow at his little brother, whose eyes glinted mischievously at his mention of Rina. “Basically, it’s someone who’s allergic to people and snot-nosed little brothers.” He punctuated his jibe with a slight, teasing smirk.

“Oh, ha-ha,” InuYasha rolled his eyes. A small smirk playing about the corners of his mouth, however, betrayed the amusement his sarcasm tried to hide.

“Care to share a drink before we call it a night, brother?” Sesshomaru invited him in.
“After all the shit we just discussed over dinner? Yeah, I think a good, stiff drink would be most welcome.”

Sesshomaru built a fire in the fire pit and then reached into Rina’s backpack that he’d brought with him and opened the bottle of Oka Cherry that Sota had procured for him before he came back.

InuYasha found a couple of drinking bowls and bowed his thanks when Sesshomaru poured it for them. “This is new. It smells interesting.”

The smile that crossed Sesshomaru’s features was wistful. “It’s the sake that Rina gave to me the night that I met her.” His expression turned wan. “I know I’m bringing her up a lot.” He could only imagine how odd it must be for his brother to see him so sappy. To his surprise, InuYasha scowled at him for a moment before he reached out and thunked him in the forehead with the heel of his palm and all Sesshomaru could do was stare silently at his brother like he’d gone nuts.

InuYasha shrugged at him. “Well, it worked for Rina, so I figured I’d try my own version.” He leveled a hard stare at his older brother. “Why are you apologizing for talking about this woman so much? That’s as stupid as if I were to apologize for being in love with Kagome. Seriously, Sesshomaru, talk about her as much as you want. It’s actually nice to know that you found someone like her. We’d all have to be completely blind and stupid to not see how different you are because of her.

“I’m only sorry about everything that’s keeping you two apart right now,” InuYasha finished quietly. His eyes became sad and haunted. “I know it’s still very different, but I still remember what it was like being separated from Kagome for so long.”

“And you didn’t even think it’d be possible for her to come back to you,” Sesshomaru quietly acknowledged. He remembered all too well how InuYasha had tried his best to move on with his life after Kagome had been sent back to her own time for those three long years. Even he had never forgotten how his brother had seemed so diminished in that time, nor how he’d come back to life when Kagome had been able to finally return.

“Like I said, different but similar. On the one hand, I knew she was safe even as I didn’t think I’d ever see her again. On the other, we have the hope of being able to help you get Rina back but also having to hope that Lady Raven can keep her promise to keep her safe. It’s utterly fucked up.”

Sesshomaru considered his words in quiet agreement for a few moments. At last, he raised his drinking bowl of sake toward his brother. “To the women who changed us for the better when everyone else thought us a lost cause.”
“Kanpai,” InuYasha lifted his bowl in reply before they knocked their sake back. “Hey! This stuff is really good! Gods, I forgot how much I’ve missed food from Kagome’s era!”

They drank a couple more rounds together before InuYasha wished Sesshomaru goodnight and excused himself to return to his and Kagome’s hut and the waiting arms of his mate.

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3 months later

He’d found the sleeping Dragons at last. It had been a frustrating time, waiting until the specified lunar cycle that Ryuka had discovered from her mother. While Ryuka’s great-grandfather could be woken from his lighter stone-sleep at any time, the rest of the Dragons could only possibly be woken up every six months until such time as they decided they were ready to wake up and give the world another chance. And they had to wait until the night of the last Dark Moon of autumn, mere days before, as Sesshomaru had learned from Ryuka without missing the irony, what would be the last Celtic harvest festival known as Samhain, during which, in their culture, the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead was at its thinnest.

It was vastly different from Japanese beliefs regarding such, but he couldn’t help but feel that, perhaps, Lady Raven was somehow lending her aid in this search, regardless of how frustrating the past few months had been. He’d occupied his time trying to find Kumayomaru’s location without the help of the Dragons, but in his heart, he’d known that it would be fruitless. At best, it merely gave him something to do to distract himself. Especially when he’d finally remembered the part of his journey into the dream world when Kumayomaru had mentioned taking Rina to an island. But there were so many islands surrounding and off-shooting from the main island, he hadn’t made it through but a fraction of them before this night arrived.

Now, in the light of the setting sun, he and InuYasha strode their way into the winding canyon that would lead to the hidden entrance to the Dragons’ cave, guarded by Ryuka’s great-grandfather. And, of course, once the sun set, InuYasha would be a vulnerable, black-haired human. Sesshomaru had pointed that out when he’d conveyed Ryuka’s information to the group. InuYasha had merely shrugged.

“So what?” he’d said. “I’m not about to let you go into that situation without me. There are simply times where people need their brothers at their backs and this sounds like one of them, even if it’s simply to offer some moral support.”
Hiromi and Shizuka had asked to come along, too, to offer whatever support they could, particularly in helping to communicate with the Dragons. They quietly trailed him and InuYasha into the canyon as the sun set and the hanyo’s hair turned black.

When they, at last, found the cave, they still had to wait until midnight before they could petition the guard to wake up and hear their plea. They made themselves comfortable around a fire and roasted up some food. While they waited, Sesshomaru pulled the Discman from Rina’s backpack along with the blanket that still carried her scent. Whenever he felt unbalanced, he’d place the blanket around his shoulders. However dumb it sounded in his head, he didn’t care, but it was like having Rina hug him from behind and offer her encouragement to not give up. That feeling only increased whenever he’d listen to “Song of the Caged Bird” and recall how she’d sounded and how beautiful she’d looked when he watched her play it that night…

Whenever he spent time like this, wrapped in her scent with his eyes closed and hearing her music, he could pretend for just a little while that they were together again. Perhaps they were at the club and she was playfully flicking his nose again for something stupid that came out of his mouth. Perhaps they were just sitting together at her beach, looking up at the stars and pointing out different constellations. Whenever he closed his eyes and pictured himself with her like that, he could feel her with him. He knew she was real and the feeling of her energy was not wishful thinking. Somehow, they were together.

A gentle tap on his arm caused him to open an eye. It was InuYasha, his currently-mahogany eyes peering at him with curiosity. “Hmm?” he acknowledged his brother while trying to reign in his temper at having had these moments interrupted.

“I’ve been meaning to ask for quite a while, Sesshomaru, but what have you been listening to for all these months?”

The question calmed Sesshomaru’s inner snap-dragon and he couldn’t help a smile. “I guess I should have shown you this quite a while ago,” he chuckled mildly. “Do you recall when I told you all of hearing Rina play her violin the night I first met her?”

InuYasha’s curious gaze softened into an understanding smile and he nodded his affirmation.

“After she played, she gave me a CD with the song that she had played. While she had been playing, her music about moved me to tears, though I didn’t understand it at the time and, of course, I fought it. Rina is an empath and she had sensed my emotional turmoil. She had
understood what effect the music had had on me even when I had no fucking clue. So, she’d hoped that, by listening to this track to my heart’s content in my own time, it would eventually cause me to shed the tears that you, Kagome, and my mother had fought so hard to get me to release.” He handed his little brother the earbuds and hit “Play”.

He couldn’t help but smile a little as, within a few moments of the music’s beginning, InuYasha’s eyes lulled closed and he lost himself within the strains until they faded away and he handed the earbuds back.

“Wow,” InuYasha whispered. “Is that what she sounded like when she played?”

Sesshomaru’s lonely smile deepened as he heard InuYasha’s admiration. “She did, indeed,” he whispered.

“We’re going to get her back, Sesshomaru. I swear to you. You know that, right?” InuYasha’s brown eyes stared fiercely into Sesshomaru’s melancholy golden ones. “We couldn’t save Rin. I wish every day that we could change that, but we can’t. But we will save Rina.”

Sesshomaru was almost surprised when he found himself nodding at his little brother’s words. And yet, he believed him with all his heart. He’d been so preoccupied with trying to keep himself busy so as to not be driven mad with the frustration and loneliness and worry of waiting for a solid lead to find Kumayomaru, he wasn’t sure he’d ever been truly certain that they’d find Rina in the first place. But hearing InuYasha swearing thus with such unshakable resolve, he realized that his heart had calmed and he’d lost a few layers of the loneliness and fear that had built up on it since he’d first discovered that Rina had been taken.

He put the earbuds back in his ears, closed his eyes, and continued to listen to the music while keeping his other senses on alert. He spent the last few hours until midnight focusing on InuYasha’s words and his certainty, rooting them in deep within his heart and projecting them to Rina, wherever she was, hoping that she could somehow hear him.

He felt rather than heard Hiromi calling to him. “Lord Sesshomaru, it is time.” His eyes popped open and he promptly packed Rina’s blanket and his Discman away into Rina’s backpack. He fished out Ryuka’s letter, just in case, and slung the bag over his shoulder and nodded his thanks to the towering female Reptilian.
“You ready for this?” InuYasha murmured at him as they looked upon the massive, stone shape of Ryuka’s great-grandfather standing sentinel at the mouth of the cave.

It seemed like such a silly question at first, but Sesshomaru realized that he was, indeed, quite nervous. He’d been waiting for this moment for almost three months since Ryuka had told him what she’d been able to find out from her mother. And everything had hinged on it so much, he hadn’t really given much thought to any of the other alternative outcomes despite Ryuka having gravely warned him of them anyway.

Obviously, the best-case scenario would be her great-grandfather hearing his plight, agreeing to wake the rest of the Dragons, and their agreeing to help him achieve whatever way to break through Kumayomaru’s otherwise-impenetrable concealment. But there were so many other ways it could go down. The Dragons could refuse to help him. They could be angry at his wakening them and kill them all. Her great-grandfather could refuse to wake the Dragons and tell him to piss off or he could kill them. So much depended on their success tonight and Rina’s life stood on edge of the very sharp blade of fate.

Sesshomaru breathed deeply and expelled a nervous breath as he, at last, answered his brother. “I don’t have any choice but to be ready.” He turned to look at his brother and his Reptilian companions. “If it goes wrong, if I anger them or it seems like they’re going to kill me, I want you three to swear that you will run and save yourselves immediately. Do you understand?” All three looked thunderstruck at his words and opened their mouths to argue with him. “No!” he barked, cutting them off. “No, do not argue with me. I appreciate that you joined me in support, but I do not want any of you losing your lives on my account.

“InuYasha,” he turned to his brother, “you have a mate who needs you. You have a village that depends on you. I will not have you making Kagome a widow over your stubbornness, do you understand me, little brother?”

InuYasha’s mouth, still ready to let loose his argument, went slack and snapped shut at his elder brother’s words. Finally, his shoulders slumped and he looked away, though he did not answer.

“Swear to me, InuYasha. Swear to me that you will make it back to Kagome alive if this shit goes sideways for whatever reason. Otherwise, I will begin the journey back to the village without contacting the Dragons at all, do you understand me?”

“Fuck. Alright, Sesshomaru. I… I swear. I swear I will get out.” He looked back up at his brother with a pained expression.

“There is no shame in it, little brother.” Sesshomaru’s unflappable gaze bore back at him.
“The fuck there isn’t,” InuYasha grumbled. “I feel like that’d be the kind of shit that would make a samurai commit seppuku, for fuck’s sake.”

“Not when they are released from an obligation by their lord or commander.” Sesshomaru shot back. “At least, that’s how I see it. And if it comes down to it, there’s more honor in living for your mate than dying needlessly for me.”

Then Sesshomaru turned to Hiromi and Shizuka. “The same goes for you two. Swear to me that if shit goes sideways, if I anger the Dragons and they seek to kill me, swear to me that you will get my brother out and you will all three run for your lives. Swear it or we go no further than this.”

Both Hiromi and Shizuka’s shoulders slumped. “We swear it, Lord Sesshomaru,” Hiromi spoke, at last, followed by Shizuka’s own confirmation. “You have our oaths and may we die in far greater agony than the Dragons can deal if we become foresworn.”

“And you will knock my brother out if you have to in order to get his stubborn ass to safety.” InuYasha shot him a withering glare. “I know you, little brother,” was all Sesshomaru said to him while not taking his eyes away from the faces of the two Reptilian women.

“We swear to do so, my lord.” It was Shizuka who spoke first, this time. “We weren’t going to say anything, but Lady Kagome already made us swear the same before we left the village.” If the situation weren’t so tense, Sesshomaru might have laughed at InuYasha’s slack-jawed and gaping, outraged expression upon hearing that.

“Good,” was his only reply. Satisfied, Sesshomaru turned back towards the cave entrance and strode forward to approach the sentinel. The other three hung back by a few paces.

Sesshomaru drew one of his blades, a simple filleting knife, and drew it across his palm. He squeezed a few drops of blood into a basin that stood on a pedestal at the feet of the giant Dragon.

“I understand why you all sleep, my lord Dragon, and it is not lightly that I seek to wake you from your rest. I, Sesshomaru Taisho, Inu Daiyokai lord of the Western Lands, beseech you in full humility to awaken and hear my plight. Should my plight offend you or displease you in any way, then I offer my life as forfeit in penance.” He sank onto the ground then and prostrated himself fully before the Dragon and he waited.

Several breaths passed, more than he could count, before he felt the energy spike, signaling the Dragon waking up from his slumber. He did not look up, would not look up until bidden.
At last, a deep, throaty voice spoke to him. “I have heard your call, Lord Sesshomaru. Rise so that we may speak.”

He swallowed hard and took a deep breath as he did as the Dragon bade. Ryuka had not told him her great-grandfather’s name. It would have been a serious breach of Dragon etiquette for her to do so and the Dragons in these lands, no different than the Dragons of the continents far to the west, guarded their true names with fierce prejudice.

Looking up, the Dragon had come out of his stone stasis but had remained in his full Dragon form, standing on all fours, rather than shifting to a humanoid one. He was a luminous, emerald green with sapphire overtones and his sapphire eyes glared at Sesshomaru dubiously.

“Thank you for waking and allowing me to speak with you, my lord Dragon,” Sesshomaru bowed low for a moment before looking back up at his host.

“Who are your companions, Sesshomaru?” the Dragon nodded towards his companions.

“The human is my hanyo half brother, InuYasha,” he began. InuYasha, thankfully, observed the courtesies and bowed low.

“Ahhh, so your brother risked accompanying you on this night, the new moon, when he is at his most vulnerable,” the Dragon acknowledged, bowing his head for a moment in InuYasha’s direction. “He must be very loyal to you to take such a risk.”

“It is a loyalty I do not yet feel I deserve, my lord,” Sesshomaru affirmed, “but I can only hope to have many more years ahead of me to earn.”

“You certainly have more wisdom to your credit than last I heard.” The Dragon now looked to the women, who were prostrate and unmoving, awaiting the Dragon’s permission to rise. “And what of your female companions?”

“If it pleases my lord, I present Hiromi and Shizuka, who also insisted they be allowed to accompany me on my quest.”
“And how is it that these women, formerly sworn to the pretender known as Ryukotsusei who slew your father, came to be in your company?” His voice carried a tinge of threat toward the two females and Sesshomaru could sense the increase in their trembling.

“It is a long story, my lord,” Sesshomaru replied evenly. “But they were not sworn to Ryukotsusei by choice.”

“Is that so?” the Dragon asked dubiously. He looked back at them. “Rise and look at me,” he ordered. Sessho could hear them scrambling to obey. “You,” he pointed a claw at one of them, “come forward. I sense that you wish to speak. Tell me, are you here of your own accord?”

Hiromi stepped forward to stand beside Sesshomaru then. “Yes, my lord,” she replied with a low bow of respect. “We insisted on being allowed to accompany Lord Sesshomaru.”

“Is what he said the truth? Were you not sworn to Ryukotsusei of your own free will? Speak truthfully, child, and know that I will sense any lie and your life will immediately be forfeit.”

“He speaks the truth, my lord Dragon,” Hiromi said, looking the Dragon full in the face without falter. “In my village, my lord, we women were ruled over by the men as though we were slaves. It was they who sought to keep the ongoing grudge against Lord Toga and his sons. We wanted no part of it.”

“You are larger in stature and stronger than your male counterparts, are you not?”

Hiromi nodded. “When they were still alive, yes, my lord, we were.”

“While we sleep, we Dragons still see more of what goes on across the land than most people think. Your men provoked needless war and slaughter, and yet you and your sisteren did nothing. Do you deny it?”

Hiromi drew herself to her full height even as she bowed her head. “No, my lord, I do not deny it. You speak true.”

“I have no excuse to offer, my lord Dragon,” Hiromi replied, keeping her eyes on the Dragon. “I can tell you that we were afraid. I can tell you that things were done this way in our tribe for so long that we didn’t dare question lest we be punished. The closest we came to revolt was upon learning that our men had slaughtered a village full of innocents, including the children. And I can tell you that not following through more fully on that revolt, allowing ourselves to believe the lies of our men, is mine and my remaining sister’s greatest regret. But we fully take responsibility for our own cowardice and complacency, my lord.” She kept her eye contact with the Dragon as he weighed her words.

“How is it you came to be in Lord Sesshomaru’s company?” he asked at last.

“He came to our village to find his woman, whom our men had kidnapped. However, our village had been slaughtered by the one we seek your aid with, the Bear Demon, Kumayomaru. They were slaughtered while Shizuka and I went about our scouting duties. We came to find the massacre first. Sesshomaru, his brother, and two of their friends heard us in our grief. “They understood that we had wanted no part in the slaughter of their people and they forgave us our unforgivable inaction. They allowed us to come back to their village to render whatever aid we could. And even though she didn’t want us to be beholden to them, we gave our oaths to the Lady Kagome, wife and mate of Lord InuYasha. We vowed to help them rebuild and to guard them with our lives. And even though they owe us nothing in return, they and the rest of their friends, as well as Lord Sesshomaru, swore to us in return that they would help us avenge our slaughtered sisters and children.”

The Dragon nodded attentively as Hiromi spoke. When she finished, he remained silent for a time. Finally, he spoke, “I sense your truth, Hiromi, and I sense your and your sister’s desire to regain your honor. You have spoken well and I honor your courage, your integrity, and your loyalty.”

At last, the Dragon allowed himself to transform into a human form. His height was still formidable, standing at almost 7 feet. Sesshomaru noted then that he bore the same sapphire eyes as Ryuka.

“You mentioned the Bear Demon, Kumayomaru. I am not unfamiliar with his petty and long-standing grudge against your family, Lord Sesshomaru. Tell me, what aid do you seek from the Dragons at this time? And what is that you are holding in your hand?”

Sesshomaru had completely forgotten about Ryuka’s letter that he held. “My lord Dragon, it is a long story, but I will do my best to be as brief as possible.

“A year ago, the men of Hiromi and Shizuka’s village slaughtered my human adopted daughter, Rin. Several months after her death, I was able to travel forward in time to the era that my brother’s mate, Kagome, comes from via a well made from the wood of Goshinboku.”

“Ahh, yes, I am aware of that portal,” the Dragon nodded.
“While there, I met and fell in love with a woman, Katarina, a wolf demon of Celtic ancestry who, I’ve discovered in recent months, is closely tied with a goddess who has only revealed herself as Lady Raven.” He saw the Dragon’s eyes widen for a moment, though he otherwise kept his gaze neutral. Still, that was enough to let Sesshomaru know that he wasn’t the only one even remotely familiar with Lady Raven. The Reptilians who killed Rin followed me to that modern era. They attacked Rina’s wolves, almost fatally injured her best friend, and they captured her back to this time and sold her to Lord Kumayomaru.” Then he held up Ryuka’s letter. “As for this, my lord Dragon, while in that time, I met a woman called Ryuka. She is romantically bonded with Rina’s best friend, Izumi. She is your great-granddaughter and it was with her help that I was able to come to petition your help. This is a letter she wrote that she asked me to deliver to you.”

The Dragon’s eyes had widened when Sesshomaru had spoken of Ryuka and her ties to him and he held out his hand for the envelope. “Have you read this letter?”

Sesshomaru shook his head ardently. “Absolutely not, my lord, and she only gave me a very minimal overview of what she’d said.” Then he waited in silence as the Dragon opened the envelope and read the contents.

The Dragon’s face betrayed no emotion as he read, and yet his eyes, whether consciously or otherwise, still showed expression – hardening at some parts while softening at others. At last, his eyes closed for a moment as he tenderly refolded the paper and placed it back in the envelope.

“She is, indeed, my great-granddaughter,” he said softly. “There is no denying it.” His voice carried pride that made Sesshomaru smile a little, though he was still afraid of possibly offending the great Dragon. “She conveyed everything that happened when Rina was taken and Izumi was injured. She also spoke of this very concerning fact that Kumayomaru has somehow gained the ability to cloak his scent and his whereabouts on the same level of skill as we Dragons are able to do. That is, indeed, very troubling.”

He looked up at Sesshomaru, then. “And she included her own pleas that we find a way to help you detect this Bear Demon so as to obtain Rina safely from him.” He nodded quietly as he considered everything that had been told to him. “Yes, I will go waken my brethren and they will hear of this. Be warned,” he cautioned, “that I cannot guarantee their acquiescence. However, I will promise my own assistance even if they will not give their own.”

Sesshomaru’s eyes popped wide at the Dragon’s words and then he bowed low in gratitude. “Thank you, my lord Dragon. Your words give me hope.”

“You must wait here, young yokai. I must go wake them and apprise them of the situation. I will come for you when they are ready to hear your plight from your own lips.” With that, the Dragon turned and strode into the cavern behind him. Sesshomaru and the others turned and shakily walked back to the fire pit they’d waited at earlier.
“That was intense,” InuYasha spoke at last, his voice hoarse. The other three nodded their silent yet emphatic agreement. “Hiromi, I about crapped myself when he questioned you. I seriously thought there was going to be some shit there, for a moment.”

Hiromi blew out a nervous breath as she looked at her sister. “Believe me, Lord InuYasha, I was afraid of the same thing.”

“You handled yourself very well, though, Hiromi,” Sesshomaru said gently. “And if he’d found your answers unsatisfactory, I would have begged him to spare you and take me instead.”

This time, it was Hiromi’s turn to level a glare at him. “You’ll not do any such thing, Lord Sesshomaru,” she snapped fiercely. “Mine and Shizuka’s actions, as well as our inaction, are entirely our own. No differently than you made us swear earlier, if the Dragons decide that Shizuka and I must pay a higher price, you will not interfere. Do you understand? You will not give up your life for us.

"Rina needs you. Your brother needs you. Your family needs you. Shizuka and I can only do as much as we can to make up for what’s happened. And if the Dragons decree we are to give our lives to pay that debt, then you will let it happen. Do you understand?”

Thoroughly cowed and humbled, Sesshomaru bowed his head. “You’re right, Hiromi. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head at him. “Do not be sorry, my lord. True loyalty is not something to apologize for and, believe me, I appreciate your wanting to shield us from whatever wrath Shizuka and I may have earned from the Dragons. But we don’t want you to lose your life needlessly any more than you want that for any of us.” Shizuka punctuated Hiromi’s words with an emphatic nod of her own.

“Well, even if the Dragons decide otherwise, I want you to know that we don’t consider either of you to be the bearers of the debt your men incurred,” Sesshomaru assured them both gently. InuYasha nodded his agreement silently as Shizuka had.

Then they all fell silent and waited for almost two hours for the Dragon to return. At last, they heard his call collectively in their heads.

I have awoken my brothers and sisters and told them briefly of your plight. They bid you all enter now.
They looked at each other for a moment. “Here we go,” breathed InuYasha. They all stood. But before they moved, Hiromi clasped one of her massive hands around Sesshomaru’s, the other took her sister’s. Shizuka, following her Alpha sister’s lead, grasped one of InuYasha’s hands. InuYasha, then, grasped Sesshomaru’s other hand. “We walk together, a strange, mismatched family,” Hiromi intoned like a prayer. “May the Dragons see the sincerity of our bonds and the true heart behind our quest and may they grant us with their kindness, wisdom, and favor. And may we walk out from their presence together as we have walked in, with lightness and hope in our hearts.”

Feeling an uncharacteristic affection, Sesshomaru embraced the two Reptilian women as well as his brother and they embraced him and each other in return. Then they strode forward together into the cavern to the Dragons that waited deep within.

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The chamber in which they were received by the Dragons was almost a half-mile into the mountain. Torches lit the way along the walls leading there and interspersed around the gigantic room. Glimmering sparkles of raw stones like quartz, obsidian, and other such gems denoted that this mountain had once been a volcano before the Dragons had made their home here.

The Dragons were seated around the edges of the chamber, giving plenty of intimidating space in the center for Sesshomaru and his companions to stand before them. Ryuka’s great-grandfather waited for them at the entrance to the chamber to guide them to where they should stand before the council. Sesshomaru then prostrated himself before the Dragons, his companions following suit, as Ryuka’s great-grandfather spoke to the council and introduced them.

“My brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, I have stood guard as we have slept for the past century and wake you this night to hear the petition of Lord Sesshomaru Taisho, son of Toga, Inu Daiyokai lord of the lands to the west. Will you hear the words of this supplicant and, as needed, his companions?”

The Dragons around the room all nodded gravely. “We will,” they intoned in unison.

Then he turned to Sesshomaru. “Lord Sesshomaru, Lord InuYasha, and the Ladies Hiromi and Shizuka, do you swear to answer every question put to you with the same honesty and integrity that you showed to me?” At their individual replies to the affirmative, he added, “And do you understand that if any of you are found to have answered without truth, your life may be forfeit?” Again, they stated their compliance. “Then, stand and be heard.”
The tall Dragon woman directly before them, seated beside her mate in the seats of highest honor, stood at that moment. Her white skin and hair shone with an opulence, not unlike mother-of-pearl and she reminded Sesshomaru of the Moon in her full. She seemed to hear his thoughts as she tipped her head slightly to the side.

“Very well,” she spoke, “then you may refer to me as Kaguya if I remind you of the moon so much, Lord Sesshomaru.”

He bowed low. “Then I am honored to meet you, Kaguya, my lady Dragon.”

Kaguya turned to Ryuka’s great-grandfather. “And what name should I speak before our guests?”

“Please refer to me as Ryuk, my lady, in honor of my great-granddaughter whose words I hold in my hand.”

“Very well.” She turned back to Sesshomaru. “Lord Ryuk, our honored sentinel, has brought your plight before me and allowed me to read the words of his great-granddaughter, Ryuka, whom you say you met in the future?”

Sesshomaru nodded. “Yes, my lady Dragon.”

“And he says that you made your way to that future era by way of the Bone Eater’s Well, is that correct?”

Again, “Yes, my lady Dragon.”

“Tell me, my lord, how you came to be acquainted with Ryuka to stand before us here this night.”

Again, Sesshomaru did his best to concisely convey everything that had happened, beginning with the circumstances of Rin’s murder, through the circumstances that led to his falling in love with Rina, the circumstances of her captivity, all the way up to when Ryuka had told him what he needed to do to contact her ancestors.

When at last he finished, Kaguya stated, “You must have made quite the positive impact on Ryuka
for her to chance this contact. It’s clear she’s as fond of you as family for what you’ve done for Rina as well as her mate, Izumi.” She looked over the letter again. “And Ryuk, you seem to have a rather spectacular great-granddaughter in your future. Her ability to communicate with the spirit of the Sacred Tree, Goshinboku, at such a young age is impressive, indeed.”

No one could miss the way Ryuk drew himself up in pride.

“The Lords of Time would not permit her to come through to speak with us herself and that seems to be for the best. Ryuka spoke correctly to you, Sesshomaru, when she spoke of how delicate the streams of time are. And yet the Lords of Time told her that coming to us was, indeed, the course of action you were meant to take.” She looked back to Sesshomaru’s patiently waiting face. “It troubles me that this Kumayomaru has become such a pestilence and it troubles me even more that he’s been able to somehow gain our ability to mask his presence to a degree similar to our own skill. It is something he could have only achieved through being taught by a Dragon or by, somehow, killing one and absorbing its power. Unfortunately, it is likely that the latter is the case.” She frowned and, for the first time, Sesshomaru saw a flicker of sorrow and pain flash across her face. “About a century ago, one of our own went missing. He was my son. We could not find him, but I could feel that he had died. That was when I decided that I’d had enough of the wars of this era and we went to sleep. The only other time we’ve awoken since then was about 40 or so years ago when one of our vassals discovered his body. We never knew who slew him or the circumstances of his death other than, by the state of his bones, that it was far more brutal and violent than any human could have done.”

“How the hell did Kumayomaru manage to slaughter a Dragon?” Sesshomaru breathed in horror, forgetting his etiquette for a tense moment. Immediately realizing his mistake, Sesshomaru bowed low. “My apologies, my lady Dragon. I did not mean to forget myself so.”

She waved away his apology. “You have become like family to one of our own from the future. I preclude you from further formalities and give you leave to speak as plainly as you wish.” She sighed, her eyes full of memory for her lost son. “As for Kumayomaru, we know he is a petty, grasping coward. We heard of the rage he went into when Lord Toga was slain by Ryukotsusei. He’d never dared before to challenge any of the Dragons or Draconic Demons. If he was the one who slaughtered my son, it’s unlikely he challenged him outright. Likely, he waited for the chance when my son would be at his most vulnerable and slaughtered him while he slept. "Teeth marks on my son’s bones show that his flesh was consumed after death.”

Sesshomaru blew out a horrified breath as his memories of Rin’s death fought to come to the surface. “My lady Dragon, I don’t know what to say.” Pain pierced his heart. “I am so sorry for your loss.”
“I feel the ache of your heart that understands my pain and I thank you, Lord Sesshomaru,” she replied softly. "But to the matter at hand. I know of no way we could teach you our skills in the time that you need and, believe me, I understand that time is of the essence. I know Ryuka passed on her capability of Heat-Sight to you through touch, but that’s a very minor ability and what you need cannot be passed onto you through such a method. About the only way we could help you and give you the strength you would need to find and face Kumayomaru and ultimately end him would be for one of us to sacrifice ourselves and allow you to consume us the way that Kumayomaru surely consumed my son.”

This time, the breath Sesshomaru expelled was as though he’d been punched in the stomach. Murmurs of concern rippled through the ranks of the Dragons. “My lady Dragon,” he stammered, “Kaguya, no. I could never ask or expect any of you to give anything of the sort.”

“We know that, Lord Sesshomaru. We know what kind of person you’ve been through most of your young 900 years and we know how drastically you’ve changed and grown at last over the course of the past decade. Even at your worst, I can’t imagine you asking this of any of us. However, that does not negate the current fact of what is needed. But this is a great and terrible thing that cannot be decided on in the space of a few hours. "Therefore, I order you and your friends to leave us for a time. There is a village to the east of here. It belongs to one of our vassals. You will stay with him in his castle as our honored guests until we send for you, no more than one month hence by the next New Moon.”

Sesshomaru looked at her, stricken. “My lady, you and your family are seriously going to confer among yourselves as to which of you will sacrifice themselves?” His voice choked in despair and he sank to his knees. “Please, don’t do this. Surely there is another way.” His head bowed to his chest and his claws dug into the stone floor with angry desolation.

Footsteps approached him and soft, white hands laid themselves upon his face, making him look upwards. “It is precisely because you wish for there to be another way, even as your Rina has need of you, that we consider this,” Kaguya said gently to him, her opalescent eyes glimmering with tears of compassion.

“But there has already been so much death because of him,” InuYasha spoke hoarsely from behind. The sun must have risen. Though Sesshomaru had all but forgotten about the presence of his brother and Reptilian companions, he could smell that InuYasha was back in his normal hanyo form.

Kaguya smiled sadly over Sesshomaru’s shoulder to where InuYasha had spoken. “Yes, young half-demon, there has. But so often we all forget, even we Dragons, that death often paves the way for life.” Looking back down at Sesshomaru, she brushed the tears from his striped cheeks. He hadn’t even been aware that he’d shed tears in the first place. Then she lifted him to his feet.
“Go now, my friends. I know it’s difficult to be patient more than you already have been in waiting to speak with us, but go and have a little more patience.” She looked up and behind them and was quiet for a moment.

Sesshomaru and the others looked in the direction of her gaze but saw nothing. "Rina is still safe," Kaguya spoke again at last. "Kumayomaru has kept mindful of the warning spoken to him by Lady Raven and has not harmed her. Rina is still locked away in catatonia and is even more secure beyond his reach. And I am assured that she will still be thus when we call you back in no more than a month’s time."

She looked back down into Sesshomaru’s eyes. “Go. And take this with you.” She removed a bracelet of Lapis Lazuli from her arm. “Our vassal will know it’s mine and he will know that you bring it with my blessing.”

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The walk to the village was silent as the four of them reeled from their audience with the Dragons and the wholly unexpected turn it had taken. But it gave them 10 miles to collect themselves as much as they could so that, by the time Sesshomaru showed the bracelet to the lord of the village, he’d been able to collect himself into his more usual stone-faced expression.

The vassal, true to Kaguya’s promise, welcomed them warmly and respectfully, not even blanching at the size of Hiromi and Shizuka’s Reptilian forms. In hindsight, Sesshomaru supposed later that that wasn’t all that surprising after all, given whom the lord served.

They were given rooms that looked out into the courtyard, which surrounded a solitary cherry blossom tree that was in perpetual bloom despite the late autumn chill. “The lady Kaguya gave it to my ancestors as a gift when they pledged their oaths to her and her family,” the lord explained to them as Sesshomaru and his companions stopped to gawk at the beautiful tree surrounded by lush, green grass as though it were still in the middle of summer.

After they crashed out for some uneasy sleep, the four of them coalesced by the tree later that evening. None of them spoke of what had transpired. They didn’t have the stomach nor the heart to, even without Kaguya’s order, given as they had taken their leave, to maintain their silence. It was all too terrible to speak on anyway.

“Sesshomaru, I’m going home tomorrow,” InuYasha said quietly to him at last. “I’ll return quickly, but I need to let Kagome know what’s going on and that this could take a while. I don’t want her worrying about me without a word for the next month.”
Sesshomaru listlessly waved away his brother’s words. “Don’t worry, InuYasha. I understand.” I’d even understand if you decided not to return, he added silently.

Shut up, Sesshomaru. You didn’t ask for any of this. No way in hell am I gonna let you go through this alone.

Sesshomaru turned to Hiromi and Shizuka. “Do either of you wish to accompany him home? If you wish to go home and not return here, I understand.”

Shizuka spoke up. “I will accompany InuYasha home and I will return with him,” she said decidedly. “We will not abandon you in this either, Lord Sesshomaru.”

They all passed a sleepless night and Sesshomaru waved his brother and Shizuka off at first light, wishing them a safe and speedy journey and safe return.

Chapter End Notes

Samhain, the last harvest, Celtic New Year, and festival honoring the dead. Pronounced "SOW-en".
Like a Ghost

Chapter Summary

I've been summoned back by the Dragon Queen sooner than expected and I don't know if I can ever forgive myself for this...

Rina woke up around noon after staying up til almost 3am the night before, continuing her tale to Grandpa for the third night in a row. He was right, of course. Her telling this to all of him was actually helping her to process through everything. The more she revealed what she could remember, the more that came back to her. Especially the memories of what all she’d seen while she’d been catatonic.

Yesterday, she’d still been a mess. Today, she still felt a bit scattered in her thoughts, but she felt a lot calmer to be able to deal with them. And by now she remembered, again, how long she’d actually been trapped back in the past. But she felt like someone had mucked around with her brain a bit because some memories were still fuzzy. What the fuck, though?!

She took some deep breaths, closed her eyes, and counted them out. I won’t panic again, she promised herself fiercely. Fuck that shit! She’d been through a lot but even without all of her memories intact, she knew without a doubt that these things had made her stronger, even if she didn’t feel terribly strong right now.

At last, she got up out of bed, carefully tucked the sheets neatly, and started to walk to the door. A scent hit her nose. How had she not noticed it before? It was faint, but... she followed her nose to the closet. There were some clothes hanging there, but most smelled of Sota. Then she spotted it, the long denim jacket that Sesshomaru had been wearing the night that they first met. It was so faint, but his scent still clung to it. Spicy, he smelled of sandalwood and evergreen forests. Her heart panged with a longing ache.

“Don’t put your life on hold for me, Rina. I don’t know how long it will take to find Kumayomaru and ensure your safety. It’s not fair to expect you to wait for me. So, go on with your life as if you will never see me again, for you very well may not.”

His last words to her rang through her head again and she clenched her teeth with a growl. Damn you, Sesshomaru. You haven’t seen the last of me and when I get my hands on you, I’m gonna smack the shit out of you for this!

Or something else, her thoughts quipped back.
She scowled. Great. She was arguing with herself in her head and her “other” voice had KO’d her angry tirade with a simple truth. Yeah, she wanted to smack him for forcing her to come back against her will. But, more than that, she just wanted him in her arms again.

“Shut the fuck up, self,” she grumbled under her breath. Her eyes found the jacket again. Without a second thought, she grabbed the jacket and whirled it to rest about her shoulders as her arms slid into the sleeves. Then she went downstairs. There was a note on the kitchen counter next to the fridge from Mrs. Higurashi.

“Rina, I know you’re still adjusting, so we wanted to let you sleep as late as you needed. I made you a lunch and it’s in the fridge whenever you feel strong enough to eat. Get comfortable and rest up.

Love,

Mom”

Rina choked back tears, touched and humbled again by the gesture. As Grandpa had done that first night, Mrs. Higurashi had welcomed Rina to refer to her as “Mom” if she so wished. Ordinarily, Rina might have shyly declined. But she felt so lonely for family and Mrs. Higurashi reminded her so of her late adoptive mom, she couldn’t help herself. She knew, logically, that she was just a stand-in for Kagome, and yet no one in this family had yet to actually make her feel that way. And, given how much they missed her, no differently than she missed her own parents, she didn’t mind all of them taking comfort in each other’s familial company.

Rina pulled the bento box that Mom had labeled out of the fridge as these thoughts crossed her mind. It was so quiet in here. The silence weighed oppressively on her loneliness, which was odd considering how loudly she could still hear the noise of the modern world outside. Still, she didn’t want to be in here by herself.

Gathering the lunch box into her arms, she ventured outside. Surely Grandpa was around here somewhere. Her ears twitched, searching for sounds indicating his movement while her nose searched for the direction of his scent. She found him tending to the Shrine’s gardens, talking lovingly to the plants as he carefully pulled weeds.

She didn’t want to disrupt the zen he was clearly enshrouded in, so she sat quietly on a bench in the shade of the nearby Sacred Tree. Even without conversation, she found the sound of his voice
comforting. She opened the lunchbox and her mouth watered at the spread Mom had left for her. It reminded her of what she and Sesshomaru had eaten together that day at the beach, so long ago. Tamagoyaki, some dumplings, rice balls, sliced hard-boiled eggs, battered chicken, and, she squealed internally with glee, three sweet custard buns! The meat-heavy spread wasn’t exactly traditional, but Mom already understood that, being a Wolf, vegetables weren’t exactly her forte.

Before she dug into her food, she felt a gentle hum of energy behind her, almost like a greeting. She turned around curiously. It took her a moment to realize that the energy had come from Goshinboku, the Sacred Tree. Her heart swelled in response. She couldn’t understand what the Tree was saying to her, but she felt like she’d just gotten a hug. She whispered a silent prayer of thanks to the Tree, for the Higurashis’ kindness as well as for the meal, and then she picked up the chopsticks and silently dug in.

“Good afternoon, Rina,” Grandpa called out to her gently. “Are you feeling better today?” He approached her from where he’d been gardening to sit on the bench beside her.

“Much better today, ojisan,” she replied as soon as she was able to swallow the bite of tamagoyaki she’d snarfed. “Thank you.” She held up her lunch box. “Would you care for some, Grandpa?”

“Just don’t tell Momma,” he said mischievously as he snagged a dumpling, a piece of chicken, and a slice of the rolled omelette. Rina saw his eyes fall towards the custard buns and she held one up for him before he could even ask. “Oh, thank you!” he practically chirped with delight. “These are my favorite!”

They ate together in silence for a few minutes, mumbling their respective enjoyment for Mrs. Higurashi’s food in groans of bliss, especially when they worked their way down to the custard buns. They each ate one and Rina offered to split the last one with him.

“Thank you for sharing your food,” Grandpa said at last. “I must get back to my duties. Would you be up for helping me clean and organize the storage shed?”

Rina, glad to be put to good use, agreed enthusiastically. He found her an apron and a bandana for her hair and they got to work, conversing lightly at first before it, of course, went back to everything Rina had thus far told him.

“No wonder you’ve struggled so much with processing everything,” he was saying as she swept and dusted and he sorted through various items. “I’ve had so much trouble sorting through it all, I didn’t sleep a wink last night. And I’ve been used to this time travel stuff for far longer.”
“Well, I’m glad I’m not the only one struggling with it all.” She explained to him how there were still some holes in her memory that had her concerned.

“We’ll worry about those as we come to them,” Grandpa assured her gently. “In the meantime, would you care to tell me more while we work? You packed a helluva wallop when you told me about Sesshomaru’s meeting with the Dragons.”

Rina’s eyes pinched shut with sadness. She could still remember the devastation on Sesshomaru’s face when he’d told her…

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The Dragons had specified a month at most. Yet Sesshomaru, and he only, was summoned back to them after only two weeks. It had been the more torturous two weeks of his existence that he could recall, his dread growing with every passing day that edged him closer to the day Kaguya’s choice would be fulfilled.

It had been absolutely maddening to get through these past several days. There had been nothing for Sesshomaru to do with himself to distract from his helpless agitation. Because they were “honored guests”, neither he nor his brother were allowed to participate in any of the work that needed doing around the village. Hiromi and Shizuka had contented themselves with scouting around nearby. But once InuYasha and Shizuka had returned from their quick trip home, he and his brother had felt like sitting ducks. Neither dared to stray too far from the village. Though neither expected any word sooner than the initially spoken month, they could not afford to be significantly absent lest they receive word sooner.

But receiving the summons that much sooner than expected was simultaneously a relief as well as a resounding death knell. Yet, the summons explicitly stating for Sesshomaru to come alone was almost more than he could bear. Naturally, both Hiromi and Shizuka accepted the order without a shred of argument.

Just as naturally, however, InuYasha raged and resolutely insisted he wouldn’t allow Sesshomaru to endure the coming ordeal alone. ”Look, I’m at least going with you as far as the cave, Sesshomaru,” he said with his usual rigid stubbornness. “I’m going with you as far as possible. The moment they tell me I can go no further, I’ll accept their decree with not another breath of argument. If they get pissed to see me there at all, I will take full responsibility and let them know you tried to talk me out of it. ”But you’re about to walk into a hellish ordeal and I’ll be fucked if you’re gonna go through it more alone than absolutely necessary.”
Sesshomaru held up his hand in a tired gesture of capitulation. He was far too drained from the perpetual strain of dread to have the even remotely enough energy to deter his little brother’s mountainous will. “But dammit, InuYasha,” he said with a weary ferocity, “if you die because you pissed the Dragons off, I’ll fucking kill you.” He held up his Tenseiga. “And with the Meido Zangetsuha, you know I can find you in the Underworld and make it happen.”

Ryuk was waiting at the mouth of the canyon leading to the cave entrance. He scowled at them when he saw InuYasha striding by Sesshomaru’s side. “You were told to come alone!” His voice rumbled threateningly.

“Don’t blame him,” InuYasha stepped forward with a scowl to match. “It’s all on me. I refused to stay behind. He’s my brother. No way in hell was I gonna let him go through this alone any more than absolutely necessary. If this is as far as I go, then so be it.”

Ryuk’s eyes softened a small degree, albeit grudgingly. “Well, then I suppose that does not technically constitute disobedience. I don’t suppose I would do any different for my own siblings were I in your stead.” Looking then at Sesshomaru, his next words were simple. “It’s time,” he intoned, his voice hollow.

Sesshomaru spared his brother one last glance before he fell in step behind the Dragon, his face stony, grim, and resolute. Every step closer to the cave and then closer to the council chamber felt like a walk toward his own execution. Ryuk did not speak at all. Though he carried himself with the full Draconic dignity, Sesshomaru noted a slump in the Dragon’s shoulders, a heaviness in his step, and sorrow in his aura.

Sessho felt sick. They were going to help him. Will Rina forgive me for this? He wondered dully. Would he be a monster in her eyes? It didn’t matter that this was the Dragons’ idea. It didn’t matter that one of them was willingly volunteering to be sacrificed and consumed. Eaten. It still felt monstrous. Unforgivably monstrous.

When they reached the chamber, Sesshomaru’s eyes were greeted only by Kaguya, her mate, and a few other Dragons that, he realized, were her remaining children. The simple manner in which she was dressed hit him right in the heart like an icy bucket of despair and his feet tripped to a halt.

“No!” he whispered. He looked up at Ryuk, whose sapphire eyes met his own, grief already
pouring in rivulets down his face. His expression was echoed on the faces of Kaguya’s family. She, however, perched on her dais, was the picture of peace. Serenity, even. “My lady Dragon, please!” he pleaded, his voice hoarse and choked.

She silenced him with a raised hand and shook her head. “My decision was made the moment I spoke what needed to be done, Lord Sesshomaru.” Her manner was simple. “I only needed the past two weeks to prepare me and my family, to make peace with the path of my fate, and to say all my goodbyes.”

“But… but why?” he questioned in desperation. “Your people need their Queen!”

“And what sort of Queen would I be, Lord Sesshomaru, if I compelled any one of my people to make this sacrifice that was my own idea?” Her voice, like the ringing of bells, was the essence of compassion.

He couldn’t argue with her logic. Still… “You mean to tell me that none tried to volunteer? To take this burden in your stead?”

“Of course there were,” she answered gently. “But I am the oldest and strongest of my people. Not only is it my duty and privilege to protect them, but I will be able to provide you all the power you need to find Kumayomaru, to save and protect your woman, and to end Kumayomaru’s stain of cruelty from this land. No one else’s power would have given you what you need.”

“But…” Sesshomaru flailed for something else to say, any other alternative. He was actually rather surprised to see Kaguya’s family regard him with the same compassion as their matriarch. “Can’t one of you just come with me to find him and defeat him instead?”

She shook her head. “No, Sesshomaru. I know it is hard to understand. Believe me, I do. But this is your fight.” She paused as her eyes glazed over and, when next she spoke, her voice sounded hollow and far away while reverberating with the power of clairvoyant vision. “It is you who must defeat this demon. You and your Wolf woman. We have been decreed to only give you the greater ability to do so, which you will be able to share with your woman when you bond with her as your Mate.” She conveyed the message of fate as it was shown to her. The sound of it raised the hair on the back of his neck. And yet her words had, overall and to an odd degree, managed to quell the sorrow within him a little.

For whatever reason, this was meant to be. And, like a Samurai, Kaguya strode toward her fated death with dignity, peace, and determination that her death would serve a greater purpose. She would rest with honor among her ancestors and watch over her family as long as they lived.
Her eyes focused again. “It is time,” she said quietly. “Sesshomaru, please exit into that corridor,” she pointed the way to him, “and wait for me in the hall. I wish to say goodbye one last time.”

He bowed to her order and moved to do as she bade. Her family stepped forward to intercept him. Her mate clasped his arm firmly and bowed.

“We hold no ill will toward you. Kaguya has known for centuries that her fate would come to a sacrifice someday.” He nodded his head towards their children, who also bowed. Their faces were sad but accepting. “Our hearts go with you as her spirit goes with you and we wish you success in retrieving your woman safely and bringing that foul bastard to his due justice.”

Sesshomaru couldn’t help but wonder at their acceptance of what was coming. He couldn’t imagine not doing anything to save the woman he loved. He couldn’t imagine not being ready to tear the universe down to its very foundations to save her. **But, then again, there’s a reason that Dragons and not Dogs are revered for their wisdom,** he thought to himself.

He didn’t realize that they’d heard him until the sad smile crossed her mate’s face. “It’s true,” he said softly, “I still wish to rail and rage and find some way to save her. And believe me, we all tried. But death is not the end. You know that about as well as I, Sesshomaru. Love never dies and she will be with us still. And someday, we will join her among the stars as well.”

“So many times,” one of their children spoke softly, “the living endure a death that feels meaningless. Accident, illness, or the cruelty of others. My mother goes to her death knowing that it means something. That it helps someone. And, in her own way, as you carry her power with her, she will be able to have the satisfaction of avenging our murdered brother.”

Sesshomaru hadn’t thought of that. At a loss for words, he could only nod at their words and then bow his farewell. “I swear to you, she will not suffer.” His voice choked again. “She will be treated with reverence and respect.” Then he walked away and did not look back.

As he waited for Kaguya to finish her goodbyes, Ryuk came to wait with him. Neither of them spoke for a few minutes. At last, Ryuk whispered, “She is my sister.” He looked over at him, his featured pained. “I accept her choice, but…” he went silent, not knowing what else to say.

Kaguya emerged into the corridor and her steadfast expression softened when her eyes found Ryuk. “Little brother,” she whispered. She placed her hand on his face. “I love you,” she said simply. “But here is where we must part.” Her voice took on the reverberation of iron-clad authority. “Do
not follow me beyond this point. Go back to my mate and my children and stay with them until this is over. Do not give in to your instincts nor your impulses to stay or thwart the hands of my fate. This is my final command as your Queen and my final request as your sister.” She embraced him tightly. “I will always be with you, my beloved brother.”

Then she released him and walked away. She did not look back. “To me, Lord Sesshomaru,” she commanded.

They emerged from the depths of the mountain into a small hidden oasis, nestled among the towering peaks that surrounded it, that teemed with a sacred aura. A mountain spring waterfall fed into a pool where numerous koi swam about. A perpetually blooming purple wisteria tree stood over the pool like a sentinel.

“This is a place of memory,” Kaguya’s voice broke through Sesshomaru’s thoughts. No outsider has ever seen it. This is where we remember our ancestors and our loved ones who’ve gone before us. I can think of no more suitable place for me to leave this world and take my place among them.” She turned to face him.

“When Kumayomaru slaughtered my son, he consumed his whole body even though it wasn’t necessary. All you need to take within yourself is my heart.” She began building up her energy.

“Once you have it in your hands, you must consume it immediately. Fix the outward damage to my body and leave it under the Wisteria for my family.” Her power was now so built up that she shone like the full moon that gazed down at them from overhead.

Sesshomaru stood at a loss as he beheld the power that could crush him like an insect if the Dragon Queen so wished. The power that this beautiful Dragon Queen was willingly giving her life to give to him.

“Do it now, Sesshomaru!” she commanded to him when her power reached its zenith. Her eyes were closed peacefully even as her voice rang with the powerful compulsion of her authority.

As though his hand was possessed with her will even as he stood frozen in place, he found himself lifting his filleting knife from his belt. Then his feet carried his body closer to her even as his mind screamed. Everything felt like it happened in slow motion even as he stood before her in a flash. He realized that tears were streaming down his face as his arm raised the knife to deal the fatal blow.

“Forgive me. Please, forgive me,” he whispered. Her face, so serene, smiled at him, shining with her peace. Then he struck.
InuYasha had spent the past two days going out of his mind. Pacing, trying to meditate, pacing some more. The farthest he’d gone from the spot where Sesshomaru and Ryuk had left him was to collect more firewood and grab fish to roast from a nearby stream. Other than that, he hadn’t dared stray too far. No way in hell was he not gonna be there whenever Sesshomaru came back.

A fissure in the air got his attention followed by the chill that crawled up the back of his neck. A moment later, Sesshomaru staggered into view from the canyon. InuYasha took one look at his brother’s countenance and, with a cry, sprang to Sesshomaru’s side. He saw Ryuk walking a few paces behind Sesshomaru and looking every bit as haggard.

“It is done,” Ryuk spoke heavily at last as Sesshomaru collapsed against his brother’s arms. InuYasha looked at Ryuk, too stunned to speak. “My sister, the Queen, is dead.” Every ounce of breath left InuYasha’s lungs in a whoosh as though he’d been struck. Now he fully understood his brother’s devastated stupor. Ryuk placed his hands gently on Sesshomaru’s head, looking at the absent yokai with a tenderness that bespoke of their shared bond of grief. “Come back, Sesshomaru,” he said softly. “I can only imagine how terrible is your burden for what you had to do. But there is no time to waste. Sleep peacefully this night, regain your strength, and find yourself renewed on the morrow.”

Sesshomaru was in Rina’s apartment. At this point, he’d had enough forays into the dream world over the past few months to know that this was not real. But oh, how he wished it was. How he longed to just be here with her and pretend that what he’d done to Kaguya was the dream. Only a nightmare.

Rina sat curled on the couch, a book on her lap, but her face was looking with loving expectation in his direction when he turned the corner to find her there.

“Sesshomaru,” she breathed in concern the moment she saw him, putting her book down as he fell to his knees before her. He wrapped his arms about her waist and laid his face into her lap. It was just a dream, but he knew she was actually there with him. He could feel her.

“I’ve done something terrible,” he whispered to her. “Unforgivable.”
Rina’s hands on his hair tightened with distress as she pulled at him, trying to make him look up at her. “What happened, Sessho?” Her emerald orbs were afraid.

“I didn’t know what else to do to find you and save you from Kumayomaru,” he said, his voice thick with grief. He poured the story out, but when he got to the part about the Dragon Queen’s decree regarding the only way she and the other Dragons could help him, he couldn’t bear to look at Rina anymore.

She shushed him softly and placed her hands over his eyes. This action confused him momentarily until the memories suddenly played back with a horrible, controlled clarity. Rina watched every agonizing second. Including when his Demon took over after he’d pulled Kaguya’s heart from her chest. He had not savaged the Queen’s body, but he had torn into the flesh of her heart with a terrible hunger and a howling bloodlust he had never before felt or exhibited, even when he had been at his worst. He still couldn’t look at her, couldn’t bear to see the revulsion and horror on her face. Couldn’t bear to see her eyes darken with hatred and disgust.

It felt like an eternity that she sat there unmoving. It was even more torturous than the two weeks he had waited for Kaguya’s final summons. And then, like a miracle he’d never deserve, he felt her arms slip about him to hold him tight. His heart shredded at her touch and he withered into uncontrollable sobs in her arms. She curled her body around him protectively as he wept and she did not move from him until he’d wrung himself spent.

Some time after his grief had at last subsided to a dull ache, she finally spoke. “You must forgive yourself, Sesshomaru. This was the Dragon Queen’s fate and she went to it willingly. You are not a monster for this. But you must forgive yourself for being the instrument of her fate. Otherwise, you will not only drown yourself in self-loathing, you will also come to hate me and resent me for it.”

He looked up her in startled confusion and found himself met with her saddened gaze. “No! Never! How could I ever hate you for this when I’m more afraid of you hating me instead?”

She shook her head at him. “You will because you did this for my sake. The more you hate yourself for this, the more you will eventually come to wonder if it was even worth it. You will wonder if there wasn’t some other way after all. You will doubt yourself and think that surely you gave in to the Queen’s decree too easily out of desperation. And then her gift to you will be poisoned, her power will be wasted, and her death and sacrifice will ultimately be in vain.” She framed his face with her hands. “Forgive yourself, Sesshomaru. Kaguya would not want you to rip yourself apart like this and neither do I.” She leaned in to kiss him tenderly. “Take that pain, accept it, and let it go. Embrace the gift that Kaguya gave.”
Sesshomaru’s heart ached at her words and split open at her touch. At her silken lips coaxing his. Gods, how he missed her! How he wished he truly was feeling her in his arms, breathing in her scent.

“How on earth do you do that?” he asked her softly. Her head tipped in slight curiosity. He struggled to find the words. “How do you…” he tried again but cut off again helplessly.

“Because you’re not a monster,” she said simply, understanding at last what he was trying to say. “Perhaps you were in the past…”

“No ‘perhaps’ about it.”

“... but that’s not you anymore and hasn’t been for quite some time,” she finished. “A monster wouldn’t have even remotely wrestled with inner conflict over what Kaguya had you do. Even if you were already at peace with it, you’d still not be a monster. Monsters, however, get off on that shit and the pain they cause. Or they think themselves so justified or righteous they don’t give the slightest of fucks about anyone they hurt. That kind of shit.”

His face softened at her simple pragmatism and he rested his forehead against her for a few moments. These moments of clarity with her in the dream world were often fleeting, a result of her body’s ongoing catatonia, wherever she was. A subtle shift in her energy heralded the coming end of her lucidity again. Forgetting her waking body’s imprisonment. Unaware of her capture. Going about as though her interminable existence confined to this apartment was natural.

It shredded Sesshomaru’s heart every time because it was like watching her fade away into a ghost.

“I’ll find you. I swear, I’ll find you,” he whispered, his forehead still against hers. “And when I do, I’ll tell you everything I’ve wanted to say for all these months.” His hope soared for a moment as she tilted her head to brush her lips and silken tongue against his. He opened to her, dying of thirst, and groaned in harmony with her as their tongues thrust against each other in a passionate dance. She pushed him back against the couch and straddled his hips, sliding slow and sensuously against him.

He had just started to run his hands underneath her shirt to caress the skin of her back when she pulled away slightly, a strange smile on her face.

“What an odd thing to say,” her voice had that distant, not-there sort of quality that he had come to recognize over the handful of times they’d been able to find each other in the dream world. “You’ve already found me, Sesshomaru. I’m right here.”
He smiled sadly up at her as she spoke. *If only that were true, Rina-chan.* He wanted to remind her, but he’d already made that mistake once and found how traumatizing it was for her to be dragged back to lucidity once she’d lapsed into the dream fog again. He’d rather eat his own heart than put her through that again.

Instead, he laid there and quietly held her. She’d already forgotten what they’d been doing. Her weight on his chest grew lighter, her solidity in his arms faded gradually to mist as did the apartment around them. He held her until she was gone from him again completely. Like a ghost. And all he could really do until Ryuk’s sleep spell wore off was lay in that empty zero-space and fight off again that feeling as though she’d somehow died in his arms.
Reunited at Last

Chapter Summary

At last, I'm finally awake. To my surprise, Kumayomaru seems a bit afraid of me, though that hardly stops him from being a complete shitheel (such fuck you, very go fuck yourself, dude). In the ultimate "fuck you", a couple of new friends help me escape, telling me to find the Wolf Demon tribe. And, at long last, there he is... Sesshomaru... gods, how I've missed you! Please tell me you're real!

Chapter Notes

When life gives you lemons... make some nommy lemon bars ;) They're worth the wait...

When Rina’s eyes opened, she felt absently, drowsily happy, like she’d been having a good dream, though she couldn't really recall much of it. The feeling quickly faded as she tried to stretch and felt the debilitating weakness of her own body, as though her muscles had been inactive for a long time. The room that greeted her eyes was not her room in her apartment or anywhere else that was familiar. Or modern, for that matter. She was in a room in some castle. Beyond that, her brain could not process these disorienting circumstances.

She crawled off of the futon and struggled shakily to her feet, tottering a bit like a newborn foal, and hobbled to the window. The sight that greeted her made her breath catch in her throat. Snow blanketed the ground outside. Nothing else that her eyes beheld stuck to her observations yet. All she could comprehend was the snow.

I don’t know where I am. I don’t know how I got here.

Her thoughts whirled faster, driving her increasing anxiety ever closer to a full-blown panic attack. She sank back down on the futon and tried to get her breathing under control. As she sought to focus herself, she began trying to trace the last things she could remember. As she did so, she also had the unshakeable sense that she needed to attract as little attention as possible. She couldn’t remember why, but she had the stark feeling that she had reason to be afraid.

She kept those things in mind as she continued to breathe deeply and mentally trace her steps back to whatever she could remember. Golden eyes gazing tenderly at her. A beach. Her wolves were upset. Her head splitting. A tall, silver-haired stranger watching her from his table. A man in
military dress pointing a gun at her.

Rina frowned and looked down under the hem of the robe she wore. The scar on her right shoulder was faded with a small, puckered peak. She’d gotten shot by that man. And Ryuka’s brother had extracted the bullet with his Dragon Sight. Sesshomaru had held her hand… Sesshomaru… the silver-haired stranger.

She’d awoken in his arms the next morning. Golden eyes gazed tenderly into her own. A crescent moon adorned his forehead. A pair of magenta stripes slashed each cheek. He’d held her close, curling his body around her protectively. He’d kissed her and she’d responded to him with matching desire. Feeling his delicious weight on her, pressing her down into her bed. His hands roving her body, skimming her leg to curl it around his hip. His hands pulling her against his swollen length, his eyes hooded with longing. Sesshomaru… please… Had she whimpered that aloud just now or had she said that in this memory? She had wanted him with an intensity that made her Wolf howl in demand. But Izumi and Ryuka had interrupted them… but wait… wait…

He’d rested his forehead against hers and had whispered the strangest thing. “I’ll find you. I swear, I’ll find you.” But I’m right here. Her heart, which had begun to pound with something other than fear as the memories started to clarify, told her as much. I’m right here, Sesshomaru… But had this actually happened or had she only dreamed it?

“What are you?” He’d asked her the night they’d met. He was a friend of Sota and his family. And he was an Inu Daiyokai… from the Sengoku Jidai. He’d known she wasn’t human… Something attacked her in her apartment. Something had killed Izumi… Impossibly big lizards…

Panic started to bubble back up as the scenes of that horror started to play through her mind with increasing intensity. Had she killed a couple of them? Had she gotten thrown? Izumi being held up by her throat… giant claws ripping through her abdomen…

Rina gasped as she yanked herself forcefully out of the memory. Her hands trembled as they wrung themselves through her hair and she fought the urge to scream. She could hear a guttural voice in her head, screaming and cursing the enormous lizards to whatever horrid death best suited them for what they’d done.

Rina tried to make her thoughts go back to those scenes with him… with Sesshomaru… the memory of his heat, his body, his lips against hers. Anything but these horrible memories of violence and death.

She was still struggling to get her anxiety and her breathing under control when the door to the
room slid open. Rina jumped and looked up, her mouth gaping in a silent scream. A woman stood there in the doorway and looked at Rina with genuine shock, so much so that she couldn’t even speak. Her wide-eyed, open-mouthed stare mirrored Rina’s entirely before crumpling into anxious uncertainty as she looked behind her and back at Rina a few times, increasing in fear with each look.

“Kotone!” a deep male voice barked. “What is taking you so long?”

The woman, who flinched at the sound of his voice, looked at Rina with eyes that begged her to understand. “She-- she’s at last awake, my lord!” she finally squeaked out.

Approaching footsteps raised the hair on Rina’s neck and arms, but not half as much as the black, oily, evil energy that accompanied. Another flash of memory. A deceptively beautiful, handsome face. Long, thick black hair and a ridiculously tall, muscular form. And clinging to this person had been such a deep aura of evil, it had caused Rina to think it would be far worse than the monsters children so often feared.

When the footsteps drew close enough, Kotone whimpered and fled into the room to kneel and prostrate herself on the floor, not daring to look up. Then he stood in the doorway.

“Kumayomaru,” Rina whispered before she’d even realized she remembered his name. She tried not to quail under the sharpness of the Bear’s gaze, who looked utterly offended. Yet, he did not advance toward her. In fact, his body language, the way he didn’t face her squarely, made her tip her head slightly. Was he afraid of her? Why?

A flash of him becoming his Bear and going on a rampage flashed into her memory. It was all she could do to maintain eye contact with him after that memory surfaced. His eyes, black as obsidian, glared at her with a peculiar apprehensive hatred. What the fuck is going on?

“So, you remember who I am, do you?” he asked, his voice cold.

“Somewhat,” Rina returned. Her voice quavered a little even as her tone was just as icy. She heard Kotone whimper next to her. “Where am I?” she demanded.

He looked like he wanted to strike her. So, why doesn’t he? “That’s not your concern,” he snarled.
“I think I can decide for myself what gives me a heckin’ concern, thanks,” she spat. He advanced toward her and she braced herself while never taking her eyes off his infuriated face. As he drew near, Rina felt her power spike up. Her fangs lengthened. Her eyes blazed. Her muscles no longer felt weak. In fact, it felt like she was growing?! Her nails blackened and sprouted into claws as she found herself suddenly eye-to-eye with him rather than looking up. Still, he held himself back. What the actual fuck?! She was about to ask as much when a voice in her head ordered her silence.

Do not egg him on right now, Katarina. Now is not the time. A feather-light touch on her shoulder propelled Rina to fall again into the arms of darkness.

“Kotone, see to it that our guest has food when next she wakes.” Kurayomaru’s snarling command was the last thing she heard.

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Hold on, Rina. I know you’re awake. Just hold on a little longer. I’m coming.

Rina sat bolt upright and looked about her in confusion. “Sesshomaru?” she murmured blearily. Had she actually heard him? Still looking for him in dazed confusion, she realized that night had fallen. Then she spotted Kotone huddled in a corner. The girl was afraid. And, by her scent, her fear had spiked as soon as Rina had awoken.

“Kotone, what’s wrong? Are you ok?” Rina rose to check on her, but the girl cringed away from her. “Ah,” she said softly. She gently reached out to tip Kotone’s face toward her by the chin. “Because I’m a demon?” she asked softly. The girl was weeping and looked away again, nodding. “It’s ok. I understand. But I promise you, I won’t hurt you. I swear it.” She waited, backing up to give Kotone some space. She went to the window. The snow looked strangely bright under the light of the waning moon. A sound caught her ears. Hope filled her heart. The sound of waves washing up on a beach.

“Kotone, can you tell me where we are?” She looked back at her when she did not hear a response. Kotone was watching her quietly but shook her head when Rina looked at her.

“All I know, mistress, is that we’re on an island somewhere.”

“Wait… ‘mistress’?” Rina questioned.

“Master Kumayomaru has said that I’m to be your personal serving girl.”
Rina swallowed. “Fuck.”

“Are you displeased, mistress?” the girl cringed. “He said that you would rip my throat out if I displeased you.”

“Don’t listen to that sack of shit,” Rina growled. “Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. ’No, Kotone, you haven’t displeased me, I swear. I’m just afraid because I think I know his game. He means to use you to control me.”

“How so, mistress?” The girl’s eyes were even more afraid now.

“For some reason, Kumayomaru seems afraid of me. I don’t know why. Earlier I gave him more than enough provocation for him to hit me or something and yet he held back. I don’t know why. But if there’s some reason why he can’t do anything to me, then he’s going for the next best thing. He’ll hold you and your safety over my head to force my cooperation.” She shuddered with dread as she turned back to Kotone. ”I’m so sorry you’ve been dragged into this.”

At last, the girl’s face softened into a wan smile. “It’s not your fault, mistress.”

“Please, just call me Rina, ok? It’s just too weird being called ‘mistress’. I’m not royalty, ok? Just some chick who somehow got dragged back in time.” Kotone looked like she wanted to argue but thought the better of it.

“Are you hungry?” She nodded her head toward a tray.

Rina sighed. “I guess I could try to eat.” The fare was very simple. Some broth and some rice. It made sense. Gods only know how long she went without proper food. She heard Kotone’s stomach growl. “Have you eaten?”

Kotone averted her gaze. “Master said I wasn’t to eat until you have.”

“Screw him. I don’t like to eat by myself. I’m not touching my food until you have some to eat with me.” Kotone looked terribly afraid. “Hey, he said you’re to be my serving girl. Well, I refuse
to let you starve. And if he tries any shit at you, I will fucking kill him.
"Look, if it will make it easier, I will go with you to get some food, ok?" Rina picked up her food
to take it with her.

Kotone hesitated before she finally stood to her feet and pulled the door open. Rina followed her
out. There, she saw that her room was at the end of a hallway. Of course, she thought. A lot harder
for me to sneak out without probably running across Kumayomaru or someone who wouldn’t
hesitate to report me if I try to escape. She followed Kotone down the hallway until she turned
right. This led them straight past a larger common room where Kumayomaru sat on a cushion with
his back to them. Kotone faltered with a small whimper.

“Don’t worry about him, just keep going,” Rina grumbled.

“Kotone, has Katarina eaten her food?”

Kotone looked at Rina with wild fear. “N-- no, Master,” she squeaked.

“Then why are you going to the kitchen?” his voice was a deceptively sensuous purr. “I explicitly
ordered that you would not eat until she does.”

“Oh, bugger off,” Rina snapped. “I don’t eat in front of people when they’re hungry and I don’t
like to eat alone. Get the fuck over it.”

Kumayomaru spun around and looked at her like she was beyond crazy for speaking to him this
way. Behind her, she could feel Kotone trembling so hard Rina thought she just might soil herself.
She didn’t blame the poor girl in the least. It was taking every ounce of strength she possessed to
keep her own composure.

“You are treading on thin ice, Wolf woman!” he snarled.

“Try me! How much is it worth to you?” Her eyes flashed red. He twitched like he just might
explode into his Bear form right there, but Rina held her ground.

“For your information,” Rina snarled, “Kotone is not to blame. She wouldn’t do this until I ordered
her to, so don’t even think of taking this shit out on her.”
“Order me about in my own castle again. I dare you.”

“Threaten me again.” Her fangs lengthened. She could scarcely contain the smug satisfaction she felt at watching him back down, his manner screamed in rage at the humiliation. He, a Bear, cowed in his own castle by a Wolf. She maintained her ground even as she knew she needed to tread carefully, still.

As they both simmered down from their spiked tempers, he glowered at her. “You won’t always have that goddess watching your back. You really should be more careful.” His voice was acid and honey wine. If he weren’t such a vile and foul creature, Rina could picture women falling at his feet and begging him to say their names.

“Noted,” she retorted coldly. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, Master,” her tone dripped with venomous sarcasm, “I’m getting her some food and then I shall partake as you ordered.” She held up her broth and rice as proof as she curled her lip at him before taking a sarcastic bow. “Let’s go, Kotone.”

In the kitchen, Kotone ladled some stew for herself and Rina refreshed her cold broth and rice. It took Kotone a few minutes to feel calm enough to eat until Rina asked her to take a few gulps of broth to get her started. Finally, Kotone started digging into her stew with voracity and Rina sipped at her broth quietly. She was lost in thought about the words Kumayomaru had flung at her. *What the fuck was that about back there? What goddess watching my back?* She wanted to ask Kotone about it, but decided to keep her thoughts to herself. She wasn’t sure what would happen if she let it be found that she had no idea what he was talking about.

When she and Kotone had eaten their fill -- with Rina patiently waiting as Kotone scarfed through three bowls of the stew -- they made their way back to Rina’s room, not even bothering to pause and look in Kumayomaru’s direction.

“Have a nice meal?” he snarked. Rina rolled her eyes. Petty, egotistical asshole. Dude was probably a major shoo-in for a Narcissistic Personality Disorder diagnosis.

“My compliments to the chef,” she retorted. “Kiss my ass, and konbanwa.” She let the "goodnight" drip acid of her own, letting him know that she wished anything but good for him.

Back in her room, Kotone refreshed the fire. She looked afraid, after that, of leaving the room to return to her own quarters. Rina shook her head at her. “Don’t even think about it. You’ll stay in here. I don’t trust him to not try anything towards you after our ‘pleasantries’ from earlier and I’ll be damned if I let him take his shit out on you for it.”
Kotone smiled at her gratefully. At Rina’s invitation, she crawled under the thick covers of Rina’s futon and, within minutes, had collapsed into an exhausted sleep. Rina stayed awake as long as she could, tense and listening, jumping at every little sound, until she felt reasonably satisfied that Kumayomaru would not come after them just yet. She slept light enough that she still jerked awake at every tiny creak.

The next morning, Kotone awoke and tried to ready herself to go about her tasks. But she looked at the door like it led straight to the pits of hell and, as Rina watched her, she supposed that analogy wasn’t terribly far off.

“What am I to do while you go about your duties?” Rina asked her. Kotone looked back at her with a curious and confused expression. “I’m supposed to just stay in here?” Kotone nodded quietly. “Screw that. I’m bored. I’ll come with you and work as well.”

“I don’t know if Master would approve,” Kotone squeaked.

“Look, I know you’re scared,” Rina said gently. “And if something happens to you because I stood up to him last night, that would be my fault. I’m not going to let you face him alone, ok?” She nodded at the door. “So, let’s go.”

They walked down the hall and to the kitchen where other servants were eating breakfast. They gawked at Rina and Kotone as they made their entrance and dutifully grabbed themselves some food. Rina helped herself to some stew that still burbled in the cauldron.

“That’s for dinner later!” snapped a woman, who spoke with the kind of authority that denoted her being the manager of the staff.

Rina shrank back. “My apologies, my lady,” she said meekly.

“Azuna, please don’t be angry with her,” Kotone begged, earning herself a glare from the woman.

“I’m sorry Miss Azuna,” Rina said with a bow. “I didn’t mean to anger you. I needed something rather protein-heavy to eat and I feared that if I tried to eat that much from the breakfast portions, I would be taking food away from you all.”
Azuna scowled at Rina for a moment before her expression softened slightly. Then she turned back to Kotone. “Why is she here?” Kotone quickly explained the situation. Azuna looked back at Rina with another scowl on her face. “You want to work around here?” Her tone was dubious.

Rina bowed respectfully again. “Yes, Miss Azuna. And I want to keep Kotone safe from Kumayomaru.” Everyone uttered a collective gasp at Rina’s lack of formality about the master that made their lives so terrifying.

“How is it that you're so formal to me, borderline quaking where you stand, and yet you have no fear of the Master?” Azuna gawked at her.

“I never said I’m not afraid of him,” Rina answered quietly. “I remember what he did to the village that he took me from.” She looked back up at Azuna, meeting her gaze fiercely. “I’m just determined to not let him rule me with that fear.”

“You are a demon, are you not?”

“I’m still trying to understand what I am, my lady,” Rina replied.

“You’re a Wolf demon of some sort,” Azuna pronounced without a doubt. “Not the same as any of the Wolf demons we have here, but a Wolf nonetheless.” Her scowl became thoughtful. “Eat your stew, Rina, and then I will designate your and Kotone’s tasks for the day.”

Their first task for the day was scrubbing floors and, the more they worked, the more Kotone’s anxiety seemed to relax, much to Rina’s relief. Having dealt with an anxiety disorder most of her life, she knew the misery of anxiety itself. The fact that it was primarily perpetrated by a monster? Rina could heavily empathize. Especially when said monster came upon them while they worked. She’d been too lost in her thoughts to notice until she looked up and saw Kotone frozen to the spot where she scrubbed, her eyes wide and her face pale.

Rina turned and saw Kumayomaru looming over her, his black eyes fixed and his expression a puzzled scowl.

“What… what are you doing?”

If he weren’t a murderous piece of shit bastard, Rina might have laughed a little. He sounded
almost… human. “I’m sure if you watch a little longer, the obvious will occur to you,” she said flatly.

His scowl deepened into annoyance. “Nobody likes a smartass--”

“That’s funny. All my friends love how much of a smartass I am,” she cut him off unrepentantly. “What nobody likes is a narsty douchebag. That I am damn sure of.” She went back to her scrubbing. Turning my back is such a stupid move and my sensei would beat me senseless for it.

He walked around and crouched in front of her, obsidian eyes snapping with his barely restrained temper. “What I mean is why are you doing this?”

Rina huffed an impatient sigh. “You’re in my way,” she snapped. He didn’t budge. “Fine,” she barked. “I don’t like being confined. I deal with anxiety and it’s hell when I get bored. If it gets bad enough, I start punching walls and I didn’t want Kotone to catch hell if I started to do that to your crappy castle, ok? It’s better for everyone if I can do something constructive.”

Now his face was utterly bewildered. “You are so strange, Wolf woman,” he finally said. “I don’t understand. You wield such power and I know that you don’t even comprehend the full scope of it. You don’t even know of the goddess who protects you. Don’t look so surprised,” he added. “You masked it quite well, but your scent betrayed you. You had absolutely no idea why I have shown such restraint to your continued insolence. And yet you’re using that shield to protect these peasants? Why? Why do you care what happens to them?”

Rina blinked up at him as her lip curled. “Is the concept of not being a selfish, cruel piece of shit really that much of a mystery to you?” His expression darkened. “Look, dude, I was raised around humans. And, believe it or not, but I’ve seen humans who are just as shitty as you, if not worse. They feel powerless for whatever their respective reasons and so they look to get a taste of power by treating other people like shit for being different or they go and pull shit every bit as monstrous as the shit I’ve already seen you do. Hell, I’ve been on the receiving end of it more times than I can count and so have my friends. And I’ve tried the retaliation bullshit where I treat people like crap, too.” She shrugged at him grudgingly. “All I really know is that continuing that shit didn’t help me. It didn’t help me feel any better about humans and it damn sure didn’t improve how I felt about myself. Being more powerful than humans doesn’t make you or I any better than them, you know. The only thing that’s ever helped me was to try to be kind anyway until I’m given valid reason by specific people not to be.”

He placed a hand on her head and she snarled. But then memories flashed before her eyes. Most of them skipped by faster than she could identify. Unfortunately, he chose to slow enough to watch what happened with David and then what happened with the two assholes at the beach the day she
met Sesshomaru.

At last, he broke his contact. “Stay the fuck out of my head!” she shrieked at him, feeling several kinds of violated. He ignored her.

“Why didn’t you kill those humans? Why didn’t you kill the one who violated you?”

She huddled away from him and wrapped her arms around herself protectively. She finally glared back up at him, her eyes reddening. “I didn’t kill him because I didn’t know how to fight yet, thanks,” she spat. “Thanks so fucking much for making me relive that, you smegma-covered dickcheese!

"Especially given what you said the night you slaughtered the village! I’ve had dreams about that, you know!” her rage continued. “I was already out of it and yet I apparently was still coherent enough to hear you talk of ‘enjoying me’ until you could ‘leave my broken body for Sesshomaru to find’! Touch me again and you won’t even have a soul left to send to the Underworld!”

He stayed quiet while she raged. When her temper quieted, he spoke. “Forgive me,” he said stiffly, sounding anything but apologetic. “I needed to see for myself what you spoke of. It is that much of a mystery to me, actually. Humans are nothing but insects and so are most demons, including the grasping reptiles of that village.”

“You slaughtered children!” Rina seethed. “You slaughtered women! You slaughtered people who didn’t even remotely deserve your cruelty and you haven’t the right!”

“I also killed the ones responsible for slaughtering your best friend.”

“Oh, and you think that somehow makes up for the rest, do you?” Her lip curled at him in disgust. Then her rage spiked to a near-volcanic level as a couple of traitorous rage-tears escaped out of her seething red eyes. “Get the fuck out of my way!” she roared, “I have work to do!”

He stood but didn’t move for several moments. Rina held his gaze and her ground until, at last, he turned on his heel and walked away, slamming out of the castle with a roar. Rina roared after him before she allowed herself to finally dissolve into the tears of rage that had built up.

“Sonofabitch cock-biting motherfucker!” she fumed as she scrubbed furiously at the floor. “I fucking hate it when people make me rage-cry! May Karma make you her absolute bitch fuck-toy, you fucking fuckwitted piece of shit!” But no matter how hard she scrubbed, she couldn’t scrub
away the memories that he’d dredged up all for the sake of his own curiosity.

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After she and Kotone had finished scrubbing the floors, Azuna decreed their next task. “The Master has left the castle and will be gone for a few days,” she spoke to them quietly, walking with them over the grounds and gesturing as though she were pointing out different things she wanted them to attend to. “Rina, you need to take this opportunity to get out of here. Tonight.”

Rina shrank back. “But what about all of you? Won’t he kill you for this?”

“It is likely at least a few of us will die,” she nodded. “But you are our best hope for doing away with this monster once and for all. And if you ultimately succeed with the help of your friends and your mate, then it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

Kotone nodded ardently next to Azuna. “As am I.”

“We are on the northside of a small island north of the main island from whence you came. Can you withstand the cold to cross the channel tonight?”

“I’ll figure out a way,” Rina answered softly.

Azuna nodded. “Good. When you make it back to the island, I want you to seek out the Wolf Demon tribe, particularly their chieftain, Koga. He is friends with your mate’s brother, InuYasha. He’ll know what to do. Though the Wolf Demons have a rather fractious history with humans, for the most part, my village was friends with them for a long time before Kumayomaru slaughtered them.” She handed Rina a strange scarf that carried a rather pungent scent on it. “Koga gave his fur so my mother could make this for me when I was a little girl. He’ll know who sent you to him.” Then she turned and walked away to leave Kotone and Rina to their “chores”.

Rina ate dinner among the rest of the household staff, none of whom seemed suspicious of what she would soon be doing. They were all too busy chattering about the dose of what-for she’d given the Master earlier that day. “I still have chills from witnessing that!” one of the girls chirped. “It was one of the most glorious things I’ve ever witnessed and I lost hope for anything glorious once I was brought here!” The rest of the staff nodded their agreement and threw out some of the things Rina had spewed at the Master that had about made them burst into peals of uncontrollable laughter at the time -- laughter that they now heartily partook of. They also enjoyed themselves
asking Rina about some of the strange phrases that had come out of her mouth, asking her to explain things like "douchebag" and "fuckwit".

After dinner, Rina retired to her room with Kotone close behind her. However, once they reached Rina’s room, Rina shook her head slightly at the other girl. **You must be seen going to your room, Kotone. I must be absolutely alone now. Otherwise, you’ll be blamed even more quickly than you’re already liable to.**

“So, thanks for helping me with my chores today,” Kotone said softly. Loud enough to be overheard but not attract unwanted attention.

Rina smirked at her. “Let’s do this again tomorrow, shall we?” she laughed.

“Tomorrow, then. Goodnight, Rina.”

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Rina spent the hours watching the moon. She wasn’t quite sure what position heralded midnight, but she sensed it when everyone in the castle was in their quarters and fast asleep. A while after that, she felt the inward nudge. **It’s time to go, Katarina.** That strange voice again. She had a feeling it was the goddess that Kumayomaru had mentioned to her. Silently, she grabbed the scarf - - the only other thing she was taking with her -- and began her escape. She silently slid her door open only just enough to squeeze out through. She’d already heard how it scraped and even squeaked if opened much further than that. She quietly padded down the hall in her bare feet and peeked into the sleeping quarters. Everyone was thoroughly crashed out as Azuna had promised they would be.

She padded silently to the door that would open the quietest -- a side door that only the servants used -- and ran into the night. It was snowing a blizzard, thank the gods, which would mean that her tracks would soon be covered up.

**Wait… where did this blizzard even come from? It was clear enough to see the moon just a little bit ago…**

**You don’t have the time to wonder, just get the fuck going!** the strange woman’s voice sounded in her head again.
Rina didn’t stop for breath even once as she ran the five miles south to the beach that would be her last point of land. She breathed nervously. Just how big was the gap of ocean between here and the main island? Could she even swim that far? She wracked her brain trying to remember what she’d been taught in her high school geography classes, but that was futile. She’d never been good at remembering shit like that. She whipped her head from side to side to clear her thoughts.

“No time to chicken out now,” she growled at herself. She knotted the wolf fur scarf around her waist and plunged into the frigid waters. The storm that had cropped up so suddenly whipped the waters about her to terrifying heights and Rina could feel her anxiety trying to rear up. "Fuck you!" she screamed at it as the crest of another huge wave towered over her. She inhaled a deep breath and plunged under before it could crash into her. She held her breath for as long as she could, swimming as far as possible before giving in to the need to breathe.

On and on, she made her way south like this. She had no idea how far she’d gotten when she felt desperate for a rest, but the seas refused her respite. She managed to get a few moments here and there of floating on her back to catch her breath, but the waves, still a good 10 or so feet high, kept forcing her to keep going.

She focused on her methodical process. Swim, dive, swim some more, surface for air. Wash, rinse, repeat. The sky was just beginning to lighten with gray when she, at last, stumbled shakily out of the water. For all this time -- trudging barefoot through the snow and the hours spent in the freezing water -- she’d not felt even a twinge of it. But her strength reserves were seriously depleted as was her newfound resistance to the cold.

“I have to keep going,” she groaned to herself. “I can’t stay here. Too exposed.” She crawled for the first bit until she was ensconced in a forest. She crawled under a bush and collapsed in on herself in exhaustion.

The sun was high in the sky when she finally came to. She was still cold, though not as much as she had been when she’d emerged from the sea. Now I gotta find the Wolf Demon tribe that Azuna told me about. Her nose was so cold, she almost couldn’t smell anything at first. The scarf still knotted about her waist was still too sodden with seawater to be of much help either. She unbelted it from her with the intent of folding it carefully. She shook it a couple of times to try to air as much of the remaining moisture as possible. But, as she started to fold it, she realized with a start that the scarf was now completely dry! Not only that, but it was preternaturally warm!

Rina gratefully buried her face in the warmth, wrapping the scarf around her neck and face, before
she started off. She didn’t know where she was going just yet, but she definitely needed to get away from here. She headed in the direction of the mountains. That seemed the most reasonable place to start, given that Azuna had told her that they primarily resided in the Northern Mountains. It only took a half-hour tops for her nose to be warmed enough to start sniffing the crisp winter air for scents.

To her relief, Kumayomaru’s scent was not there at all. She knew he could hide his scent, but she also knew instinctively that now that she’d gotten his scent, he’d never be able to hide it from her ever again. Still, she’d have to be careful. He could still use wind direction to his advantage if he were hunting her.

She caught the scent of Wolf Demons a little to her left and she took off into a blazing run in the direction of the scent. The sun was dipping towards the horizon and painting the sky with its last brilliant show of the evening when Rina stopped in her tracks. The hair on her neck stood on end under the wrap of the scarf and she froze, wondering what to do in momentary panic. She was being watched.

She snarled a yelp of surprise when she found herself surrounded by four demons, all wearing furs. She relaxed when she realized they were of the Wolf Demon tribe she sought. “Oh, thank gods, I’ve found you,” she blurted. Their snarls didn’t abate, however.

*Fuck!* she scolded herself internally. *I’m a stranger and a strange Wolf in their territory. Gods, I’m stupid!*

She immediately threw herself prostrate before them. “I’m sorry! I wasn’t thinking of anything regarding proper protocols…” her voice faded as she realized that she actually had no idea what would constitute “proper protocols” with this tribe. She knew regular wolves. She had no idea about Wolf Demons. One demon strode forward, accompanied by a woman with red hair and green eyes. They were clearly the Alpha pair. Out of sheer habit from her dealings with her wolf pack back home, Rina rolled on her back and turned her head to the side in a show of submission, making careful sure not to meet their eyes.

“Where did you get this?” the Alpha male demanded, fingering the scarf about her throat. Before she could respond, he grabbed her by the throat and held her aloft. “I asked you where you got it!” he barked again. “Answer me!”

Rina’s temper snapped. She lashed out with her foot and caught him in his own throat, causing him to drop her and his companions to snarl at her menacingly. She landed on her feet and threw a baleful look at them. Then she looked at the Alpha male and uttered a snarl of her own. “It’s kinda hard to answer a question when you’re cutting off my air, you know!” She stood tall. “This is your territory and, believe me, I respect the shit out of that, but I don’t have time for this! I was sent by a woman named Azuna. She said I could find you and your tribe and ask for your help.”
“Did you say ‘Azuna’?” the grumpy male rasped through his own sore throat. “Bullshit. Azuna has been dead for years.”

“Are you Koga?” she quipped back. He didn’t answer her. She removed the scarf from her neck and held it out to him. “Smell it for yourself.”

He scowled as he took it from her and sniffed. Then he looked at her with surprise. “She’s telling the truth,” he said to his companions, stunned. “Azuna’s scent is still on here and, aside from the smell of seawater, her scent is still fresh.” He jumped back up into Rina’s face again. “Where is she?!”

Rina growled at the intrusion upon her personal space. “Back off!” She held her ground and refused to speak until he did so. “She’s been held captive on an island north of here by the demon Kumayomaru.”

“Oh shit,” the redheaded Alpha woman breathed. “He’s the one who destroyed her village.” She reached out with a hand to grasp Rina’s forearm in greeting. “I am Ayame, Koga’s wife and mate, and Alpha of the pack.”

Rina clasped her back with a respectful bow. “My name is Katarina, but people just call me Rina, usually.”

“Why did Azuna tell you to seek us out?” Koga asked her.

“She said you could help me find…” Rina cut off. Azuna’s words hadn’t really sunk in until now. Azuna had called Sesshomaru her “mate”. She shook herself out of her thoughts. “She said you could help me find my mate because you know his brother. A hanyo by the name of InuYasha.”

If they hadn’t already looked gobsmacked, they definitely did now. “You’re Sesshomaru’s mate?” one of the other demons asked. “Man, that guy’s scary!”

“Come with us to our den,” Ayame invited. “You can tell us everything while we get you fed.” She looked over to Koga for confirmation and he nodded without hesitation.
Rina bowed deeply again. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Their den was a cave high in the mountains and there were at least a hundred other Wolves in there as well as a sizable pack of various pups. Rina stopped dead in her tracks, suddenly very afraid.

“No, I can’t be here,” she whispered.

“Wait, what?” Koga snapped.

“No, you don’t understand!” she cried out, edging closer to hysteria. “When Kumayomaru took me, he slaughtered an entire village of lizard-type demons, including their children! What if he tracks me here? He won’t think anything of slaughtering your pups!” Rina whimpered as the scene played over her mind again, but instead of reptilian children, he was decimating this pack.

“Easy, easy,” Ayame said gently, her emerald eyes soft with compassion. “If he comes here, we won’t let him close enough to the youngsters like that, I promise you. Come on inside,” she coaxed, somewhat reminding Rina of how she’d talk to her wolves when they were new to the pack and coping with trust issues. “I can tell you’ve been through some terrible ordeals. As rough as we are, believe me, we get it.”

Koga, who’d been eyeing Rina with concerns of his own, nodded ardently as his wife spoke. “Ayame’s right. We’ve been itching to get a piece of that monster ever since he decimated Azuna’s village. But we’ve been unable to track him or find him anywhere. The fucker has been a ghost for at least a century now and no one knows why. So, if anything, if he comes after you, you’ll just be doing us a favor by luring him here.”

Rina hesitated. “Wolves always have contingency plans,” she finally said. “Do you have somewhere safe you can send the youngsters just in case? An emergency hideaway or anything?”

Koga and Ayame looked quietly between each other. Rina got the distinct feeling they were having a very private conversation. At last, Koga nodded at her. “Yeah, we do.” He turned and hollered over his shoulder. “Ginta! Hakkaku!” The two Wolves that had accompanied him and Ayame when they’d found Rina approached now as he barked.

“Get your mates and get the children packed off to the safe den,” Koga ordered them.

“Sir?” they squeaked.
“It’s just a precaution. We don’t want the children to be at risk if Kumayomaru does track Rina here. Yeah, I think we could take him, but I’m not going to bet their lives on it.” Koga cast a wistful glance at the children, his eyes were haunted. Rina followed his gaze to a small pack of children, in particular, three of which had Ayame’s red hair. Ayame placed herself beside him and took his hand. He turned and gave her a winsome, loving smile and kissed the back of her hand.

They said goodbye to their children and a good dozen of their packmates and then beckoned Rina to sit with them at their fire. Ayame handed her a and Koga a bowl of venison stew before sitting down with her own. Rina salivated at the smell of the meat and her stomach burred loudly, causing Ayame and Koga to chuckle.

“Ohmigods, this is so good,” Rina groaned around her first mouthful without thinking. Neither of the Alphas looked offended by her lack of manners, however. In fact, Ayame drew herself up with pride.

“Thanks!” she chirped happily. “I made it myself! I’ve made plenty, so don’t hesitate to help yourself to more.”

Rina had two more bowls before she finally leaned against the rock behind her and patted her slightly extended stomach. Not quite comfortable enough, she curled up on her left side to help digestion. She let out a long sigh of over-stuffed contentment.

“Would you like to rest before you tell us what’s going on?” Koga asked her gruffly.

She shook her head. She was exhausted, but the sooner she told them her story, the sooner they could be prepared. She nutshelled everything as best she could, telling them about how she was from the future (“Oh! So you know Kagome?” Koga had asked brightly, to which Rina had shaken her head and said she actually hadn’t yet gotten to meet InuYasha or Kagome), how she met Sesshomaru, how she’d gotten kidnapped, what had happened when Kumayomaru had taken her from the lizard village, and how she’d only awoken a few days ago.

“Azuna called Sesshomaru your mate,” Ayame piped up. “Sorry if this is a bit personal, but I don’t see a mating mark on you?” At Rina’s puzzled look, she showed her a scar that rested on the juncture of her neck and shoulder and Koga showed a similar mark on him. Then they went into rather… ahem… explicit detail as to what all was involved in a mating ceremony.

“No, we’re not mated,” Rina said, blushing as red as her own hair, not willing to examine how heated her body got at the thought of her and Sesshomaru… “We’d only started developing a relationship when I was taken. We weren’t even sure where it was going to go or what was going to
happen.” She shrugged helplessly. “I mean, how is it supposed to work when he and I are from two completely different time periods?”

Koga shrugged. “It worked for Kagome and InuYasha.”

“Yeah,” Ayame interjected. “But Kagome has been cut off from her time for so many years now. That’s a huge sacrifice to make.” She looked over at Rina. “But Sesshomaru was right. Wolves and Dogs don’t become attached easily. And we, like real wolves, mate for life. Often our hearts make that choice for us before we even mark our bodies with it. So, when we end up feeling that way about someone, it matters. As long as you two stand by each other, you can tackle whatever comes your way.”

Koga gazed at Ayame with deep affection and pulled her against him, nuzzling his face into her neck and kissing her mating mark. The scene laid a profound ache upon Rina’s heart. She was finally free of Kumayomaru’s clutches, at least for now. How much longer would she have to wait to be reunited with Sesshomaru? As she’d worked in Kumayomaru’s castle a couple days ago, more of her memories had returned, including some of the dreams they’d shared. They were pretty fuzzy still, but she was able to recall enough.

A sultry growl caught her attention and her face flamed all over again as she saw Ayame crawl up her mate’s body, their intentions clearly outlined on their heated faces. Elsewhere, she heard the sounds of other couples becoming intimate without reservation or embarrassment over who might be watching. It was definitely outside of Rina’s realm of experience. So, the Wolf Demons are basically the Dothraki of the Feudal Era, she mused to herself. She shrugged finally. It makes sense, actually. She turned to place her back towards Koga and Ayame, whose breathing had become gasping moans and growls of passion. She envied them, actually.

Her mind turned over what Ayame had said about Wolves mating for life and what Sesshomaru had said to her so many months ago about how the human rules didn’t really apply to Demons when their hearts got involved. She sighed quietly to herself. Gods, she missed him. And the stronger the scents of the various mating Wolves became, the more her body ached for him. Her eyes closed as she tried to lose herself in the memories of waking up next to him the morning after she’d been shot. The way his golden eyes had looked so deeply into her own. The way he’d kissed her for the first time and with such a profound desperation. His musky, intoxicating scent made her head buzz. His scent…

Her eyes flew open. His scent! She sat bolt upright, scarcely daring to hope. She had been laying facing the cave entrance, but nothing was there and it was snowing another blizzard out there. She scented the breeze again and wanted to cry when nothing came to her.
Restless now, she threw the wolf shawl Ayame had given her about her shoulders and Azuna’s scarf about her neck and got up to pace. She went to the cave entrance and looked about. She looked up at the snow falling, the wind whipping her hair about her shoulders. A break in the clouds allowed the waning moon to look down on her for a moment and she felt herself smile a little. She wondered…

There! His scent again! Her nose worked frantically as she looked down and then her heart stopped. There he was! Sesshomaru… He was coming up the mountain path, covered in snow, and he’d stopped, his eyes wide and his mouth slack as he took in the sight of her. Then he was running to her and before Rina could utter a word, his arms were around her, lifting her up to him, crushing her to him as though he were trying to fuse their bodies together.

“Rina!” he gasped. “It’s really you!”

She clung to him desperately. It was so surreal to be holding him again after all this time. The last time she’d seen him had been when he’d gone with Ryuka to check on her wolves! And now he was here. “Sesshomaru…” she whispered. “Please tell me you’re real!”

He answered her by plundering her mouth like he was starving. His lips were cold and she didn’t care. She whimpered against his mouth, her body bursting into flames as his hands trailed down to her butt to support her weight. He growled into her mouth as his tongue thrust against hers. They carried on like this for several minutes before a chorus of approving howls and whoops caught their attention and forced them to come up for air.

“Sesshomaru!” Koga greeted, still straddled by his mate, who was laying on his chest and watching Sesshomaru and Rina’s reunion with tears in her eyes and a gleaming smile on her face. “Get your ass in here out of the cold already!”

Rina looked up at him with a blush on her face. So lost she’d been in his arms, she hadn’t even noticed when the sounds of mating Wolves had gone silent. **We must have given them a helluva show.** Sesshomaru grasped her hand and they walked together into the cave and settled by the fire near Koga and Ayame, who had separated their bodies and straightened themselves to greet their newest guest. Ayame ladled out some stew for him, which Sesshomaru gratefully accepted. Then she pulled Koga to his feet.

“We have so many questions, but those can wait til morning. There’s no such thing as privacy here, but we’ll give you what we can. Come, Koga, let’s prepare the alcove for them.”

Koga’s eyes glinted as he followed his mate to do her bidding so they could give Sesshomaru time
to eat and warm himself.

He was about to dig into his stew when he glanced at Rina. “Have you eaten, Firefly?”

Rina smiled at hearing him use that endearment again. “Don’t worry about me. I stuffed the hell out of myself a little while ago and I’m still full.” He nodded to her and began to inhale his food with vigor. “Holy shit, this is really good,” he mumbled.

Rina giggled. As a high-ranking demon lord, he’d always had better table manners than she ever did. And even when she’d had the manners of… well… a wolf, he’d never looked down on her for it. ”It must be if you’re talking with your mouth full, Lord Sesshomaru,” she teased. He raked her with a sultry glance.

“Why, Firefly, are you commenting about my lack of manners?”

“Indeed, but only because my lack of manners makes it particularly funny to me.” She grinned at him with the full force of her cheek.

“I do believe I now owe you a flick on the nose for that,” he growled playfully. This time when he spoke around the fresh mouthful of stew, he did it on purpose, making sure some of the food could even be seen as he spoke.

Rina dissolved into giggles. “Ohmigods, gross!” she protested overdramatically. “When one asks for seafood, this is not the see-food they were talking about!”

It struck her as rather amazing as they took playful verbal swipes at each other, just like they had before she’d been abducted. That easy companionship that they didn’t really share with anyone else. It was almost like no time had passed even though they were both painfully aware as to how much time actually had. Rina wasn’t sure as to how many months specifically had transpired, but it wasn’t hard for her to guess. It had been summer when she’d met Sesshomaru and it was now winter. And considering that she’d been catatonic for most of those months, she could only imagine how much more difficult the time had been for him than it had for her.

Koga and Ayame arrived back at the fire right about the time Sesshomaru polished off his second bowl. “Ayame, this stew is delectable!” he thanked her.
“He means it, too!” Rina spoke up. “It made him talk with his mouth full!” He shot her an overdramatized glare of outrage as Ayame and Koga chuckled.

“Well, no wonder it’s snowing out there!” Koga laughed. “The great Lord Sesshomaru talked with his mouth full?! Hell hath truly frozen over!”

“Can’t fuckin’ believe it,” Sesshomaru grumbled good-naturedly. “I’m getting harped on about my table manners by a pack of rowdy Wolves.” Rina, Ayame, and Koga all shot him their cheekiest grins.

“Would you like another helping?” Ayame invited.

“No, thank you, my lady,” Sesshomaru bowed in thanks. “It was absolutely delicious, but I’m fairly stuffed.”

“Then follow us, please. We prepared the alcove for you two to sleep in and we got a fire started for you there. You two should be plenty warm for the night.” Her gracious tone had an underlying teasing note to it that was subtle and yet so very difficult to miss. Especially when Koga playfully swatted her backside.

The alcove was a small, naturally occurring room in the cave, hidden away by a chunk of wall from the main room where everyone else congregated to sleep. A rough-spun futon stuffed with dried lavender lay flush with the back wall and a fire blazed merrily in the fire pit.

Koga and Ayame bade them a good night’s sleep (Koga coughed and Ayame smacked him across the back of the head for it) and walked away with their arms around each other. Rina chuckled quietly to herself when, minutes later, she could hear their breathing change as they picked up where they’d left off when Sesshomaru had arrived.

Her heart skipped a beat and her stomach did a nervous flip. She turned to Sesshomaru, who set a backpack down near the bed and removed his armor and outer robe, a shy expression on his face. Then she realized why. “Hey, that’s my backpack,” she laughed softly. Yep, his shy smile deepened.

“Yes, I indeed stole your backpack,” he confessed. “And also one of the blankets from your bed.” The way he said that last made a sensuous chill tease a thrill up her spine. “I… I wanted things of yours to carry with me. Things with your scent on them.” His voice softened to a soft, throaty
whisper as he slowly approached her.

Rina heartbeat began to race and she found herself struggling to breathe a little. The air between them brewed to a boiling electricity as he brought himself chest-to-chest with her but did not reach for her.

“You promised you’d find me,” she said softly.

The heat in his eyes was joined by something bittersweet. “You remembered?” he whispered, his voice thick. She nodded quietly, not taking her eyes off of him. “Do you remember anything else from that dream?”

“You said you had something to tell me.” Her voice quavered.

His hands lifted to frame her face as he placed a kiss on her forehead before he nuzzled his own against hers. “I’ve missed you so much, Firefly. So many times I almost gave up hope. You always gave it back to me in the dream world. Especially when… the Dragon Queen…” his eyes closed painfully. Rina gasped as she remembered. Oh gods, how broken he’d been over that.

She lifted her hands to his face, wishing to soothe that lingering pain.

“Don’t worry, I don’t hate myself. I took your words to heart, my Rina-chan.” She remembered of what he spoke and smiled softly. “Nor do I resent you, I swear it.” He lifted his face away from her for a moment, searching her face for a moment, before he tipped her face up so he could bring his mouth to hers in a tender kiss. “And what I’ve been wanting to say to you for so long is that I love you, Rina. I’ve loved you from the moment I saw you on the beach, from the moment I saw you fight. I fell in love with your fire and your strength and with your tenderness. Your kindness. Your music. There’s not a thing about you that I don’t adore with every fiber of my soul.”

Rina’s blood roared in her ears at his words and she felt tears prick the corners of her eyes. She teased his lip with her tongue and gently deepened the kiss, reveling in the power she felt when he groaned against her lips. “I love you, too, Sesshomaru,” she whispered against him in return. “I’ve loved you from the moment you teased me about flicking my nose after I crashed out on you at the beach.”

He laughed softly as he stroked her face before he lifted her gently into his arms and carried her to the mattress. The sweet scent of lavender cushioned them as he gently laid her down and stretched
himself out beside her. A shiver coursed through Rina’s body and his face immediately etched with concern. “Are you cold, Firely?”

“And exhausted,” she confessed.

He lifted her enough to move the coverlet back and he tucked her against him as he pulled the blanket about them both. “Then sleep, love. You’ve been through a lot.”

The lavender mixed with his spicy, woodsy scent lulled Rina into the best sleep she’d had in far, far too long. She nuzzled her head against his chest as he curled his body around her and the last sound she heard before sleep claimed her was the comforting sound of his heartbeat and his breathing.

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When next she awoke, before her senses fully woke up, Rina was almost afraid to open her eyes. If her reunion with Sesshomaru had been nothing but a dream… She didn’t even want to think it. It would be utterly cruel for something so real to only have been a dream.

“It’s alright, Firefly,” his voice reached her ears about the same time that his scent filled her nose. “I’m right here.” She felt his lips on her brow, as soft as flower petals.

She, at last, opened her eyes and took in those beautiful amber eyes. They had been the first thing she had remembered when she’d at last awoken from her months-long stupor.

“I think you had some nightmares while you slept,” he said gently.

Rina cocked her head. “I really don’t remember.”

“Who’s David, love?”

She cringed. Fuck. Thankfully, she didn’t remember having any dreams, much less any nightmares of David, but it must have come up because of Kumayomaru digging around in her memories. That sonofabitch. Her eyes flashed red at the thought. She drew a deep breath. “He was a friend in high
school. He was the sonofabitch who raped me.” She paused as Sesshomaru’s eyes red, but otherwise, he said nothing. Instead, he quietly waited for her to speak more. “I hadn’t even thought of it in years. My parents were both therapists and they helped me to process it and work through it. But by the time I was finally able to tell them, two years had already passed and he’d gone back to France, where he was from.”

Sesshomaru’s eyes betrayed how his heart shattered at her words. “You carried that alone for two years?” His voice cracked.

“In my time, women are rarely believed when they speak up. They get run roughshod. They get threatened. Bullied. Vilified. And despite the known rape statistics, men are still believed to be some font of innocent truth while women are still believed to be liars.” She couldn’t contain the bitterness in her voice.

“I won’t ask you what happened, Firefly,” Sesshomaru said at last. “But if you ever feel like telling me, I will listen. I swear it.”

Rina’s eyes filled with tears. “I just wanted to forget about it. And, for the most part, I had. As I said, I hadn’t thought about it in years. Not even when you and I almost…” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “But Kumayomaru thought it’d be fun to go digging around in my memories and that was one of the ones he decided would be fucking great to watch while he tried to figure out why I’m not a cruel piece of shit.” Sesshomaru blinked in confusion and Rina shook her head. “It’s a long story and I’d rather save it for now.”

Sesshomaru pulled her against him, his arms trembling. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

Rina looked up him and placed her fingers on his lips. “Don’t,” she said softly. “I don’t want to think of any of that shit right now. My life has been nothing but a nightmare since those lizard bastards came into my apartment and…” her throat closed viciously, “…and killed Izumi. I don’t want to think of any of that right now. I just… I want to just be here in this moment with you, ok? Can we do that?”

“Rina,” Sesshomaru smiled down at her, his eyes tender. “Rina, Izumi is still alive.”

Rina jerked to look up at him. “She… but she was impaled by Hibiki’s claws!”

“The cops were able to show up in time to get her to the hospital. She almost died a few times in
surgery, but Ryuu was able to keep her heart beating until she got through surgery and then he did the rest to get her healed up and stabilized. Izumi is alive and she’s fine, I swear to you.”

Rina’s hands flew to her mouth and she burst into tears of relief, throwing her arms around Sesshomaru in joyous abandon. She cried wordlessly against his chest, unloading the pent-up grief she had held within, unable to process the loss she had felt when she’d thought Izumi dead.

At last, freed from that heavy weight on her heart, she looked up at Sesshomaru and pulled him to her to kiss him with every ounce of the joy and relief that coursed freely through her. She opened herself to him with a moan at the questioning caress of his tongue on her lip. Her breath left her in an elated rush when he snaked his arms about her to crush her against him. One hand stroked down her body, over the swell of her butt, and down her thigh to pull her closer to him, draping her leg to curl over the jut of his lean hip.

The heated groan that dredged from his throat matched hers in a savory, harmonious baritone that set her blood afire. She tightened her leg about his hip to curl herself tightly against the steely length of him. She whimpered against his mouth as they slid against each other, her heart thundering in her ears. He rolled himself gently over her, caressing her legs and grinding himself a little more thoroughly against her core, causing them both to moan in increasing desperation.

Sesshomaru looked down at her for a moment, his gaze questioning, wanting to make sure he absolutely had her permission to continue. Rina nodded breathlessly. Please… please…

Sesshomaru sat back on his haunches and pulled her up to him to straddle his hips while he kissed her deeply, his tongue tangling with hers as he worked to un-knot the belt of her robe. Goosebumps dusted their way across Rina’s now-bared skin. Sessho held her away from himself for a moment so he could feast his eyes across her flesh. Rina had never felt so bold nor so deliciously vulnerable as when his hooded gaze took in the sight of her so disrobed. Her breasts tightened under his gaze before he laid her back down so that he could take one of the taut peaks into his mouth.

Rina bit back a cry of delight as his tongue circled and his fangs gently scraped her oversensitive nipples, first one then the other, his hands gently kneading where his mouth wasn’t. She leaned up again to pull at his robe, wanting to feel his skin against hers and he acquiesced to her demanding hands with a low, throaty chuckle. Then he gently pulled at her pants, lifting her hips slightly, sliding them sensuously down her legs, baring her body fully before his blazing amber eyes at long last. Her feet were planted on either side of him, her knees were slightly parted, and his mouth watered as he caught his first gaze of her glistening, intimate flesh. His erection twitched eagerly under his pants and he longed to satisfy his body’s demands. But not until he tasted her first.

He bent to place gentle, soothing kisses on Rina’s knees and her breath hitched under his ministrations as he kissed a path down the inside of her thighs. The scent of her desire, the wetness
of her womanhood, made his head spin. Rina grasped the sheets beneath her in anticipation as his lips drew closer to her core and she felt her inner muscles quiver with need. The barest touch of his tonguel on her clit was enough to make fireworks explode throughout her body and behind her eyes. Then his mouth embraced her flesh to its fullest and his tongue probed inside her. He growled at her responses and the vibration of it about made her shatter right then and there.

The beast of Sesshomaru’s inner Demon roared in victory and delight to hear her panting, gasping whimpers and her crying out his name in uninhibited abandon. He couldn’t get enough of her honeyed flavor, coating his tongue like expensive mead. He plunged his tongue into her as deep as he possibly could, holding her tightly to him when her hips came off the bed. Her legs, draped over his shoulders, began to tremble uncontrollably and he felt the beginning pulses of her impending orgasm. He quickly shed his pants so he would be ready.

Rina writhed in tormented ecstasy as the pressure began to build. Her hips rolled her core against Sesshomaru’s mouth of their own uncontrollable volition and her voice climbed as her body coiled to explode. There! His tongue scraped and pushed against the sensitive tissue of her pelvic wall and her body exploded into a million bright lights. Her back arched, her head fell back against the bed, and her voice shrieked in a keening scream of exquisite agony. She was lost in the lights as her body shuddered through the waves, so she was barely aware when Sessho pulled away from her. But then he was there, the heat of his body covering her, warming her, and suddenly his mouth covered hers, drinking the last dredges of her ecstasy. She drank him just as greedily, her body reacting to the combined flavors of him with her wetness on his lips and tongue.

She felt the tip of him gently probing into her, coating himself with the rain of her body and delving deeper into her. Her orgasm had begun to settle until that point, but the feel of him gently driving himself into her sent her soaring to the clouds all over again. Her hands reached down with a mind of their own to grab the tight, rounded flesh of his buttocks to pull him into her the rest of the way. The sound that he uttered as he filled her to the hilt could not even remotely be considered human.

He trembled with the effort it took to hold himself still lest he spill himself too soon, especially with her inner muscles still pulling and grabbing at him with heated desperation. “Rina!” he cried her name with a groan. He couldn’t hold himself still anymore. He had to move! He growled as he drew himself back to press into her again. Her hands still clutched his ass, pulling him into her again and again as her hips found his rhythm and began to match him stroke for stroke.

Rina craned her neck to lick at his throat and nip at his neck. “Oh gods, Rina!” he cried hoarsely as his control snapped. He wanted to sink his teeth into her neck and make her his. His beast demanded he do so. Instead, he sank his fangs into the pillow behind her bed. Rina could feel the buildup dragging her back to the precipice from where she’d already taken flight once before. But this time he was with her. Their bodies strained together. Climbing, climbing…
Her voice built up again to a keen and his voice joined her as his thrusts gained in strength and bruising intensity. Her body began to splinter again and her nails sank reflexively into the meat of his backside. Two more thrusts and he froze as they sailed together over the precipice and burst into starlight.

He couldn’t resist milking it for her, continuing to thrust gently as her body continued to spasm around his, grinding himself so as to hit the most sensitive points of her core with tantalizing gentleness. She surprised him, then, with a show of strength, heaving her weight to roll him beneath her. Holy shit, he was hard all over again.

Rina reveled as she felt him harden inside her again. Everything in her gaze was a red haze from their passion and she watched him with sultry mischief as she lifted herself almost completely off of him, teasing the tip of him with torturous dips but not taking him fully inside her again just yet.

“Oh, you mischievous wench,” he rasped desperately. “Please…” his voice faded as she slid herself down on him just a little more before withdrawing again. “Ohmigods, please,” he begged again, growling in relief when she finally set herself down on him again and taking him in up to the hilt. He pushed himself up to take her in his arms and kiss her senseless as she rode him, slow and easy at first before her control unraveled and she bucked against him like her very life and sanity depended on it. He held himself in check, letting her have full control of their union, matching his pace to hers to jut himself up into her as deeply as possible.

Rina explored him as her body mated his with joy beyond words, experimenting with different angles and delighting in his responses to her touch. She laved her tongue across his chest and gently scraped her teeth and tongue across his nipples. And when she reached back to cup the velvety pouch of his sac, tracing a finger across the seam in a feather-light touch, the sound she elicited from him was all it took for her body to begin to break all over again.

“Please, Sessho,” she whimpered as she felt the contractions begin again. He took her into his arms and flipped her back over to bury himself into her with a roar and she joined him with a shriek of her own. Their fangs descended but he still refused to bite her. That was not something done without express permission and agreement ahead of time and never in the first joining unless already married. It was an even deeper commitment than marriage. There was no such thing as divorce once the mating marks were placed.

He kissed her instead, his tongue delving as deeply into her mouth as his body delved between her legs, mating her tongue in thrusting caresses as their bodies spent themselves at last.

Rina sighed in sated relief as he collapsed upon her, nuzzling his face into the crook of her neck. Trembling from their lovemaking, he groaned as he slipped himself out of her body to stretch out next to her and hold her against him.
“I love you, Sessho,” she said drowsily, nuzzling her face against his chest as she faded back to sleep.

“I love you too, Firefly.” He kissed her brow tenderly and joined her.
Chapter Summary

After all these months, Rina and I have finally been reunited. But after getting to spend a mind-blowing, incredible night together, we have to start thinking of our next move. We could leave and hope that Kumayomaru would be too focused on Rina to pay the Wolves much mind, but we both know he's not likely to be that merciful. We all know that Kumayomaru would likely decimate the Pack on principle just for sheltering us. And if we don't leave, there's too much risk that he'd manage to take Rina back again...

Sesshomaru awoke a few hours later as the sun was starting to shine into the cave. He couldn’t remember the last time, if ever, he had felt so peaceful. Contented. Dare he even say “happy”? He was curled around Rina’s still sleeping form, her back braced against his chest, and he relished the way her skin felt against his. He didn’t want to move from this bed. Ever. In here, sheltered from the outside world and all the shit they’d been forced to endure the past several months, it was just him and Rina. And after all these months of forced separation, the last thing in the universe he wanted was to leave the small world of this alcove that had served as their own private universe for the past night.

She stirred and stretched in his arms. Not awake yet, but close. And the way her back arched as she stretched, her ass ended up thoroughly pressed against his manhood, which immediately hardened with unabashed interest. Sesshomaru nuzzled the back of Rina’s neck and nipped her gently while he cupped one of her breasts. She moaned sleepily but arched her head back to allow him greater access.

“Good morning,” he whispered in her ear before he captured her lobe between his teeth. Her soft smile warmed him.

“Morning,” she murmured, her voice still drowsy but languorous as Sesshomaru continued to coax her body’s waking arousal. His fingers were gentle as they played about her folds tenderly, not wanting to aggravate any lingering soreness. Sure enough, she hissed a little, a sound of pleasure and pain.

“Are you alright, Firefly?” he asked as he nuzzled her ear again.

“Mmm…” she nodded. “Just a little sore.” She smiled a sleepy smile as she craned her neck to look at him. “It’s a nice soreness, though.” Her eyes became hooded as he propped her leg onto his and continued to gently caress the center of her pleasure, taking extra care with his claws. They
wouldn’t release venom unless he so wished, but he, of course, did not want to accidentally scratch her.

Her mouth fell open as her body responded to his touch and he took advantage by capturing her with a deep, slow kiss. He felt her arm move and he wasn’t quite sure what she was trying to do until he felt her fingers brush against the velvety steel of his arousal. Then she had him in her gentle grip and he thought he saw stars. He gasped against her lips as she began to gently move her fist up and down along his length. The green forest of her eyes glimmered in pleasure at his reaction as she now took advantage of his gaped expression in return.

His Demon howled in delight at their currently slight yet tantalizing battle of wills. And he could scent her Alpha female cheekily determined to make him work for his domination. Not so much right now. Rather, she was giving him a bit of a taste of future events. At some point, they were going to have a helluva throw-down. For now, however, she was content to let him call the shots.

He didn’t care. Right now, there was only her hand caressing him as two of his fingers gently pushed their way into her. She groaned his name as she arched into him, riding his hand in unison with the motion of his hips that moved his erection through her hand. Finally, she decided that she’d had enough of foreplay. Arching against him, she placed him at her entrance.

He teased her opening the way she’d teased him last night until she whimpered and begged. Honey couldn’t be sweeter than the pleading sound of her voice.

“Please, Sessho…”

He growled in delight and nipped the pointed tip of her ear as he teased her a little more. At last, he gently entered her from behind in a slow, smooth motion. He teased her clit in time with his strokes and reveled in the way she arched against him. Their lovemaking was tender and easy this time, luxuriating in each other like they had all the time in the world. When they reached the peak of their pleasure, it rippled through the both of them like honey wine rather than combusting them like fireworks.

He still couldn’t get enough of her. He gently and carefully kept grinding against her until he grew hard within her again and carried her through until they came a second time. At that point, she turned in his arms and slung her leg over his hip, reaching down to caress him until he stiffened again before she guided him back into her body. She was every bit as insatiable as he was, he purred with delight even as he felt himself beginning to get sore. He stroked her face and looked in her eyes as they moved against each other, still slow and easy. He felt the quivering of her inner muscles begin again and gently rolled her beneath him so he could angle himself against her core.
Her voice started to keen a little higher, so he covered her mouth with his and swallowed her cries as their bodies rode the waves one more time. Sated again at last, he lay there between her legs for a while to kiss her tenderly until they were at last ready to leave the bed and face the day.

Once fully dressed, they walked out of the alcove and over to where Ayame and Koga were sharing breakfast. The two Wolves greeted the pair of them with what could only be called “shit-eating grins”.

“So, you have your mark yet?” Ayame chirped knowingly.

Rina blushed deeply and shook her head. “No, not yet,” she laughed.

Sesshomaru blinked at her in confusion. Ayame saw his look and laughed. “I told her about mating marks last night before you arrived. Sorry if I broached the topic too early.”

Sesshomaru and Rina exchanged shy glances between them. “Not at all,” he assured her. “We just haven’t yet had the chance to discuss that step just yet.” His eyes met Rina’s as he said, “I’m not about to push you into anything you’re not ready for.”

“I know, love,” she smiled. “I’m in no hurry just yet, but it’s a conversation worth having when we’ve got the moment to discuss it.” Her face flamed.

Ayame and Koga looked thoroughly entertained by their shy, tender awkwardness as Ayame handed them bowls of rice and Misu for breakfast. “Awwwww, aren’t they just so cute, Koga?”

Oh lord, it was just like Izumi and Ryuka razzing them when they’d caught him and Rina in her apartment. He chuckled at the memory.

“Yeah,” Koga drawled back. “Reminds me of how goofy we were when we first officially mated after we got married,” he teased up at her while casting Rina and Sessho a mischievous wink.

Rina shook her head at their antics with an embarrassed smile on her face. “Gods, you two remind me of my best friends.” She told Ayame and Koga, between mouthfuls of her breakfast, of how Izumi had caught her and Sessho in almost-flagrante delicto and how she and Ryuka had razzed them mercilessly for the rest of the day.
Koga and Ayame laughed helplessly while Sesshomaru grinned wryly and chuckled his own amusement. It was so strange to him how comfortable he felt around the Wolves. Far moreso than he’d ever thought he would, actually. Among them, as with Ryuka and Izumi, he was able to let his guard down a little and not feel required to maintain his lordly dignity. It was actually quite refreshing. Especially given how loud he and Rina had been last night. No one was shy here. No one cared. Intimacy was celebrated rather than hidden and hushed like some dirty secret.

They continued to chatter as they ate until Koga asked them for the details of what had happened to have them cross Kumayomaru. The cheer diminished drastically, but they deserved to know. They took turns giving their respective versions of events as well as listening raptly as they also caught each other up as to what they’d been through while apart.

Rina gaped over Sesshomaru’s interaction with Lady Raven and, even though she vaguely recollected seeing in his memories, his having to sacrifice the Dragon Queen.

“That’s part of why we may need to have a conversation about our officially mating sooner rather than later,” he explained to her. “She said that the power I gained from her could be shared to you through such. But I’m not trying to pressure you, I swear,” he added hastily, hoping that he didn’t sound as though he didn’t want to mate with her since nothing could be further from the truth. Thankfully, Rina seemed to understand as she gave his hand an encouraging squeeze.

Then they listened as Rina ran through the events that occurred after she woke up.

“Holy shit, I can’t believe you had the gall to cow him like that,” Koga gaped at her.

“Yeah,” Rina squirmed uncomfortably. “I definitely poked the proverbial bear and then some. But I will say it was satisfying as fuck. Especially after he invaded my memories.”

“Fair enough,” Ayame piped up. “I can’t say I would feel any different if it were me.”

“We need to get out of your hair sooner than later,” Rina said softly. “Azuna said he’d be gone for a few days, but that doesn’t mean he won’t catch my scent on the beach where I came ashore and come tracking me here. But I’m conflicted because even if we leave and get ahead of him, I wouldn’t put it past him to come here anyway and try to slaughter you all for sheltering me and Sesshomaru. So, do we go or do we stay and help you face him when he does come?”

She looked at him now.
Sesshomaru frowned as he took a deep breath. “You’re right. Chances are he’ll come here regardless. And you would have a much better chance against him if we’re here.”

“But what if he manages to overwhelm us anyway and captures her back with him?” Koga pointed out.

Rina looked like she was going to be sick at the very thought. This was only further confirmed when she put down her breakfast bowl.

“The way I see it,” Ayame said thoughtfully, “we’d all be better off if we accompanied you back to your village. We all serve a much better chance of beating him if we stand together.”

“What about the children?” Koga frowned. “What if he tracks them to the safe den?”

“Bring them with,” Sesshomaru offered. “We have a safe den near the village that Kagome is able to obscure from any invading, unwelcome demon with a Sacred Barrier. Even if he were to track the scents to the cave, he wouldn’t be able to break through. Of that, I am certain.”

Koga and Ayame looked at each other, communicating silently and nodding. Looking back at Sessomaru, Ayame nodded definitively. “Then let’s get going. The sooner we get out of here, the more likely we’ll be able to stay ahead of him.”

Koga stood to his feet and howled at the remaining Wolves to gather. He abrested them of the situation regarding Kumayomaru and of the plan to go to Kagome and InuYasha’s village. Most of the Wolves whooped at the thought of seeing their adopted little sister again. Even though Koga had married Ayame after all, despite the feelings he’d once had for Kagome, the Pack still considered her an honorary member due to how much she’d helped them, cared for their wounded, and fought to protect them.

“You all have 10 minutes to grab whatever you don’t want to leave behind and provisions for the journey, but don’t weigh yourselves down unnecessarily,” Ayame warned. “We need to travel light and fast. We can hunt for food along the way.” She turned and called out a few names. “Put what remaining food we have into the cold cache while your mates prepare for the journey. Quickly!” She looked nervous. “I have a bad feeling and we need to get going now.”

Koga whistled sharply. “You heard your Queen!” he barked. “Move it!”
Everyone scattered to obey their Alphas. It looked chaotic as hell at first, but they moved efficiently. Despite the time limit of 10 minutes, the Wolves were ready to leave in 5.

Koga motioned for Sesshomaru to help him as the rest of the Wolves finished getting ready. There were poles on either side of the main entrance of the cave strategically latticed and holding up a pile of boulders. “We’re going to block the main entrance so he can’t sneak up on us,” he explained.

“Very clever, Wolf,” Sesshomaru validated, more than a little impressed at the Pack’s ingenuity.

Koga nodded his acknowledgment. “Kick the pole out and jump clear immediately so you don’t get trapped or crushed.” At Sesshomaru’s nod, Koga marked a countdown with his fingers. “Now!” he barked and he and Sessho kicked the poles in unison and sprang clear of the falling boulders.

Then he found Rina in the alcove, scooped up her backpack, and slung it across his back. “Are you ready, Rina-chan?” His heart turned a flip at her smile.

“More than ready, Sessho-kun.” She had some Wolf fur leggings on this time as well as the Wolf fur capelet that Ayame had lent her and Azuna’s scarf. She took his breath away even as her smile became a little strained. “Beyond ready to put some miles between us and him.”

“Everyone ready?” Ayame barked. Everyone returned their affirmatives.

“Then let’s get going!” Koga howled.

“Sesshomaru and Rina, to me!” Ayame ordered as she led the procession into the cave, heading for its much less used escape exit. Ayame and Koga guided Rina and Sessho through the dark, warning them of slippery points until the cave’s floor finally began to level out from the long, winding slope they traversed. After what had to be at least an hour, Sesshomaru guessed that they must be getting close to the exit because every ounce of even the quiet conversations went silent and everyone padded as silently as possible.

We’ll be coming upon the exit in about 20 or so minutes, Koga spoke silently to him, Rina, and Ayame. Sesshomaru, when we get near the exit, you and I are going to scout outside and
make sure that Kumayomaru isn’t somehow waiting to ambush us. Thanks to the Dragon Queen, you’d be about the only one who could smell him or detect that he’s there at all.

I’ll be able to smell him, Rina interjected. I don’t think he’s able to mask his scent from those who’ve smelled him since he acquired the ability to cloak it.

I don’t doubt that, my lady, Koga said gently. But we’re not about to outright risk you, ok? If you detect his scent or his aura from inside the cave while Sesshomaru and I scout around, then definitely let us know, ok?

Rina nodded.

They remained silent the rest of the way. Before long, Ayame gave the signal to halt. A few more bends is where the exit is, Ayame said to them. We’ll wait here.

Rina blew out a nervous breath and looked at Sesshomaru. Be careful.

He kissed her quietly. It’ll be alright, my love. Then he followed Koga quietly the last several yards until the light from the exit greeted them. Calling upon his newly-acquired Dragon abilities, Sesshomaru cloaked their scents and their energies. My lady Kaguya, Sesshomaru called silently. She appeared next to him.

Good to see you, Sesshomaru, her ghost greeted him. You’re looking much better than last we met. This was his first time calling upon her since he’d killed her.

Thank you, my lady. And you as well.

We shall assuredly catch up later, she promised. What can I help you with?

Can you help me and the Wolf scout around and ensure that Kumayomaru isn’t waiting to ambush us?
Gladly! Tell the Wolf to give me a couple minutes to go first. She flitted off as Sesshomaru silently relayed the message to Koga.

They continued to sniff the breeze until Kaguya bade them to come out. Safe thus far. She then directed which way they should go to establish a good, clear perimeter while she took to the air. Kumayomaru, after all, could only mask his scent. He couldn’t make himself invisible.

About 20 minutes later, the three of them were satisfied that it was safe. Sesshomaru thanked Kaguya’s ghost for her assistance and bowed low before her. She smiled at him cheerfully, bade him farewell til next they would meet, and faded away.

Everything’s clear, Ayame. Go ahead and bring everyone out, Koga called. A few minutes later, Ayame, Rina, and the rest of the Wolves emerged. Alright, Koga called silently to get everyone’s attention. We’re in the clear for now, but I want you all to remain silent. Keep your personal conversations to yourselves, don’t broadcast them to everyone. We need to be able to keep our ears sharp in case we end up being tracked. We’re heading to the safe den next to collect the children and then we’re gonna be making a mad dash as fast as we can go to get to InuYasha’s village. We need to conserve our energy until then, but we still need to keep a decently quick pace. Ayame will set the pace, so keep up. With that, Koga kissed Ayame soundly before she started away from him. He motioned for Sesshomaru to join him at the rear so they could ensure no one would catch them unawares. Sesshomaru kissed Rina before he joined Koga at the back and she hustled off to keep up with Ayame’s stride.

The Pack moved single file the whole way to the den to obscure their numbers in the snow as best they could and Sesshomaru cast the scent-obscuring barrier over the group. Neither he nor Koga spoke the entire way to the safe den. They were on high alert, listening to every little sound, tasting every scent. The sun was almost directly overhead by the time they arrived at the safe den and silently collecting the pups. Though boisterous as normal human children, Sesshomaru noted with approval that, like true Wolves, they were very good at keeping silent at the behest of their elders.

He watched with a smile and felt an unfamiliar ache as he watched Koga and Ayame reunite with their six children -- three of which had red hair like their mother and the other three had her luminous green eyes with their father’s darker coloring. He found himself wondering what his and Rina’s pups would look like… his eyes met hers and she smiled shyly at him, seeming to know where his thoughts were.

Gods, what if she’s already pregnant? he thought wonderingly. He’d never before considered ever having children. Hell, he’d never considered himself father material aside from Rin. Oh, he was patient with other people’s children but even though his affections for the children of the village had gradually increased, it had never occurred to him to wonder about producing children
with anyone. Yet, picturing Rina growing large and round with pups of their own… gods, he felt himself hardening at the thought. _Only if she actually wants to, though, of course._ He shook himself out of his thoughts. And first they needed to ensure their permanent safety from Kumayomaru.

Then he frowned. **Kumayomaru is not the only one who threatens us. He won’t be the last. There will always be monsters to guard ourselves from. If Rina mates with me, her life will always be in danger.** The thought of anything happening to her or any children they might produce… it lanced a pain through his heart that almost drove him to his knees.

**Don’t do that, Father.** Rin’s voice echoed through his head as she manifested near him. **Don’t worry about what might be, ok? Don’t be afraid to let yourself be happy. You’re not a coward, so don’t start acting like one now.**

He took a deep breath to dispel the worries that had built up. As they loosened their grip, Rin faded away. About that moment, he realized that the pups, all 30 or so, had been effectively gathered up and it was time to head out for the mad dash.

**Sesshomaru, to me!** Ayame called. He quickly joined her at the front of the Pack. **It’s fair to say that you know the quickest way to make it to the village from here?** she asked him. He quickly scented the breeze and nodded silently. **Good. Koga and I are going to guard the back; you and Rina will take point. Don’t worry, everyone will be able to keep up even with carrying a pup. Everyone ready?** she silently barked at everyone else. **Then follow Sesshomaru and keep up! Holler to him and Rina if you need the pace to slow a bit or if you fall. Everyone carrying a pup, you’re going to be running in the middle surrounded by everyone else with free hands, so say something if you or someone else falls so no one gets trampled!**

Sesshomaru waited just long enough for everyone to get in their proper formations before he gave the command for them to go. He grasped Rina’s hand and they took off together. They could hear everyone running and keeping the pace well so far. After he was certain that everyone had adjusted, he called out, **Can everyone handle it if we speed it up?** Everyone silently barked their affirmative, so he led them out with an extra burst of speed.

**At this rate, we should be back to the village in three days at most, including taking the time for the pups and their carriers to rest,** he said to Rina.

**Seems decently reasonable,** she affirmed. They were starting from the more northeastern-most region of the island.

**So, am I able to hazard a decent guess as to what had you looking so wistful a little while**
ago? Her voice sounded in his head with a gentle, teasing tone, one meant to encourage him to talk to her without the pressure of sounding dour and serious.

He smiled. She had a knack for knowing how to approach just about anything with him thus far. **Go ahead and take a crack at it,** he teased back.

**Oh, go on,** she laughed. **I’m not letting you off the hook that easy, buster. I think I know, but be brave and take the leap, ok? We both have to know that we can broach potentially awkward topics with each other and do so safely, right?**

**Fair enough, Firely, fair enough,** he chuckled. **You’re right.** He took a deep breath to steady himself. **I dunno,** he began awkwardly. **I was watching Koga and Ayame with their pups and observing how their pups resemble their parents in different ways and I found myself wondering and picturing what our own would look like, were we to have any.** He felt a blush creeping up his neck to blossom on his face. Or was that just windburn?

**And?** she asked.

**Huh? And what?**

**That wasn’t all there was to it, was there?**

Dammit. Of course, she knew. He smiled ruefully. **No,** he finally admitted. **Assuming you even want children in the first place, which is ultimately and entirely up to you,** he hastily added, **I found myself worrying…** his mental voice faded away. Even without speaking verbally, it was hard to articulate the painful worries that had started spinning through his head.

**About what, love?**

Well, even thinking about this is kinda getting ahead of myself. I mean, even if we were to become mated and even if you were to want children with me, it’s a bit soon to think about it, at least until we’ve neutralized Kumayomaru’s threat against us. But even then, what about all the monsters we’d surely deal with after that? **Hell,** that’s also just assuming you’d even want to live back in this time if we were to become
mated. My silly self didn’t even consider that earlier. I just assumed you’d live back here with me and I didn’t stop to think that maybe you wouldn’t want that. He gave her an apologetic look for his oversight. She, however, squeezed his hand.

It’s ok. Keep going. Keep talking to me.

I’m terrified of losing you, he confessed. I never told you what happened to Rin, but I’m terrified that something like that would happen to you or our hypothetical children. I went insane, quite literally, after Rin died. I don’t imagine I’d handle it any better if something ill were to happen to you or them like that. He knew that she felt the lance of pain spear his heart again when she clutched his hand tighter. Or maybe she just felt that similar fear and pain for herself even without it emanating to her from him with her empathic abilities.

But Rin talked some sense into you, didn’t she?

That out-of-nowhere comment about made him trip over his own feet. How did you know that?

Because I’ve been able to see her with you since the night we first met, she explained. I saw her talking to you right before I showed up at your table with the second bottle of sake that I drank with you. She’s spoken to me a few times, by the way, she added. She’s not told me anything about the circumstances of her death. She said she could tell me if she wanted, but she felt it would be better for you to tell me, that you needed to get it off your chest with someone who can bolster you and sit with you in that pain. She said that if she told me herself, she would be robbing you of the opportunity to really process through it. She’s a really smart kid. As the daughter of a couple of therapists, believe me, I know.

Sesshomaru smiled as he listened to her praise his adoptive daughter. She sounds like she would have made a good therapist, he said sadly.

It sounds like she already is a good one even now. But we can go over that later. So, what’d she say to you to snap you out of your worries earlier?

Basically the same thing I said to you when you worried about falling for me and how we could possibly make it work, what with our rather extensive time difference.
Rina squeezed his hand again and he returned the pressure. **We’ll figure it out together as we go along.** She spoke to him the words that he’d said to her that night right before all hell had broken loose.

**Exactly.** He kissed her hand tenderly and then they continued on in silence.

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It was getting late and although the children maintained their verbal silence beautifully, there wasn’t much that any of the adults could do when they began to mentally project their chorus of discomfort when they got hungry.

I’m going to call a halt, Koga, Sesshomaru called to him privately. This isn’t a good place to stop for the night, but we can at least send out some hunting parties and scouts so we can get the children fed and find somewhere better suited for the night. At Koga’s affirmative, he put the call out Pack-wide.

The children were all tired, hungry, and increasingly upset. Only a little less than half were old enough to comprehend why they were being taken somewhere other than home. The rest? Not so much.

While Koga sorted out hunting and scouting parties, Sesshomaru observed the equally tired frustrations of parents and assisting caregivers as they tried to wrangle and soothe the overtired pups. There were at least three times the number of children in the Pack than there had been back at the village. But it seemed, to him, that children needed to be distracted as best as possible at such times. Especially as he remembered all the times he’d served as that distraction for the children in the village. But how did one do that in such circumstances as these? Obviously, playing was not an option.

“In my time, we’d pile them in front of a Disney movie or a cartoon with crayons to color with,” Rina murmured quietly as she approached to stand by his side. “Sure you want kids?” A low chortle deep in her throat accompanied the teasing inquiry.

“No this many,” he teased back, arching a suggestive brow at her and enjoying the blush that crept over her face. “What about you?”

“No pressure?”
“None whatsoever.”

She furrowed her brow thoughtfully. “Truth be told, I never thought about it much. Neither for or opposed, I suppose. I guess I never imagined I’d really be in a situation where the topic would come up.

“What about you, though? Aren’t you, like, required to produce heirs or some shit?”

“Technically, yes, but I don’t give a shit,” he smiled at her. “If children aren’t for us, then InuYasha would be the next to inherit. I know things are different in your modern world.”

“Meh, not that different. Even in modern Japan, women still get crapped on and shamed pretty prevalently if they decide that they don’t want to be mothers or want more to their lives than marriage and children right away.”

“Oh. Well, fuck.” She chuckled at his succinct verbage but he still frowned. “Well, I still have zero intentions of forcing you to have children if you don’t want to.”

She nuzzled his arm. “Hey, I didn’t say ‘no’ yet. Just that I haven’t had a chance or opportunity prior to actually think about the possibility.” She blanched for a moment as a thought occurred rather harshly to her. “Oh, fuck. I’d have to give birth without an epidural.” She turned a rather interesting shade of green.

“What’s an epidural?”

“It’s this stuff they inject right into your spine that makes you go numb from that point in your back on down so that childbirth isn’t nearly so painful.”

He cringed. He hadn’t even considered the pain and risk of childbirth. He squeezed her hand apologetically. “Well, if that ever becomes something necessary to worry about, we’ll figure it out as best we can.”

“Fair enough.” She squeezed his hand in return.

“But what if you were to decide you didn’t want to live in this era?”
Rina frowned. Clearly, she hadn’t thought of that. “What, both of us live in my era? What if that’s not what you want?”

“I don’t care where or I am, Firefly, or when. As long as I’m with you, I’m home.” To his utter surprise, tears filled her eyes. They didn’t smell of sadness, however. That’s what confused him the most. He didn't know that it was possible to shed tears from being happy. How odd.

“But you could be cut off from your brother. Your friends.”

He stared at her. “You’d be sacrificing no less if you were to stay here. Not to mention all your modern conveniences. Your music.” He gave her a light, teasing nudge. “Your custard buns that you’re hopelessly addicted to.”

“Holy shit, I haven’t even thought of any of that stuff since waking up.” She sounded thoroughly surprised with herself. Then she started looking a little overwhelmed.

Shit! He felt like a heel. “I’m sorry. This was a lot for us to discuss all at once, wasn’t it?” He placed a contrite kiss to her forehead and pulled her to him in a gentle embrace. She walked gladly into his arms and uttered a sigh that sounded like relief.

“Yeah, but we are gonna have to discuss it, probably sooner than later.” She sounded weary.

“One day at a time, my love. We’ll face it together. We’ll make the best choices we possibly can and we’ll make them together. I will not run roughshod over you or your opinions. Even as we’re not officially mated, you are, nonetheless, my partner.” He felt her shift in his arms and looked down at her as she went up on her toes to kiss him thoroughly.

He struggled to breathe as his body roared to life, demanding to join with her again. He blushed a little as she giggled against his lips.

“Down, boy,” she murmured, her voice alight with good-natured humor. “Not in front of the kids.”
The two hunting parties had managed to bag a deer each and, of course, they’d taken the time to dress the carcasses before carrying them back. The children were so hungry they were ready to jump on the deer “like a bunch of piranhas”, Rina had joked, and they had keened their protest when told they needed to wait a little bit longer for portions to be cut for everyone and roasted up.

Before the butchering of the deer could begin, one of the scouting parties returned and reported that they’d found an abandoned village they could bunk down in for the night. They’d found the other scouting party while they’d been out and had sent them on ahead to get some fires lit in some of the huts as well as to retrieve water for boiling and cooking.

The children were still not happy to have to wait for food, but with the promise of warmth and shelter, their protests quieted significantly.

The village was only about ten minutes away at a full run from where they’d stopped to rest the children. Upon their arrival, they were delighted to find things already thoroughly set up for what they needed. However, the village was so long abandoned that there were no usable grain or produce stores they could make use of. That was fine by Sesshomaru. A long-abandoned village meant it was unlikely there were any lingering enemies hanging around. And judging by the state of some of the huts, it looked like the village had been abandoned due to the continually warring feudal lords rather than anything demon-related.

Ayame, Koga, and several other Wolves set about roasting up cuts of venison as quickly as they were butchered while several continued to patrol outside, patiently awaiting their food and for their turn to be relieved.

Sesshomaru and Rina helped with passing out food portions as they were ready. After parents and the assisting caretakers took portions for the children, he and Rina took portions out to the guarding patrols. It was a very tight stretch. Nobody would have full stomachs, but at least the edge would be somewhat alleviated. The children, at least, were sated and most crashed out quite readily in the great hall once they’d eaten.

Once the children were put to bed, Koga assigned patrol shifts. Rina and Sesshomaru volunteered for shifts, but Koga refused and silenced their resulting protests. “You two had one of the hardest jobs today with setting the pace. Yeah, we had to keep up, but following isn’t nearly as draining as leading, believe it or not. You two go get some rest. We’ll give you a guard detail tomorrow night, alright? Don’t worry, you two are contributing just fine.”

Sesshomaru led Rina to the hut they’d been assigned for the night. It was long past midnight by this time and as much as he would have loved to entice her into another night of passion, they were
both exhausted. They were asleep within minutes of curling up together on their futon near the fire.

They were only able to get about four hours of sleep as it was before they were awakened by Ayame. One look and it was clear that she’d not gotten any sleep. Apparently, she and Koga had gone hunting after everyone else had gone to sleep. They’d managed to find just enough deer to fill everyone’s bellies properly, ensuring that they’d all have the fueled strength for another long, hard day’s run.

“Koga and I are going to crash out for a couple of hours. Otherwise, we’ll be completely dead on our feet and we’ll slow everyone down.”

“Is there anything you’d like for us to do while you two rest?” Rina asked?

Ayame shook her head wearily. “No, just make sure you two get some food and get properly charged up. Everyone is taking it easy for right now and things are pretty well handled otherwise.”

When Ayame left their borrowed hut, Sesshomaru told Rina to stay in bed as he rebuilt the fire. “I’ll go grab us some food and be right back, ok? You just rest.”


“That’s a thing in your era I take it?” he chuckled.

“So I’ve heard,” she laughed. “I always thought it was just one of those stupid things that only happens in movies. Truth be told, I’ve never been one to let people do stuff for me.” She flashed him a sheepish, embarrassed grin.

He returned after a few minutes with enough meat for them to completely gorge themselves and with assurances that everyone else was able to have similar portions. Then he gladly joined Rina back in bed, pulled her snugly against him, and they promptly fell back asleep.

The food and the little bit of extra sleep gave them second wind and by mid-morning, the Pack was on the run again.
Sesshomaru had never been so glad to see the village. The past couple of days had gone smoothly enough, given their numbers. But it had been grueling keeping that kind of pace, especially with the worry of wondering just how close or far behind Kumayomaru was, fearing that he’d catch up to them while they were still vulnerable with the children.

He took the Pack to the emergency den, cast the scent-cloaking barrier, and asked them to wait while he, Rina, Koga, and Ayame went to the village to apprise InuYasha and the others as to what was going on.

He’d been gone for a little more than a month since returning from his encounter with the Dragons. He’d stayed for only a few days before he’d set off alone one night, returned to the deserted reptilian village and learned to use his newly-acquired Dragon powers to start tracking Kumayomaru’s whereabouts.

Doubtless, InuYasha would give him a helluva tongue-lashing for leaving without a word and doing this by himself. He’ll get over it. Especially when he introduced Rina to them.

He spotted Kagome coming toward the village from the direction from the Well. Doubtless, she’d just sent a letter to her mother or had gone to check for one in return. She looked up when Sesshomaru called her name and froze in her tracks, jaw dropped, as she took in the sight of his arrival and that of his companions.

“Sesshomaru! You’re back!” She broke into a delighted grin. “Ohmigods! Koga! Ayame! It’s been such a long time!” She ran towards them and launched herself to practically pounce on the two Wolves for a hug. They laughed and swung her around, chattering excitedly all at once. “What are you guys doing here?” she was finally able to ask.

“Hooo, it’s a long story,” Koga chuckled. “We’re gonna have to leave that to Sesshomaru and Rina to explain.”

Kagome’s jaw dropped again and her eyes widened as she finally looked at Rina and comprehended that she wasn’t actually a member of Koga and Ayame’s Pack despite her garb.

“Holy shit! I thought you were Ayame’s sister or something!” she laughed with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry!” Then, as quick as the crack of a whip, she got a rather goofy-looking expression on her face that Sesshomaru could only call “sappy” and her eyes filled with tears. “Ohmigods, Sesshomaru, you found her!” She beamed up at him. “I’m so happy for you!”
Turning back to Rina, she introduced herself. “I’m sorry if I seem really out of it. A lot’s been going on.”

“Dude, I totally hear you on that. Shit’s been so crazy, I’m almost tempted to say some equally-crazy millennial speak or something!” Clearly, Rina enjoyed Kagome’s knowing laugh almost as much as she seemed to enjoy the confused, clueless expressions on Sesshomaru, Koga, and Ayame’s faces.

“Thank the gods, somebody speaks my language! Oh, I can tell we’re gonna get along famously! Let’s hurry back to the village! Everyone’s going to be so excited!”

“Are you sure about that?” Koga asked wryly.

“Oh, don’t worry about InuYasha,” Kagome laughed as she broke into a run. “Believe me, he’s got more on his plate to worry about than a long-dead feud.”

As they ran after her, Koga’s voice sounded in Sesshomaru’s head. **Is it me, or does Kagome seem a little strange?**

Sesshomaru frowned. *I was wondering the same thing, actually. She seems… out of it, or something.*

Ayame’s laugh sounded next. *I know exactly what’s going on with her.*

**Oh?** Koga and Sesshomaru asked in unison.

But Ayame only replied with a cheeky, delighted grin. **I’ll give you a hint, Koga. I’ve been just like her a couple of times. You won’t get it, Sesshomaru, ‘cause you’ve not experienced this for yourself yet.**

Sesshomaru looked at Koga, but the Wolf looked completely clueless. Ayame’s laugh rang in their heads like the pealing of bells.
You’ll see what I mean. She’s busting at the seams to blurt her little news!

Sesshomaru saw Rina’s eyes widen and a spark of comprehension flare to life. Riiinaaaa, he purred. **Do you know something?**

**Huh? Oh! I know nothing, Jon Snow!** she chirped innocently.

His face broke into a predatory grin. **Oh, now I know you know something!** He waggled his fingers at her in a gesture that threatened a good tickling.

Her laughter in their heads took on a screeching squeal as she put on a burst of speed! **I know nothing! Nothing at all!** she screeched as Sesshomaru tried to catch up. She carefully scooped up Kagome. “Here! Let me help you!” her laughter broke through her voice.

“Wha-?!” Kagome yelped.

“Sesshomaru’s gonna torture me for information!” Rina squealed, laughing so hard that tears began to pour down her face.

Kagome looked back to Sesshomaru, who blazed after them, still with that predatory grin, and with Koga -- who still looked confused as fuck -- and Ayame -- who was laughing just as hard as Rina -- close on his heels. “What the actual fuck?!” Kagome barked even as she began to laugh in confusion. They arrived back at the village in no time.

The sounds of their laughter brought people out of their huts to look upon them in curiosity. And when InuYasha came out, Sesshomaru felt no small amount of satisfaction to see the open-mouthed expression of surprise on his little brother’s face when their eyes met. Then curiosity when he saw Kagome in the arms of a red-headed stranger followed by a slight scowl when he saw Koga and Ayame.

“Sesshomaru! You’re back! Where the fuck have you been?!” InuYasha finally barked as they stopped in front of him and Rina gently placed Kagome on her feet. He saw InuYasha’s eyes soften as he looked at his mate and kissed her tenderly.

**I finally get it.** InuYasha looked at him curiously at his silent validation.
InuYasha’s nose suddenly began to work and he gawked at Rina. “Oh my gods, you’re her!” He whipped his head to gawk at Sesshomaru. “You found her!”

“Little brother, I think you’d best call the group together. We all have much to tell you and not all of it is good.”

“Rina!” came a joyous cry and they all turned.

Rina gawked. “Ohmigods! Hiromi?! Shizuka?!” she flew to the two reptilian women and gave them fierce hugs. “Oh my gods, I can’t believe you’re both still alive! I thought Kumayomaru slaughtered you along with everyone else! "Wait, how are you two here?"

“Sesshomaru befriended us when he came to find you at our village!” Shizuka explained. “Hiromi and I were out on a scouting patrol when Kumayomaru came. We didn’t find out what happened until the following night.”

Rina hugged them again. “I’m so glad you both are ok and I’m so sorry for what happened!”

Sesshomaru looked upon their reunion with a soft smile, his heart doing odd flips in his chest as he witnessed his beloved’s joy. He felt InuYasha sidle up to his side.

“You know, I was so fucking pissed at you when you took off alone, Sesshomaru. You didn’t have to do this by yourself. But gods, I am so happy that you found her and that she’s safe.” Sesshomaru turned to find himself greeted by his brother’s soft, peaceful smile. Like all was well in the world.

“She’s not out of the woods yet, brother,” Sesshomaru replied. “But, thank you.”

“I take it that the danger she still faces has something to do with why the Wolves are here?” Sesshomaru was actually a little surprised to hear his brother speak of Koga without a bitter snarl. “Eh, relax. I still don’t much like the creep, but it’s obvious to anyone with even a shred of a brain cell that he’s head-over-heels for Ayame. And it’s good. I’m actually really happy for them.”

“Dude,” Sesshomaru couldn’t resist using some of Rina and Kagome’s more modern vernacular
even though it sounded completely foreign and out-of-character for him, “you have no idea.” He laughed. “Let’s just say they are completely unabashed in how they display their affections.”

InuYasha snickered. “Oh really?”

“Yeah, there’s literally no such thing as privacy and nobody gives a fuck while they--”

“Ok, boys,” Rina laughed, her face flaming.

“Yeah, don’t let Miroku hear you guys talking,” Ayame interjected. “If I recall that lecher correctly, if he hears you talking, he’s going to want to move in!”

“Yeah, like Sango would go for that!” Kagome guffawed.

“But to answer your question, brother,” Sesshomaru spoke soberly, “yes, the ongoing dangers are why the Wolves are here.”

“Sesshomaru! You’re back! Welcome home!” came a new voice. Sango and Miroku were running over to them, followed by their three youngsters.

“Uncle Sesshy!” they screeched. “We’ve missed you so much!”

Sesshomaru’s countenance actually lit up at the sounds of their voices and he crouched with his arms open so they could pounce on him and climb their way up to his shoulders.

“Daaaaaamn,” InuYasha whistled lowly to Rina. “You have had a helluva profound effect on him, I gotta say.” He gave her an appreciative grin. “He was always pretty damn good with the kids before, but since he met you? He’s actually warmed up to them a lot more. Before he was merely patient and indulgent. But since meeting you, it’s like he actually likes kids now. It’s nice to see that miracles do happen!”

Sesshomaru turned as he heard his brother’s words and was warmed by Rina’s blushing laugh, her soft expression as she watched him with Sango and Miroku’s children. He stood and led Sango and Miroku to her.
“Sango, Miroku, this is Rina.”

The demon slayer and the monk’s faces lit up and they added their voices to the collective congratulations on their successful reunion.

“And what was it you weren’t supposed to discuss in front of me?” Miroku asked cheekily. Apparently, Sango had caught every word regarding the Pack’s living style and sent a snarky glare in his direction.

“Watch it, Miroku! Or, I swear, I will shove my Hiraikotsu so far up your ass, you’ll be tasting nothing but demon bones for years.” Miroku laughed as he rubbed the growing bump on his head where Sango had smacked him.

Sesshomaru, still carrying the children, placed himself beside Rina. “Watch out for that one.”

“Ah, I ain’t worried,” she chortled. “Looks like Sango keeps him pretty well leashed.”

“Ha! You should have seen how he used to be!” Kagome interjected. “Sango always beat the hell out of him. But you? You very well may have killed him.”

Sesshomaru’s brow arched with concern when he felt Rina’s humor fade. It took him a moment to understand why. Fuck. He wanted to smack himself in the face.

“Don’t forget, Monk, that Rina is from Kagome’s time.” He wouldn’t tell them of David, for that wasn’t his place. But he felt it beneficial to at least let there be heavy implication in his voice.

Thankfully, Miroku caught it and his face fell as he looked at Rina. “Oh,” he said softly. Rina’s eyes flashed with surprise. Miroku knelt before her. “My lady, I think I understand what Sesshomaru is saying and, if I may say, I am so very sorry you were put through something so vile. “It is true, I never used to keep my hands to myself…” he faltered a little at the growl that began to rumble in Rina’s throat. “…and believe me, though I am still a lech in general, I have eyes and hands only for my beloved wife, whom I just live to annoy because she’s as adorable as she is dangerous when she’s angry.” He looked up at her as Rina’s growl quieted a little. “But please know that I swear to you upon my precious family that I will never treat you with anything but respect. And if I forget myself and behave thoughtlessly in any way, I will submit myself to whatever vengeance you would wish to inflict upon me.”
Rina knelt down to look at his face. “Where I come from, men still put their hands on us and we’re just expected to tolerate it because ‘that’s just their humor’ or whatever. I understand that times here are different and yet still the same.”

“That it is, my lady,” he confirmed with a sad smile.

“I understand that you’ve never meant any real harm, but I do wish you would realize what harm it does still actually cause for women even in this time when men don’t keep their hands to themselves even if they are ‘harmless’.”

“All I have learned about that I have learned from my beloved Sango,” he replied earnestly.

Rina took a shaky breath as she wrestled still with the demons of her past that Kumayomaru had dredged up. “I believe you,” she said at last. “Don’t make me regret that.”

“If he makes you regret it, I’ll assist you with returning that regret a thousandfold,” Sango promised. Her eyes had been pained as soon as she’d understood Sesshomaru’s implication.

“As will I,” Sesshomaru’s voice rumbled dangerously.

“I’m sorry,” Kagome said contritely. “I didn’t mean--”

Rina cut her off with a gentle wave. “We’re all unintentionally thoughtless at times in comfortable company, Kagome.” She smiled. “Actually, I’m not used to being comfortable around new people so quickly nor new people being so comfortable with me. I’m honored to have been accepted among you so quickly that you’re even including me in on the jokes. It actually means a lot to me.”

Everyone beamed at her in response and she blushed while Sesshomaru placed an arm about her shoulders. “Well, since we are all here, we should probably adjourn to whomever’s hut and begin our discussion. Much as I would actually like to keep the mirth going, time may be of the essence and we need to prepare ourselves as much as possible. Kumayomaru will likely be coming.”

Those dour words were enough to get everyone in gear for the serious discussions ahead. Within minutes, they were gathered in Kagome and InuYasha’s hut, gathered around the fire. Miroku took the children to be looked after by some of the other parents in the village and returned promptly. Sango and Kagome started preparing a stew for the later evening meal and handing out portions of
smoked meat and dried fish to subsist them all until then. Rina offered to help, but they gently waved her away.

“You must be exhausted from your journey the past few days,” Kagome said kindly. “Please, just rest. Sango and I’ve got this.”

“But, aren’t you pr--” Rina quickly cut off her question at Kagome’s pointed look. “… probably needing rest yourself?” she finished lamely.

“Meh, I’m kinda beat, sure, but I’m ok, I promise.”

By the clueless looks on everyone else’s faces, Sesshomaru was able to guess that no one yet knew whatever secret Kagome was currently keeping.

“Say, Kagome,” InuYasha broke in thoughtfully, “Are you sure you’re ok? You’ve been a lot more tired lately.”

“Go sit down, Kagome,” Sango said gently, her gaze full of knowing. “I’ve got the rest of this.”

When Kagome seated herself, reclining back against her mate, she got a shy look on her face. "So, you know how my mom and I figured out that she and I could send pictures and stuff to each other through the well?” The others nodded while Sesshomaru remained quiet. That must have been a development that came about after he’d set off alone.

What is she talking about? Koga asked in confusion.

Long story. I’ll tell you later.

“Well, I asked my mom to send me something, in particular, a few days ago.” Her shy expression deepened as she pulled something out of the sleeve of her habuki. It was small, white, slender, and plastic. Out of all of them, Rina was the only one to recognize what it was immediately, which she indicated with a small, gasping squeal.

"This,” Kagome explained to the rest of them, “is something from my time that’s called a pregnancy test…” she let the words hang in the air as comprehension began to dawn on everyone else’s expressions. “I won’t tell you how it works ‘cause you all would probably find it gross…” her words cut off as InuYasha and the rest of the demons sniffed and blushed. “Never mind. I
should have known that you’d figure it out.” She facepalmed.

“You’re pregnant?!” InuYasha squeaked, his voice cracking comically, his face paling even as his amber eyes lit up.

Kagome blushed deeply. “Yeah,” she said softly, her eyes shining. Everyone gasped and clapped with joy and Sango, Rina, and Ayame all uttered squeals of glee. Then Kagome squealed a little herself as InuYasha hauled her into his arms and kissed her in a way that was definitely not polite for company, plundering her mouth with growls of delight.

Miroku, unable to tear his eyes away, finally uttered a little cough.

InuYasha’s ears twitched at the sound and he looked up, glaring at them balefully. “Listen, I know we have a lot of serious shit to talk about? But I’m gonna need you all to get the fuck out for a little while. We’ll talk about everything over dinner.”

No one hesitated to obey as InuYasha made it clear he would ravish his mate with or without them gone and Kagome laughed at his gruff enthusiasm. As they exited the hut to the sounds of Kagome already moaning, Sesshomaru scooped Rina up in his arms and turned to the rest of the group. “We’ll see you at dinner. Don’t come into our hut either.”

He didn’t wait for any confirmation as he turned and stalked to the hut that Kaede had left for him, kissing Rina with abundant promise. “I can’t torture you for information any longer, it seems, but I can still get my vengeance upon you, mischievous wench,” he teased her with a sultry growl. Rina giggled against his mouth as they disappeared into the hut.

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InuYasha collapsed next to Kagome and twined himself around her, relishing in the feel of her skin against his. Relishing the dew of sweat that clung to them and dampened their hair. Relishing the way Kagome’s breasts pressed against his chest when she turned in his arms to nuzzle her face into his neck. He gazed at his mate, his heart overflowing with adoration. A baby. We’re having a baby. The words pulsed in his mind over and over, keeping time with their still thundering heartbeats.

Never had InuYasha felt such a stark combination of excitement and terror all at once. Through their mating mark, Kagome sensed his conflicted emotions. “InuYasha?” she looked up at him.
She placed a gentle hand on his face. “Are you ok?”

He tightened his arms around her. “I’m more than ok, Kagome-chan,” he said, breathing in the scent of her hair as he placed a thigh between her own and tangled his legs with hers. “I’m overjoyed and yet I’m terrified, truth be told. You remember the way Miroku reacted when Sango became pregnant with the girls.”

Kagome chuckled even as his muscular thigh caressed her intimately, eliciting a small gasp. “It’s still more than that, though. I can feel it, remember?” She gasped again as he increased the pressure from his thigh. His amber eyes glinted at her with lurid mischief. “Oh, you’re a funny guy,” she looked up at him with a smirk through desire-darkened eyes.

“Yes, it’s more than that,” he acknowledged as he gently nipped her lip, feeling himself harden against her again as her pregnancy-laced scent spiked his longing again. “I’m terrified because Sesshomaru said Kumayomaru will follow them here. I know why he and the Pack have come. I can smell them in the forest -- they and all their children. We’re banding together to face him and take him out. But after everything that’s happened, after all the people we’ve lost this last year alone…” he dragged in a worried breath. “It’s hard not to be terrified of something happening to you and it’s even more terrifying now that you’re pregnant.”

Kagome’s eyes flashed with worry as he spoke but oh, how he did not want her to be afraid. He pressed against her flesh with his thigh again, caressing her with gentle, enticing strokes.

“I know what you’re doing,” she moaned. “And it’s not going to work, InuYasha. You don’t get to carry this weight by yourself.” He could feel her wetness on his skin as he continued his teasing even as he listened to her. “That’s part of what it means for us to be married and mated,” she continued. “It means that we’re partners, through and through. It means that whatever we face, we face together, right?”

He pulled her leg around his hip and entered her again in a gentle slide, causing them both to gasp. “You’re right,” he whispered hoarsely.

As he gently thrust against her, a sound caught their ears. Breathy moans and growls from another hut. Kaede’s old hut, now in Sesshomaru’s possession. Rina’s voice building up in passion. Sesshomaru’s growls of beastly triumph.

InuYasha and Kagome’s eyes never left each other as they quietly listened. Then he rolled her underneath him to grind more thoroughly against the center of her body. “I’m so happy for them,” Kagome breathed against his mouth. “I’m happy that Sesshomaru has found for himself what you
and I have.”

He gazed tenderly down at her. His mate. His wife. His heart. “Me too.” But he didn’t want to talk about them right now. Kissing her deeply, he picked up their pace, delighting in the sounds she whimpered against him as he brought them closer to their peak. She cried out his name as her body spasmed and shattered around his and brought him with her again to their private paradise.

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Rina laid her head on Sesshomaru’s chest as they recovered from yet another leg of their pent-up marathon. “If we keep going like this, I’ll be asking Kagome to request an additional test,” she panted against him with a wry chuckle.

Sesshomaru smiled against her hair. “And what, at this moment, do you imagine your reaction would be if that became a necessity?”

“Mmmm,” she purred quietly. “I dunno. Watching you with Sango and Miroku’s kids was definitely adorable. Especially when InuYasha told me that your attitude towards kids apparently warmed up considerably after you and I met.” She laughed gently at the blush that warmed his face. “Not yet, though,” she finally answered him. “I just want to enjoy what we have right now. Someday, though.” She kissed him soundly. “Someday.”

He nodded against her, deepening their kiss so he could taste her again and feeling his body harden once more. “Someday.”

His heart howled with delight as she welcomed him into her again.
Preparations and Mating Marks

Chapter Summary

After an afternoon of understandable diversion, we gather to discuss the possibilities of what we can likely expect from Kumayomaru. Thanks to my parents having been psychologists, I think I've got a pretty decent, albeit horrifying, grasp on the likelihoods we face from our enemy. We spend the next several weeks training and preparing our strategies for action. Meanwhile, I'm plagued by nightmares -- horrifying premonitions of death and violence against my friends and loved ones...

“Alright,” InuYasha cleared his throat as everyone sat back down together that evening. Everyone had bowls of stew and rice and were digging in with gusto and complimenting Sango’s cooking. “Thanks for bearing with me and Kagome earlier, by the way,” InuYasha said to them, a slightly sheepish grin on his face.

“As dire as our situations are and may well soon become, little brother, if we don’t take time to celebrate things like Kagome’s pregnancy and your growing family, then what are we even fighting to protect?” Sesshomaru smiled.

“Yeah, Kagome and I heard you and Rina celebrating up a storm,” InuYasha teased saucily.

Rina burst into snorting giggles as they continued their good-natured banter. She knew by now of their severely fractious history. It was hard to imagine the brothers at each others’ throats as enemies while listening to them trade jibes in proper, brotherly affection and all the orneriness that came with it.

“Alright, you pair of pups,” Koga barked. His voice was tense with urgency even as he tried, unsuccessfully, to keep his tone light enough to not make either of the brothers bristle. But then his temper snapped. “This is all well and good, but we can no longer procrastinate on this conversation. We have no idea how far Kumayomaru may be behind us, but I don’t want to assume that he’s very far out. And while you two,” he nodded at InuYasha and Kagome, “have an addition to your family coming, Ayame and I have six children of our own already here. Not to mention the rest of my Pack and their own pups! Now, I ask you to shut the fuck up for a bit and fucking focus!”

Rina and everyone else held their breaths while the brothers regarded Koga soberly. “Please forgive us, Koga,” Sesshomaru said with full humility and looking thoroughly ashamed. InuYasha echoed similar apologies and also looked utterly cowed.
Koga was clearly not expecting that reaction from either of them, given the look of abject, blinking surprise on his face. “That’s… that’s better,” he finally said before he sat back down next to his mate.

“Koga’s right,” Sesshomaru finally spoke. “We’ve behaved far too cavalierly considering what all is at stake. Koga, Ayame, you both have my profound apologies. That was a rather poor way to repay how you put your Pack at stake for helping Rina.”

Koga waved him off. “Don’t worry about it. Believe me, even Ayame and I know how easy it is to be overcome with excitement over such things.” The two Alphas passed knowing grins between them. Then he turned to Rina. “My lady, if you would, please, tell them what happened to you when you awoke.”

Rina suddenly felt so tired. There was so much and it was all so heavy. As she took a deep breath, trying to summon the strength to blurt through all this again, she felt Sesshomaru take her hand and she felt a literal and significant rise in her energy reserves. She looked over at him and met his encouraging smile with a grateful one of her own.

By the time she was finished, everyone was soberly quiet.

“If you all don’t mind, I shall return,” Miroku said at last as he rose to his feet. “I think this calls for many stiff drinks.”

“So, the fact that you’ve got the Raven woman watching your back definitely helps,” InuYasha said thoughtfully as he processed what Rina had said. “And between what Sesshomaru told us quite a while ago about your power and potential that he witnessed as well as how you seemed to make him come to a stand-still even without the Lady Raven’s help--”

“How do you figure?” Rina asked, rather confused.

“I really, REALLY fucking hate to say this,” InuYasha began, hiding his head in his hands as though he had a headache developing, “but it sounds like you may have triggered him to have something akin to feelings for you.”

Rina audibly gagged and she felt like she just might lose her dinner. “Oh gods, dare I ask?” Even Sesshomarou looked more than a little ill.
“You piqued his interest because you’re the first person to ever catch him by surprise. You confused him, stood up against him without any of the fear he expected you to have. And you took his attempt to control you with that Kotone girl and turned that on his head, too. Plus, he knows how powerful you already are and yet, unlike him, you were willing to get down and do servants work in order to protect Kotone from any backlash he might have tried to give her for your defiance. You intrigued him enough for him to actually ask you why you are the way you are and he actually frikkin’ asked for your forgiveness when his invasion of your memories enraged you.

"Come on, Rina, you’re the daughter of psychologists. Kagome explained to me what those are years ago. You grew up with people who taught you how people like him work. Surely you can work this out.”

Rina swallowed the bile in her throat. “I really didn’t want to think about it,” she admitted.

“So,” Kagome asked her softly. “You have already figured that he is potentially a Narcissist…”

“Among other things,” Rina interjected quietly.

“So, given what you know of how people like him work, what do you think he’ll do?”

“When people like him become infatuated, it always turns to a sick obsession to possess the object of their desire,” Rina said dully. “In his case, it’s probably already progressed to that stage. They become lost in fantasies of their obsession. For Kumayomaru, it’s only going to deepen his grudge against Sesshomaru’s family, but when he realizes that Sesshomaru and I have already consummated our relationship, his grudge is going to focus solely on Sesshomaru to an even more intense degree. He’s going to hate Sesshomaru far more than he ever hated Toga Taisho.” Her voice trembled.

“He’ll come here hoping to somehow entice me to his side. Once he realizes that’s not possible and once he realizes that Sesshomaru and I are actually together, he will try to use whatever means to force my cooperation. He’ll essentially have a massive psychotic break because his fantasies will have been obliterated. And with the power he carries?” She shuddered. “Humans who have a psychotic break are terrifying enough. Truly. I don’t even want to imagine what happens when a demon of his caliber has one.” She looked around at everyone in the room. “He will try to use every single one of you and those dearest to you to force me to his side. Your lives for my cooperation. And if I don’t give in, he will kill any and every one of you that he can. One by one until I either give in to save whoever remains or until you’re all dead. You. Your children. Everyone.” Rina’s breathing became ragged as her chest clutched painfully with the beginning pains of a panic attack.

Miroku had returned when InuYasha had pointed out the signs of Kumayomaru’s infatuation. When Rina finished speaking and he saw the beginnings of her panic, he thumped the casks of sake
that he’d gone to fetch hurriedly down to the floor. He quickly grabbed a drinking bowl, filled it with the sake, and handed it to Sesshomaru, whispering a sutra over it. “Hurry, Sesshomaru. Make her drink it.”

Rina had begun to shake uncontrollably and even though she uttered no sounds, her eyes were screaming as she tried to fight it.

“Baby? Rina-chan, I’m right here,” Sesshomaru spoke as soothingly as he could as he cradled her with one arm and held up the bowl with the other. “Come on, my love, try to drink.” Rina was gasping as the panic attack continued to unravel her control. Her eyes started to change, reddening and rolling wide with panic, and her fangs began to enlarge and lengthen.

InuYasha began to move, ordering that she be restrained.

“No, don’t!” Miroku warned. “With her strength, you’d likely make the rest of her control snap and she could end up going on a rampage! With what she’s already been through, it’s likely that restraints would feel like an attack rather than an attempt to help!” The others stood down.

Sesshomaru continued to try to coax her to drink the sake. “It’s ok, Rina,” he spoke, his voice taking on a reverberation of his authority power without being overwhelming. Just enough to try to break through the haze. “It’s alright. I’m here. We’re all here. It’s ok to be afraid. But honey, I need you to drink this for me. It will help you. It will make the pain go away and it’ll make it easier for you to breathe.”

As he spoke, he could feel the edge of Rina’s panic dull just enough. Her wild eyes were focused on him and he saw rage start to come through. Not an uncontrolled rage, he sensed. Rather, it was the rage of feeling so helpless. “Come on, my love,” he coaxed gently again, “drink.”

Rina leaned her head forward towards the drinking bowl and he carefully tipped small amounts of the sake into her mouth, trying to be careful to not cause her to choke between her ragged gasps for air. Slowly. Slowly. He reached out to her mind. It will be alright. He fed images to her. Together in her apartment in those minutes before Izumi had caught them. Together in the alcove after their reunion. It was no one but them. The rest of the world did not exist. It was just them in each others’ arms.

Rina was able to take larger and larger sips until the bowl was depleted. Sesshomaru held it out to the monk, who promptly refilled it and whispered another sutra over it. When Sesshomaru held it out to her, she managed to chug it all in one long series of gulps. As the sake worked the magic that Miroku added to it, her breathing finally slowed and her tremors stopped. She took the bowl from
Sesshomaru’s hand and silently held it out to Miroku again and drained it promptly. Her jaw was clenched as she struggled to keep control of the sobs that threatened to tear forth.

Fuck you, you can wait, she snarled silently at the monster of her pulverized emotions. She drained one more bowl of sake, complete with the monk’s sutra, before she felt strong enough to sit back up. This conversation wasn’t fucking done. She dashed away the few traitorous tears that managed to make it past her guard as InuYasha knelt quietly before her. He quailed a little under the weight of the rage her eyes carried.

“I know this has been a lot to deal with,” he said quietly. “We just want you to know that you’re not weak. I know you’re feeling as though you are, believe me. We all know it. But we also know that you’re still here. You’ve been through hell and there’s still more hell to come, but you’re still here.”

She nodded silently at him as his words reached her heart.

“Are you ok to continue, Rina?” Sesshomaru asked her quietly. She looked at him, still silent, and gave a nod. So slight it was, yet filled with tightly-controlled determination.

“So, given what you know and are able to anticipate about him, how long do you think we’ve got?”

Rina quietly mulled the question for a while as Miroku loaded everyone else up with bowls of sake. Kagome accepted one and said she’d settle for tea thereafter.

“He’s probably already tracked us this far,” Rina finally spoke when everyone settled into their sake. She felt so strangely calm. And, despite how much sake she’d chugged, she felt ridiculously clear-headed, like the way she’d felt before her battle against the Reptilians that night... like she could see everything in the tiniest puffs of wind and know everything that had traversed and everything that would follow.

“He’s aware of our numbers and our collective powers. He knows especially that he’s going up against the people who were finally able to take out Naraku, which is a feat that commands even his respect.”

She could smell him. She could actually smell him nearby. How had she not noticed sooner? The scent was faded, but she knew he’d been there. He’d probably watched her and Sesshomaru arrive at the village with Koga and Ayame.

”He’s more than just a narcissist. Most narcissists typically think themselves brilliant without realizing they’re actually a dime a dozen and most are about as dumb as a bag of hammers.
Kumayomaru doesn’t just have the ego of a narcissist, however. He has the mental capabilities of a sociopath. He’s calculating enough that it may be enough to staunch his more narcissistic, ego-driven impulses for a time.

"Had he been able to catch up to us and the Pack when we fled here, he would have attempted to do what I mentioned earlier without hesitation. But he failed. We were too fast for him and Sesshomaru kept our scents and whereabouts too well guarded.” She looked at him. “You not only cloaked our scents and energies, you dispersed them around, didn’t you?”

Sesshomaru smiled at her quietly and nodded.

“He didn’t figure it out until it was too late. We beat him here. Not by a whole lot, but enough to where he felt the need to retreat and rethink his strategy.” She went quiet again for a few moments. “I don’t know how long he will take. It won’t be terribly long. We may only have a matter of weeks or even a few months. And during that time, he’s going to be preparing, trying to make himself strong enough to take us all on.”

She looked at Kagome. “We’ll need to find another safe den to shelter the children in when the time comes. He knows about the one where the rest of the Pack currently wait. I know your barriers are strong, but he’ll break through. So, as much as you can, you need to get stronger. And, believe it or not, but your pregnancy will actually help with that a lot. You’ll see what I mean.”

“Kagome and I will work together on these barriers,” Miroku announced. “Alone, even after becoming stronger, there’s the possibility that Kumayomaru will still manage to overcome her barriers. But with mine and her spiritual powers put together, I think we’ll be able to stop him in his tracks and prevent him from bringing any harm to the children and I’ll be able to make sure she stays safe while the rest of you kick that foul Bear’s ass.”

InuYasha nodded as he took everything in, looking utterly exhausted. “Alright. I think that’s about all we can do for tonight. I vote we have a drinking contest and see who can get shit-faced the soonest.”

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Rina didn’t participate much in the drinking, though it was rather fun to watch everyone else get sloshed. Unfortunately for her, whatever effects Miroku had prayed onto the sake she’d drunk earlier seemed to only increase the more she drank after that. So, instead of getting buzzed, she only got more restless yet calm and clear-headed after two more bowls of the stuff.

“Rina, would you care to accompany me for a walk? I wanted to go check out a few things.”
She smiled at him wanly. “You don’t have to miss out on the party just cause I can’t seem to get drunk right now.” She laughed as his expression became one of mock outrage.

“Would I do something like that? No, Firefly, I have purely selfish reasons, I assure you. Salacious ones, too.”

“Oh? Now you’ve piqued my interest,” she laughed before he kissed her with a teasing peck.

“Truly, though,” he said thoughtfully, “I do want to check out some things around the village. Also, I think I’m a little worn out from being around people for so long.”

“Yeah, I’ve pretty much had it for the evening, myself,” Rina acknowledged wearily.

They slipped out, unnoticed, from InuYasha and Kagome’s hut and he grasped her hand and led her away from the village. They paced along in silence, pausing only when occasionally she heard the quiet puffs of Sesshomaru trying to catch a scent.

“Do you smell that?” he asked at last.

Rina felt sick. Kumayomaru’s scent had teased her like a ghost in the hut, but out here, across the clearing from where they’d come into the village with Kagome, it punched her full in the face. “I was so focused on our playing around, I completely missed it,” she whispered hoarsely.

Sesshomaru shook his head. “No, my love, that wasn’t the reason. Believe me, if we’d scented him, we wouldn’t have missed it. The wind was at our backs earlier when we arrived, remember?” She looked at him blankly. He smiled sheepishly at her. “Sorry, remembering details like that has been a centuries-long habit of mine.”

She smiled thinly. “Fair enough. I’m gonna have to start developing those kinds of awareness habits too, I’m thinking.” Out of the corner of her eye, she was aware of Sesshomaru looking at her with an expression of concern. He’d been sneaking those peeks at her since her panic attack. But he said nothing. Instead, he pointed out the direction he could smell Kumayomaru’s scent retreating to.

They followed the scent cautiously for a little way -- perhaps a half hour’s run away from the village -- and the scent kept retreating and getting weaker. They ran another sweeping patrol on
the way back until they were satisfied he was nowhere nearby.

Rina remained silent through the whole run, comforted by the feel of Sesshomaru’s hand clasping hers and grateful that he didn’t pepper her with questions even as she could sense that he wanted to. However, his patience with temptation seemed to run out when they reached the edge of the treeline outside of the village. He pulled her gently to a stop and looked in her eyes with a searching, carefully concerned expression.

“Are you alright?” he finally asked.

“Yeah, I’m totally fine,” she answered automatically. The words were barely out of her mouth and she knew he’d call bullshit just as quickly. Except, he didn’t. Instead, he remained quiet and the look on his face, patiently waiting, did it for him. Her shoulders slumped a little. “I used to get panic attacks a lot after David raped me,” she finally said. “I hadn’t had one in years, though. And then tonight, as I was going over all that shit that Kumayomaru would likely do, suddenly I couldn’t breathe, my chest tightened, and then it felt like I was having a fucking heart attack.” Her hands were still trembling, she realized then.

“I hate having panic attacks.” She dragged her hands through her hair as she drew a ragged breath. “I hate feeling that helpless. I hate feeling as though my body is completely betraying me and stripping me of all control like that.” Then her eyes blazed with humiliation and angry, unshed tears.

“And?” Sesshomaru asked softly. Rina’s throat worked madly as she struggled with the rest. “It’s ok, Firefly,” he gently pushed her no differently than she’d encouraged him to keep talking to her a couple of days ago.

“And I hated everyone seeing me in such a weak state,” she finally managed to grind out through clenched teeth. In response, Sesshomaru reached for her, a questioning look on his face, but did not put his arms around her until she reached for him in return.

“I saw how you reacted to what InuYasha said,” he whispered into her hair. “And he was right. You’re not weak for dealing with panic attacks. We didn’t really have a term for those things before we met Kagome, but it’s something I’ve seen just about all of them deal with at one point or another after what they went through with Naraku. Nightmares, struggles to breathe, all of it. ’Rina, these people are some of the strongest people I’ve ever known and I’ve seen them, including my own brother, go through this and similar. Believe me, my love, you are anything but weak. To my thinking, this is something that strong people end up dealing with, especially when they’ve been through a lot of shit.” He framed Rina’s face with his hands as he spoke so she’d have no choice but to look him in the eyes.

Rina swallowed hard as she took in the molten gold of his gaze and the force of the love and
compassion contained therein. Finally, she nodded after she’d let his words sink in. “You’re right and I know you’re right. My parents used to tell me the same thing. My logic says the same thing even now. It’s just hard to think logically when my anxiety is still so much at the forefront.”

He nodded down at her before resting his forehead against hers. Her eyes closed at the simple-yet-intimate contact as she nuzzled her face against the caress of his hand and felt the rest of her anxiety gradually melt away. “Now that I’ve taken care of the selfish, perhaps we can now partake of the salacious,” he murmured before he tipped her face up so he could cover her mouth with his. Her acquiescence came out as a small, pleading whimper and her heart thundered with delicious anticipation as he obliged by picking her up in his arms and making dire haste back to their hut.

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Even though Rina insisted that she didn’t want to actually go back home until after Kumayomaru had been dealt with, she’d at least wanted to make a visit back home. However, in the weeks that followed her reunion with Sesshomaru, they discovered that the Well was closed to them for the time being. Kagome could still send letters back and forth with her mother, but the Well would permit neither Rina nor Sesshomaru through to the modern era.

That made them both nervous. Was she going to be stuck here for years on end without a choice before she could go back, the same way Kagome had been stuck in the modern era for those three years?

At the very least, Kagome was able to send a letter to her mother and let her know that Rina had been found and was safe for the time being.

Rina decided she wouldn’t worry about it. If she ended up trapped in the feudal era forever, she’d live. So would her friends. And if the overall lifespan of demons and half-demons was any indication, she’d see them again someday. She’d just have to take the long way. Ryuka and Izumi had each other. They would be ok. She had Sesshomaru and she would be alright.

Winter at last melted into spring and they’d spent the past several weeks formulating their strategy for Kumayomaru’s inevitable return. They found another cave for the Pack to take shelter in. They found another village that would shelter the human inhabitants for a time and some of the Pack members moved into the emptied huts to maintain them as well as the farmlands to basically masquerade as the humans who had been moved to safety.

The original safe den was made and kept to look as though it was still the main font of safety. It was decided that Kagome and Miroku would still protect that den as though it were chock-full of
the Wolves and their pups lest Kumayomaru search for the newly-established alternate safe den. There would be several Wolves hiding in the original one and Kagome had been learning how to cast illusion magic so there would be a convincing appearance of youngsters hiding in that den. Sesshomaru worked with Kagome quite a lot until she progressed to give not only the appearance of Wolf pups but also the scents and energies of them.

Whenever Sesshomaru worked with Kagome, Rina spent time with Sango. She helped her with her work around the village and then Sango would help Rina polish her current fighting abilities and train her in some new skills. Rina was already fairly proficient with a katana, but both Sango and Sesshomaru helped her to sharpen her skills and learn newer ones. Among her continued training in the katana and hand-to-hand combat, Sango also began to teach Rina how to use the kusarigama -- the chain-sickle weapon that had been so commonly used by her demon slayer tribe before they'd been murdered. It was clear that Rina would not be ready to effectively wield the tricky weapon by the time Kumayomaru made his move, but learning the new weapon gave her something else to focus on to combat the growing anxiety that began to affect her.

The more time passed, the more agitated and nervous Rina got. She began to have nightmares almost every night. Some were memories. Others felt like premonitions. Vivid threats of death against these people she had come to be close friends with and who she loved with all her heart. Ayame getting ripped apart in Kumayomaru's claws. Koga getting bent backwards in half and dropping sightlessly to the ground. Kagome’s unborn child getting carved from her womb and both getting devoured while InuYasha, forced to watch, screamed in crazed agony. On and on the nightmares went, each more horrifying than the last.

Sesshomaru shook her awake as she thrashed in the throes of the latest nightmare. As soon as her eyes opened and focused on him, she covered her eyes and burst into hoarse, wracking sobs. Sesshomaru looked pale and she knew she had to have been screaming his name this time, for the nightmare had been about him.

She shook uncontrollably as he held her, stroking her hair. She burrowed her face into his chest as she tried to dispel the images that kept playing on the most gods-awful repeat in her brain.

“What happened, Firefly?” he asked her quietly, nuzzling his face into her hair.

Rina shook her head against him. It was too fucking horrible for words. It had been another threatening nightmare. They always started out the same: She’d be fighting Kumayomaru in hand-to-hand combat and she’d be kicking his ass as easily as those jerks on the beach. But then he’d transform into his Bear form and she’d be as helpless as an infant and her movements would be as sluggish as if she were trying to fight or run while submerged in water as Kumayomaru went after her loved ones.
This time, when he transformed, he got his paws on Sesshomaru while rendering her motionless somehow, as though she were tied up. And instead of killing him outright, he tortured Sesshomaru in front of her for what felt like years before ripping him into pieces, beginning with his head, and devouring him, telling her, “You should have chosen me instead, Wolf woman.”

She felt Sesshomaru watch the memory with her when she couldn’t bring herself to speak it. “Jesus,” he finally whispered. He tipped her face up to look at him. “I’m sorry you’ve been having to endure all these nightmares, Rina,” he said softly before kissing her tenderly on the forehead. He frowned quietly then, clearly in thought.

“What is it?” she asked him. She was so tired. She hadn’t had a restful night’s sleep in weeks and it was wearing her down physically and mentally.

“I’ve been thinking this for a while, but I’m really becoming convinced that these aren’t mere nightmares.” His expression was troubled.

“What do you mean?”

“I think he’s acting out from his obsession with you and I think he’s found a way to plague you with your worst fears. I think he’s trying to wear you down so that you’ll surrender easier when he does come. All these threats of what he’ll do if you try to fight him.”

Rina sighed. She’d been wondering the same thing for quite a while, but she’d been afraid to give voice to that suspicion lest she sound paranoid. She should have known she could have broached this with him. She looked back up at him and expressed as much.

His expression softened when he heard her words. “Of course you could have, Rina-chan, but even I know what it’s like to keep silent on things that are too difficult to discuss or you don’t know how to discuss.”

“Well, it’s long past time to discuss it,” came a new voice, a woman’s voice, that caused them both to jump.

“I know that voice,” Rina breathed before she dared look. Sesshomaru nodded his wide-eyed agreement.
There, down by the fire pit, stood the woman whose voice Rina had only heard in her head and who Sesshomaru hadn’t seen since his first foray with Rin into the dream world.

“Lady Raven,” he breathed.

“It’s you!” Rina gasped. Then she cried out as the events she hadn’t remembered from Kumayomaru’s massacre of the reptilian village poured back into her mind all at once. Lady Raven speaking through her before she took her terrifying, towering form next to her and how Rina had exploded into her huge, enraged dire wolf form, ready to rip Kumayomaru’s throat out at the most minimal provocation.

When she, at last, was freed from the memory, she found herself kneeling at Lady Raven’s feet. No… not “Lady Raven”… She looked up at the goddess, not really knowing how she knew, and blurted out, “My lady, Morrigan!”

The Morrigan smiled down at her. “It was time for you to remember,” she said gently. “Katarina, I’ve watched over you all your life, especially when your parents were forcefully returned to me.” She pulled Rina to her feet, seeming undisturbed by Rina and Sesshomaru’s collective nudity. “Sesshomaru, if you would be so kind as to make us some tea. We have much to discuss and I need some answers from you two on a couple of things. In fact, I’m going to get those answers from you two first and we may leave the rest for another night depending on how that portion of the conversation goes.”

Sesshomaru hurried to obey. He’d not forgotten the sheer amount of power the Great Queen wielded. The last thing on this earth he wanted was for her to give him one of the same quelling looks that she’d given to Kumayomaru.

When the tea was ready, the three of them were seated around the fire, which Rina had rebuilt while Sesshomaru had heated up the water on the stove.

“So, what is it you wish to know, my Queen?” Rina asked quietly.

“I need to know why you two haven’t officially Mated yet,” the Morrigan said bluntly. She chuckled when Rina’s face flamed and Sesshomaru choked on his tea. “Yeah, yeah, I know I’m more blunt than is typical in your culture. Not that respect is a bad thing, but we Celts didn’t often have time for pussyfooting around our dignity.”
“Fair enough, my lady,” Sesshomaru said with a sheepish smile. “You’d think I’d be more used to that anyway, given our closer association with the Wolf Pack.”

The Morrigan laughed at that. “Very true. So, are either one of you going to answer my question?”

Rina didn’t hesitate. “We’d discussed the possibility, my Queen, and he’d told me what the Dragon Queen had told him. But, I didn’t feel ready yet.”

“My girl, you’re going to need to be ready sooner rather than later,” she said, not laying up on her succinct manner in the slightest. “I know that whence you come, it’s something you have the luxury to wait for, but what exactly makes you hesitate?”

Rina blanched at the question, her mouth opening and closing like a fish for a moment.

“Do you love him?”

She blushed again as she looked at Sesshomaru. “Yes,” she answered simply.

The Morrigan looked at him. “And you love her, yes?”

Sesshomaru’s rather shy smile mirrored Rina’s as he gave his answer. “Yes, my lady.”

“And it’s obvious you both trust each other.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Soooloo…” her voice trailed off with a sarcastic lilt as though they were missing something obvious. “Look,” she finally said, “I know it feels, perhaps, as though you both are being pushed into some kind of arranged marriage and maybe it’s technically true. But you both already have what most arranged marriages lack at the beginning. Some arranged marriages never actually find the love
that you two already share, so you are already ahead of the game. But I’m afraid I have to insist that you two get it over with already. Not only will your bond deepen, but it will make you both far more effective against Kumayomaru’s machinations and will give you a greater edge when he does arrive. And he will be here at the next Dark Moon.”

It was Rina’s turn to choke on her tea. “Oh gods.” She looked ill.

“Yeah,” the Morrigan confirmed. “And considering the benefits you both will find from becoming officially Mated? Sorry, Rina, but you need to just be ready.” She drained the rest of her tea and stood. “I will be back in two night’s time to answer your questions. But when I come back, I expect to see Mating marks on the two of you and I expect you to be much better rested. Do I make myself clear?”

Sesshomaru looked tenderly at Rina. “You don’t have to twist my arm, my lady.”

“Good to hear it. See you soon.” And with that, the Great Queen vanished like the Phantom she also bore the moniker of.

Rina was so exhausted and the Morrigan had thrown her for such a loop, she could only stare completely dumbstruck at the space that the goddess had vanished from. Then Sesshomaru approached her from behind and wrapped his arms around her, bending his head to kiss the side of her neck with a gentle nip and a stroke of his tongue.

“Youre Queen may have given her orders, but it’s still ultimately up to you, my love,” he murmured into her ear. “Mating is an exchange and binding of life forces and it only works with the female’s active and heartfelt consent. I could bite you right now and you could bite me, but if your heart isn’t in it, then all we’d be doing is acquiring some needless scars.” He kissed her neck again, sweeping her hair aside to nip the nape of her neck, a spot he had found could make her instantly wet. She moaned at the contact and arched her neck to give him better access, so he nipped again a little harder.

Rina turned to face him, her gaze hooded with the desire he’d awakened. “I’m ready,” she said softly. “I don’t know why I was so insistent on waiting. She’s right. We have all we need and there’s no one else I could ever want to spend my life with the way I want to spend it with you.”

It was all Sesshomaru could do to keep from howling in victory. He’d been wanting to ask her to be his mate for so many weeks but he’d been hesitant to push the issue. He’d felt like he’d previously been a little too pushy on the topic of children even though he hadn’t meant to be and even though Rina had assured him that she hadn’t taken it as such. But now, even though she’d already said she
was willing, he wanted to ask her anyway. He lifted her into his arms, relishing the way her naked skin glided against his.
“Rina, will you accept me as your mate?”

Rina looked down at him, her heart thundering in her ears at the intensity of his eyes as he asked her. “Yes,” she answered breathlessly and without hesitation. She was aware that he was moving them both to their futon. “Yes,” she whispered again as he laid her down and covered her body with his own.

She opened herself eagerly to him as he nestled between her thighs and she pulled him down so she could claim his lips with her own. He groaned as her tongue rimmed his lower lip, drawing it into her mouth so she could nip him gently with her fangs. That was something she knew could drive him about as wild as it did her when he nipped the back of her neck. Sure enough. Her heart sang with delight as she felt him harden against her. He opened his mouth to her so his tongue could dance with hers, growling with animalistic delight, the sound of which was always enough to set Rina’s body aflame.

Her eyes blazed red suddenly as her Wolf decided that this would be the time that Sesshomaru would fight for her actual submission. She didn’t yet know that this was an instinctive part of the Mating ritual. Ayame had only told her the details of the Mating ritual that happened during the act of sex, when the pair would sink their fangs into each other and consume the blood of their intended.

With a heave, she threw him off of her, her reddened eyes dancing with challenge. “If you want me, you’re going to have to catch me,” she snarled with a grin through her lengthened fangs.

Sesshomaru’s eyes flashed red and his answering smile seethed with hungry, predatory ardor.

Rina turned with a flash and she leaped through the nearest window in a dive roll. Lunging to her feet, she tore at full speed to the nearest tree line. Everyone in the village was asleep and even if they weren’t, she didn’t give even a slight fuck about the fact that she was starkly naked. She could hear the whisper of Sesshomaru’s footfalls in the grass behind her. He wasn’t running full-out yet. He was enjoying the chase; letting her get ahead of him was part of the challenge. The breeze at her back carried the scent of his arousal and enjoyment of their game and it was almost enough to make her concede too quickly just so she could have him inside her again sooner rather than later. Her Wolf, however, refused. **He’ll have us when he earns us**, it demanded with a bark of gleeful determination.

The sound of his footsteps in the grass faded away as she plunged through the trees and she knew instinctively that he’d gone into hunter mode. Rina made her way through the forest more quietly, her senses on high alert. She moved with the wind, trying to keep it at her back until she realized
she couldn’t scent him any longer. Had he managed to get around her? Or had he cloaked his scent with the powers of the Dragon Queen? No, he’d hunt her with his natural prowess. He’d win her as an equal. Sesshomaru was not the type to cheat in this.

Her body trembled with expectant desire. He was nearby, upwind of her. Waiting for her. She was certain. She smiled evily and she dipped her fingers into her wetness to leave her mark on a tree she stood near. No way I’ll make this that easy for you, she thought to herself before she turned and fled in the opposite direction from where she could sense him waiting. He would have to catch her. If he wanted to ambush her, he’d have to do better than that.

Sure enough, she could hear his rumbling chuckle of delight as he gave chase again. She knew he’d found her scent-mark when he groaned, Oh, you mischievous little minx! This time, he was laying on the speed for all he was worth. He was faster than her and she knew it. Butterflies screamed in her stomach, provoking her into a shrieking laugh as she sensed him right behind her. She felt him lunge and she dodged to the side, looking at him sidelong still through a haze of red and delighting in the grin of predatory lust that had taken him over.

She put on another burst of speed and felt him readying himself to lunge again. As he did so, she leaped high into the air to dodge him. She’d underestimated how quickly he was capable of correcting himself, however, and she uttered a startled yelp when she felt his arms lock about her waist to take them down to the ground. He rolled so that his body would break their fall. She barely noticed their descent. Her attention was completely captivated by how good his body felt against her and the way he wrapped himself around her to protect her from the coming impact.

They rolled several feet on the ground before she was able to wrench herself free and roll to her feet to face him in a challenging crouch. He’d caught her. Now he’d have to best her. He rose confidently to his full height, letting her take in the sight of him before his body coiled into a ready crouch of his own.

Her heart thundered in expectation. A barely discernible tension tightened his legs and she braced herself for his charge. She laughed low in her throat as he leaped toward her. She dodged low to avoid the grasp of his arms and swept her leg out in a spin behind her, trying to catch him off balance. Naturally, he dodged with a throaty, growling laugh of his own.

On and on this dance went until they were both panting from their exertions as well as the driving, burning force of their lust. He charged her again and when she leaped to dance out of the way, he spun in the direction of her leap and tackled her face down into the ground beneath him. She struggled for a moment, her rump colliding deliciously with his arousal and she heard him utter a groan of longing a split second before he swept her hair aside and latched his fangs tightly to the back of her neck. Pain and pleasure swirled together as fireworks exploded behind her closed eyes.
Yield to me, he demanded in her head with the most sultry growl she’d ever heard. Part of her wanted to refuse, but that was getting quickly drowned out by the part of her that longed to feel his body driving masterfully into hers. He nipped and licked the back of her neck again. Yield to me.

She cried out in ecstasy as his words and his teeth heightened the magic he was working on her body. She felt his arm snaking beneath her belly so his fingers could find the wetness between her legs where her body wept to have him. Still, she stubbornly refused. She was enjoying this domination far too much. She wanted him, wanted his beast to be at the same soaring heights as hers was. Rina yelped again as his fingers plunged into her core and his fangs nipped at the tips of her pointed ears and the side of her neck. He ground himself against her backside but would not move to enter her.

Yield! his voice grated out, a visceral mix of dominant beast and soft, silky, inviting plea. There it was.

Arching herself up against him, she finally said the words he’d been waiting for: “I yield!”

He uttered a roar of jubilant victory as he drove himself into her right up to the hilt. Rina shrieked an ecstatic howl of her own at the feel of him filling her and stretching her. One of his arms was still beneath her belly, his fingers teasing her clit in time with his maddened thrusts. The other reached up to turn her face toward him so he could claim her mouth with growling, mindless passion.

She whimpered against his lips as she could feel her body being driven to its peak. Oh, gods, so close! Almost there! She wanted to sob when he withdrew himself from her body then, turning her over with a tempered roughness so he could draw her up to straddle his hips. He crushed her to him and plundered her mouth again as she impaled herself onto him.

He drew back from her, his eyes no longer red but, rather, back to their molten gold and fevered with the heat of their passion. “I am yours and you are mine. Irrevocably from this moment forward, I bind myself to you, body and soul, fated to love you in this life and follow you in every life hereafter.” The moment the words were out of his mouth, his head snapped forward to sink his fangs deep into her neck.

Rina gasped at the momentary pain before she screamed a keening howl as her body exploded around his, bursting into a universe of starlight. Barely coherent as her body continued to spasm around his, she repeated the words to him that would bind her, in turn, to him. Her fangs lengthened and she bent her head and sank her fangs into the juncture of his neck and shoulder. His blood flooded into her mouth like a fine wine and she drank greedily. His roar, bellowing her name, filled her ears as she felt his body twitching within her from the force of his orgasm.
Without warning, a pain ripped through them both, grasping their hearts in a punishing grip that caused them both to shriek. She’d forgotten about this part. This was caused by their hearts synchronizing as their life forces combined. As the pain receded, she could feel him hardening within her again. Rina groaned his name as he began to move against her, relishing the feel of him inside her, driving into her core. She rocked against him, completely hypnotized by his hooded gaze when he finally drew back to look at her. She smiled a little as she saw that a tiny drop of her blood had escaped his mouth.

Sesshomaru clasped her in his arms as he carefully lifted her to lay her back on the grass beneath them without separating their joined bodies. Sealing his mouth over hers, she whimpered in delight at the intermingled flavors of their blood that swirled together on her tongue. He held her arms above her head, his fingers interlacing with hers, as he continued to move within her. She rolled her hips in time with his gentle, rolling strokes, tangling her legs with his, and whimpered his name with the building urgency. He held her close as they found their paradise again and he didn’t let her go even after the tremors subsided.

They lay there together in the aftermath, exhausted and contented, until the first traces of dawn began to lighten the sky. Then he gathered her in his arms and flew them back to their hut. No one was yet stirring in any of the other huts as he brought them back down to the ground and silently carried her into theirs.

They lay together on their futon, gazing quietly into each others’ eyes. Sesshomaru’s eyes overflowed with love as he looked at her and her heart pounded madly again under his regard. “We’re Mated now,” he whispered at her, his voice alight with surreal wonder.

Rina smiled at him sleepily. “I love you, Sesshomaru.”

“And I, you, Rina, my beloved.” Nuzzling as close together as they possibly could, they drifted off to sleep.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The nightmare was back. But this time she felt a lot more ready for it. The battle with Kumayomaru began as it always did with her kicking his ass in hand-to-hand combat and with Sesshomaru by her side. Then Kumayomaru began to transform into his Bear form. Once again, she felt helpless as he grabbed Sesshomaru to torture him in front of her.
This time, her rage spiraled high with explosive fury. “Oh no you don’t, you sonofabitch!” she
roared at him. For the first time in her nightmares, Kumayomaru looked positively surprised,
 baffled even, as she broke through whatever bonds had always previously managed to make her
 feel like she was slogging through water. That alone was enough to give her delight as she leaped
 into her immense dire wolf form. But this time, Sesshomaru was with her. No more a mindless,
tortured puppet of illusion, he glared back up towards Kumayomaru, who still held him aloft by
the head. Drawing his Bakusaiga, he slashed at the great Bear with a roar and severed the arm that
held him prisoner.

“You will never torment my mate through her dreams again, you pathetic, vile piece of shit!” he
seethed through his lengthening fangs.

Kumayomaru looked disoriented, confused, and with growing fear as they both advanced on him --
Rina in her dire wolf form, black as midnight death, and Sesshomaru rapidly growing into his full
Dog Demon form. The last thing Rina remembered before the nightmare ended was the
satisfaction of their dismembering the Bear together.

Sesshomaru was already awake and watching her sleep with a contented smile upon his face when
she at last opened her eyes. “You beat him,” he whispered to her before he pulled her to him for a
kiss. She moaned against his mouth, feeling better and more energized than she had in weeks. She
wrapped her body around his, her desire spiking again.

“You helped me,” she finally whispered as she felt his arousal heavily against her thigh.

He nodded. “I was there, but you’re the one who broke through your bonds. There was something
attached to the back of your head. I don’t know how he got it there, but I got the feeling that he’d
somehow attached it to you, perhaps back before you escaped, and he’s been using it to weaken
you. But he’d only activate it after he’d transform and go after someone you care for. He was not
happy when you raged out and destroyed that connection.” His evil smile, full of smug satisfaction
at her victory, made her heart turn a few giddy flips.

He began to devour her mouth as he pulled her leg up around his hip so he could enter her, but just
as he did so, they heard InuYasha’s voice hollering his name to see if they were awake a split
second before he barged through the door curtain into their hut.

“Sesshoma-- oh!” InuYasha blinked at them for a moment, reminding Rina a little of a deer in the
headlights. “Shit, sorry!” Then his nose began to twitch as he caught their scent and the significant
event that the changes to their scents heralded. “Oh!” he said again as a wide grin split his face. “Never mind! Definitely not important! Congratulations, you two!” To Rina, he added, “And welcome the rest of the way and officially to the family, little sister!” With that, he made a hasty retreat back out the door.

Rina looked up at Sesshomaru’s humorously exasperated face and collapsed into giggles as they listened to InuYasha’s retreating voice bellowing for Kagome, announcing that she officially had a new sister-in-law. Humor was quickly forgotten, however, when Sesshomaru reminded her exactly what his little brother had just interrupted, picking up where they’d left off.
Chapter Summary

At the Morrigan's request, Koga and Ayame begin training me to master my transformations. We don't have much time left before Kumayomaru is expected to return to slaughter us all and time is of the essence. Meanwhile, Sesshomaru's mother has a secret to reveal. Why can't he remember the events surrounding his prior confrontations with Kumayomaru?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rina lay in bed unable to sleep, her mind roiling over the memories she had detailed to Grandpa, both the ones she had come back to this era with as well as the ones that became more unshadowed as her tale continued -- leaving out the more sensitive, intimate details, of course.

The further along she got in her story with Grandpa, the more her stomach tightened with dread. What was it she had yet to remember? Her mind couldn’t remember, but her heart clearly did. Her chest felt like it was weighted with sorrow and she wasn’t sure she could bear it, whatever it was. Her most recent memory before finding herself in the Well house was still of Sesshomaru looking upon her with eyes deadened with sorrow, telling her to get on with her life because she’d likely not see him again.

That memory had already pained her, but now recalling their having Mated and having been able to see her Mating mark since that memory had returned, those words slashed through her being far more profoundly. Her anxiety kept trying to grasp onto the fear that she had somehow done something wrong and he didn’t want her anymore. She clung, therefore, to her logic with all the strength she possessed.

Something had gone horribly wrong in the battle against Kumayomaru. Something terrible must have happened. His eyes had looked so lifeless. Weary. Broken. Defeated. “I don’t know how long it will take to find Kumayomaru and ensure your safety,” he had said to her. At the moment he’d said it, she had barely known who he was. Why? What had happened that she’d had to fight so hard to recall these events the more the story had poured out?

She longed for her friends. She’d only been able to recall Izumi when she’d first come out of the Well. She hadn’t yet recalled that Izumi knew what she was. It had been as though so much of her brain had been “reset to factory settings”, recalling even less than she had when she’d come out of her catatonia at Kumayomaru’s castle.
She longed for her friends, but she hadn’t yet had the courage to call them. Everything was still too overwhelming, but she needed them.

Swallowing hard, she looked at the clock. It was 11pm. Knowing them, they were awake. Should she call? Should she just go right to their cottage? It felt way too claustrophobic in this damn room. She felt almost as restless as she had the first time she and her wolves had sensed the threat of the Reptile demons. She’d been back a week and she hadn’t yet even had the courage to venture outside of the Shrine to visit the graves of the four who had died...

Rina, it’s time. She could almost swear she heard Sesshomaru’s voice in her head. You need your friends and it’s time.

Yeah, well, I need you too, you fucking idiot.

She swallowed past the growing lump in her throat that longed for her mate and she flung the covers back to climb out of the bed. She threw on the jacket that still had his scent clinging to it, which now almost drove her to her knees.

No! she screamed viciously in her head. If she broke down now, she very well might not have the strength to move again for quite some time. She dragged in ragged, forceful breaths as she scribbled a quick note to Mrs. Higurashi, detailing where she was going and that she’d be back, before she silently left the house.

She broke into a run and let her mind go blessedly blank, focused only on the rhythm of her breaths and how they harmonized with the pounding of her feet. Rina ran eastward until she reached the outskirts of the city before, with a howl, she flashed into her Dire Wolf transformation.

She ran south by southeast, wending her way through the countryside until she smelled the familiar scents of the woods near Izumi and Ryuka’s cottage. Her already-heavy heart, however, sank when she arrived at their cottage and found that they weren’t home. Shit. Of course they weren’t. It was about 2am by this point. They’d be at the club right now. Still in her Wolf form, she emitted a whine of distress.

Wait! A scent! His scent! Her body snapped around as her nose worked frantically to find him. Her heart was already weeping, however, as her more conscious mind realized that it was faint because he hadn’t been here in a long time. Still, she followed it to the little lake several yards away from the house. Here. He’d sat here.
Her heart cracked open as she lifted her muzzle skyward and emitted a long, mournful howl, the kind used by wolves who are lost and trying to find their family. Only, she knew that she’d not hear an answering howl from her mate. Not now. Perhaps never again. Still, the instincts of her Wolf form would not be denied from trying again, so she wailed out another long call.

Finally, she curled up next to the lake, burying her nose into the midnight fur of her tail, and she lay there to wait, emitting heartbroken whines with every exhalation of breath.

Izumi loved it when she got to ride on the back of her lover’s Dragon form. It felt like Ryuka gave her the world every time. Aladdin could keep his flying carpet; gliding through the air astride her Dragon was far superior. It had been a good night at the club. Since re-opening after Rina’s disappearance, they’d managed to make their Karaoke for Kindness event a monthly occurrence, each one more successful than the last. And tonight had been no exception.

Rina would be so proud and happy if she knew, Izumi thought to herself wistfully. Gods, how she missed her best friend! There was so much she wanted to tell her! But the Well, aside from a weird hiccup of energy that Ryuka had sensed last week, had been closed for months and they’d not heard from Sesshomaru since right before he went to petition Ryuka’s ancestors.

Izumi had taken to writing Rina letters and collecting them in a box to give to her whenever Rina was able to come home at last. She reached up and felt the scars of her Mating mark. Once she and Ryuka had figured out how it was possible to make their bond thus official, Ryuka had asked her to marry her. They’d gone to Shibuya to obtain their partnership certificate and had a private little ceremony before consummating the Mating ritual. Izumi had wanted to wait until Rina was back before they had something more akin to an actual wedding, however. Ryuka, of course, had wholeheartedly agreed.

Something’s wrong, Yumi!, she heard Ryuka’s voice in her head, pulling her out of her thoughts and she could feel Ryuka’s tension increase. There’s a scent near our house I don’t recognize.

Izumi, whose senses were now demonically enhanced, scented the breeze. It was still so strange to be able to experience the world more on par with the way Rina always had. And it sent a chill down her spine to smell the scent of a huge and completely foreign Wolf on their property. What the fuck is that? she mentally nudged Ryuka into looking at a huge black mass lying prone near the lake. Suddenly, she gasped. She didn’t need to recognize the scent. She knew exactly who that was. Wait! It’s Rina!
Are you sure? Ryuka worried. She’d been even more protective of Izumi since she’d almost died at the hands of the Reptilians almost a year ago.

I’m positive! Izumi leaped from Ryuka’s back as soon as they were close enough to the ground, but Ryuka blocked her from running to the massive beast.

Careful! Even if that’s her, there’s no telling what the balance is between her human mind and her beast mind! Ryuka approached the curled up Wolf carefully, still in her Dragon form. But as she drew near, she could hear the whimpers. The Wolf was trembling fitfully in its sleep and whines of distress could be heard with every breath as though it were wounded.

Rina? she asked cautiously. The Wolf did not respond. Fuck. Rina? Is that you? She reached out with her tail to nudge the Wolf, coiled and tense, ready to spring to kill should it come awake with hostility.

The Wolf yelped with surprise when Ryuka’s tail made contact and leaped to its feet. Sesshomaru! it cried.

Ohmigods, Rina! It’s really you! Ryuka cried out in relief. Unsettlingly deep emerald eyes blinked at her in fright and confusion.

Finally… Ryuka? Holy shit! Is that you?! Ryuka had forgotten that Rina had never actually seen her in her full Dragon form.

Both Rina and Ryuka transformed quickly back to their normal forms as Izumi came running to them with a blazing speed that she was sure Rina would not remember her having. And as soon as she was close enough, she pounced on them both to drag the three of them together in a tearful embrace.

Rina sat curled on the couch, holding the cup of jasmine tea that Ryuka had made for her. She felt so numb with sorrow, she wasn’t even sure what to say or where to begin. But the sight of the sapphire blue marks on Ryuka’s and Izumi’s necks provided her with ample distraction.
“You guys Mated?!” she blurted with joy. It almost amused her to see their jaws drop with surprise. With a wistful smile, she lifted away the collar of her jacket to reveal her own mark, swirling with an amethyst hue.

“That’s why we didn’t recognize your scent!” Izumi squealed. Her excitement died down, however, when she saw how the smile on her best friend’s face did not reach her eyes. “Rina?” she breathed, remembering how she’d cried out Sesshomaru’s name when she’d awakened, “where is Sesshomaru?”

Rina looked at them desperately, unable to speak around the boulder lodged in her throat.

Ryuka knelt in front of her and held up her hands towards Rina’s temples. “May I?” she asked softly. Rina nodded ardently. It would be so much easier if they could See her memories so she wouldn’t have to verbalize everything all over again. As Ryuka delved into Rina’s memories, she transmitted them to Izumi so she could see, too.

“What the fuck?” she breathed with a frown. “Your memories have a lot of holes in them, Rina.”

“I know,” she answered miserably.

“Did you know that your memories were meddled with or did you think that this was somehow a side effect of some sort of injury?”

“Someone mucked with my memories?!” Rina gasped in outrage. “I wasn’t sure what to think. I’ve been able to fill in a lot of the gaps as I’ve been telling the story to Grandpa the past few days, but the closer I get to the darkest parts, the more afraid I become.”

Ryuka’s focus became more increased as she watched the memories play from the time of Rina’s battle in her apartment to her arrival in the Reptilian village and on up as far as she could. Rina couldn’t help a giggle as she watched her friends’ faces flame up in deep blushes when they came across her more intimate memories with Sesshomaru.

“Oh, my lesbian eyes,” Izumi teased her lightly at one point, squeezing her best friend’s hand when she saw that Rina’s smile barely masked the sorrow that still roared to escape.

“Rina, you’ve been able to fill in a lot of the gaps as you’ve gone along,” Ryuka said gently. “This
memory loss doesn’t feel like a permanent spell. Rather, it feels as though they were locked away for you to reacquaint yourself with them more slowly. It’s likely because the full force of them would have been too much for your brain to handle all at once. Are you up for telling us the rest?”

“I’m scared,” Rina whispered. “And I’m sorry I didn’t come to you guys sooner--”

“Shut it,” Izumi said with a firm gentleness. “You’re handling things as best you can and the way that you’ve needed to. We’re just happy that you’re back.” She flung her arms around Rina’s trembling shoulders to hug her fiercely.

“Let me get you some more tea,” Ryuka said, taking Rina’s cup with a gentle, sisterly kiss to her forehead. Rina downed two more cups of the heavenly jasmine tea before she drew a deep breath to continue her story for her friends.

Rina and Sesshomaru spent the day isolated together in their hut, locked inside their own little world, discovering the plethora of delights that came with their newly-forged Mating bond. That night, however, InuYasha threatened to drag them to dinner naked. The news of their having completed the Mating ritual had, of course, spread like wildfire among their friends and Ayame had insisted on throwing them a celebratory dinner to congratulate them.

“I suppose I could use a little break and some food,” Rina laughed to her mate as she tried to stretch out the kinks in some of her sore muscles. “Plus, she could probably use a break and some ice.” She pointed down to her vag with such a droll expression that Sesshomaru couldn’t help the bark of laughter that came out.

“Can you imagine the teasing that Izumi and Ryuka would be throwing at us right now?” he chuckled.

Rina laughed as she awkwardly stood to her feet and hobbled to put on her clothes. “Oh gods, can you imagine how Izumi would have shrieked if she’d caught us like InuYasha did earlier?”

“If her lesbian eyes had suffered when she caught us almost in the act, I think they may have straight-up burned this time around!” They broke down into snorting guffaws as they imagined the various reactions of their long-missed friends.
They walked out of their hut, arms wrapped about each other, to go join the others near the hut that
Ayame, Koga, and their pups currently shared, where the outdoor settings provided space for the
huge potluck everyone had been preparing all day. As they walked down the path, Rina caught
Sesshomaru giving her a contrite glance. “Hmm?”

“I don’t regret a single moment of today, but I feel bad for making you so sore,” he said sheepishly.

Rina arched a brow in amusement before she reached over and flicked him on the nose -- a
throwback to one of her first interactions with him -- and laughed at his bark of humorous outrage.
“Don’t you dare feel bad!” she chuckled as she tightened her arm about his waist and nuzzled her
face against his chest. “It’s been completely worth it and,” she added, lowering her voice, “it’s
even added a bit to it, if you know what I mean.” She raked him with a sultry grin and she, through
their Mating bond, felt the heat of his body increase.

“Well,” he said at last, “once dinner is over and we’re allowed to escape, I know of a hot spring
relatively nearby that could assist with our collective aches.”

Rina purred at the thought. “That sounds like heaven,” she sighed.

Ayame greeted them on the path to her borrowed hut with a shriek of glee and a pouncing hug
while Koga observed with a smug grin.

“It’s about fucking time, really!” he chortled. His humorous emphasis couldn’t be missed as he
looked all too pleased with his groaner of a joke. Sesshomaru made use of the gesture he’d seen
Kagome and Rina employ more times than he could count, facepalming himself with an audible
smack. Rina made use of a different gesture entirely and flipped Koga off with a chortle, which
provoked howls of laughter from the two Wolves.

Ayame and Rina, then, proceeded to ignore Koga entirely as Ayame shrieked her exuberant
demand to see Rina’s mark. Rina shyly pulled aside the hem of her robe so Ayame could see the
already-healed puncture scars that shimmered slightly with the aura of their bond. Rina had already
noticed that the aura was a different color with every Mated pair. Sesshomaru had explained to her
that every aura was, essentially, the combined color of their two individual auras, tuned to a
frequency that was most powerfully efficient for their bond and for the powers and abilities they
shared together.

Ayame and Koga’s Mating marks glowed with a crimson opalescence. Kagome and InuYasha’s
were a swirling golden pearl. Rina’s and Sesshomaru’s gave off a royal amethyst hue.

Once Ayame had gotten her gander at Rina’s mark, she grabbed Rina’s wrist and dragged her at full speed to where Kagome rested on a cushion near the banquet setup, trying to find a comfortable angle around her rounding belly as she reclined against her own doting mate. As they approached, Rina could see Kagome’s nose working. Her senses had already been heightened before, but with her pregnancy, Kagome’s sense of smell rivaled pretty much every demon residing in the village. She turned around and pinned Rina and Ayame with an eager stare before she began trying to awkwardly struggle to her feet.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Inuyasha said to her with stern affection as he held her fast against him.
“You’ve been busting your ass all day, you little workaholic, and you’re not getting up for anything but the bathroom til after dinner.”

Kagome turned around and speared her mate with a malevolent glare. “Inuyasha…” her voice warned, “Si--” she cut herself off.

Normally, such was enough to get Inuyasha to quail, but this time he held his ground and pinned her with a gimlet stare of his own. “’Sit’ me all you like, Kagome, but even you know that not giving yourself a break could be bad for you, not just bad for the baby! You’ve been training so hard! So, sue me for worrying about you!” His voice was resentful, but it was impossible to miss the tinge of hurt that darkened his golden eyes.

Rina and Ayame exchanged a nervous, awkward glance at each other.

Thankfully, Kagome’s rising, pregnant temper deflated with a sigh. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Inuyasha.” She turned in his arms to plant a contrite kiss on his lips. His demeanor instantly relaxed with relief and eagerly returned her affection. “I know you’re just trying to look out for me. I don’t mean to be even more quick-tempered than I normally am.” Everyone within earshot winced when Kagome’s mood swung from pissed off to tearful. “Damn these goddamn motherfucking hormones!” she snarled, dashing a couple of wayward tears from her cheeks.

“Hey, Rina!” Inuyasha called for her hastily. “Weren’t you going to show Kagome something?”

The distraction worked and Rina knelt quickly before the pregnant, hormonal Miko to show her Mating mark.
Sure enough, Kagome’s mood fluctuations swung back up toward jubilant as she emitted a squeal that made every demon within a 10-mile radius cringe to cover their ears.

“I’m sorry!” she laughed. “I’m just so excited and happy for you and Sesshomaru! And I’m excited that I officially get to call you my sister! All I had growing up was my little brother, and gods how I miss him, but I always wanted a sister!”

Rina’s jaw dropped. All these months since she’d met Kagome and somehow it had never fully connected for her that this was the older sister of her co-worker and friend, Sota. And when she sheepishly said as much, Kagome crowed with laughter.

“Don’t worry about it,” she chuckled. “With everything that’s been going on, I really can’t say that I’m surprised or that I blame you. We never really got a chance to talk about it since you got here. We’ve been far more focused on being ready when Kumayomaru comes.”

Rina was tempted to tell her what the Morrigan had informed her as to when Kumayomaru would arrive, but she internally shook her head.

This has given her something to be happy about. That news can wait until tomorrow.

She was jostled out of her thoughts when she realized InuYasha had said something to her that she’d completely missed. “Sorry about that, brother, I was lost in my thoughts for a moment.”

Are you ok? You looked troubled, wherever you were, he asked her silently.

I have news about Kumayomaru. I don’t want Kagome to know until tomorrow. I just want her to be able to enjoy the happiness she’s gleaned from today. Then she projected her memories of her and Sesshomaru’s encounter with Lady Raven, the Morrigan, from the night before as well as what the goddess had had to say regarding when they could expect Kumayomaru to come for them.

Alright, he finally responded as he finished processing the memory vision. We’ll worry about the implications of that timing later. At least we have another month to prepare.

Rina didn’t have a chance to ask him what he meant by that because at that moment, the setting sun dipped below the horizon and his hair began to darken to black and his eyes from gold to brown. Her heart clenched in horror. Fucking duh! Oh fuck. Oh fuck fuck fuck fuck fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck! She kept her face neutral lest Kagome realize that something was wrong.
Inside, she was screaming. InuYasha would be human the night that Kumayomaru was expected to launch his assault.

She sensed Sesshomaru sidling up to her side a moment before he grasped her hand in his and, through their mark, she felt him seek to bolster her against her rising panic. One look at his face made it clear that he’d already thought of this the previous night when the Morrigan gave them that piece of news. **Let it go, Firefly. You deserve to enjoy today no less than Kagome. Let it go for now and we’ll worry about it tomorrow.**

Thankfully, at that moment, Koga stepped up to call everyone’s attention so he could get the feast started.

“Hey, you pack of mutts!” he barked, succinct as always, and grinned as the roar of conversations dulled. “I don’t know about the humans here, but my Pack and I have been trying to take bets as to when Sesshomaru and Rina would actually finally get it over with and Mate already!” Rina and Sesshomaru grinned awkwardly at each other as snickers and giggles already began to scatter through the crowd.

“Well, I’m here to announce that none of us won the bet because they took a fuck-ton longer than any of us thought!” He turned his cheeky, smug grin in their direction. “But that’s ok because they finally took the leap last night and are now officially Mated!” The scattered chuckles became a collective roar of approval, with the Wolves drowning out everyone else, naturally.

“So!” Koga gleefully continued, “we’re here to celebrate Rina and Sesshomaru and to wish them the utmost happiness they deserve and then some! These two have been through hell to be together and it is mine and Ayame’s hope that their bond will carry them through whatever other hells they face, whether it’s the one we know is coming soon or any others that happen along their path!”

Another roar from the Pack and some interspersed screeches of agreement from Kagome, Miroku, and Sango. Rina laughed as she felt Sesshomaru press a kiss to her temple.

“So, I’ll shut the hell up so we can get to chowing down, but first I want to point out that this feast came about through the efforts of our lovely sister, Kagome, and my beautiful mate, Ayame! They were both so excited to hear the news this morning that they, along with Sango, worked hard to make this happen. Enjoy and dig in!”

Rina hadn’t eaten since lunch the previous day and was actually quite startled to realize just how hungry she was! Especially given the marathon she and Sesshomaru had engaged in for most of the day. To her delight, she found that Ayame had made two large cauldrons of her decadent venison stew. She and Sesshomaru grabbed plates and bowls and helped themselves to the generous spread, making sure to thank every cook profusely, and started to make their way to where they could sit with Kagome and InuYasha.

They looked up and saw InuYasha struggling to balance several plates of food, most of which, they knew, were for Kagome. Sesshomaru chuckled. “Guard my food for me a moment, would you? I’m going to go help InuYasha before he has an accident.” Rina laughed as she saw Kagome grinning and laughing sheepishly from her cushion.
“Gods, I hate feeling helpless,” she chuckled wistfully. “But it’s cute as hell to see InuYasha and Sesshomaru getting along so well now. It seriously is such a miracle, you have no idea.” Rina smiled as she listened to her sister-in-law and followed her genuinely affectionate gaze to their mates, who reached them at last, carefully balancing the multitude of plates and bowls between them and trading good-natured jibes at each others’ expense.

A few minutes later, Ayame was able to sit next to Rina and murmur in her ear, “So, tell me, just how sore are you?” She emphasized the question with a wink. Kagome overheard and scooted closer to partake of the girl talk.

“Sore as fuck,” Rina muttered back to them with a sniggering grin.

“Well, no wonder,” Kagome chortled, “what with all the racket I heard you two making in the woods last night.”

“Oh, shit! We woke you up?!” Rina guffawed and Ayame’s laughter joined hers.

“No, not directly!” Kagome was laughing hard enough now that she was nearing the point of tears. “I woke up cause I had to pee…”

“Gotta love the magically shrinking bladder that comes with pregnancy!” Ayame interjected, causing Kagome to laugh harder.

“Right?! Anyway, I had to pee and I was still fairly asleep when I stumbled out to do my business, but I heard you and Sesshomaru crashing about in the woods and I woke up enough I couldn’t go back to sleep for ages!”

“Oh fuck, I’m sorry!” Rina’s hand slapped over her mouth to try to disguise her mirth a little since she had just taken another bite of her stew.

“Oh, not at all!” Kagome waved away her apology. “Scared the hell out of me at first, but once I realized what was going on, that’s when I couldn’t go back to sleep!”

“Hey, are you, by any chance, the reason that InuYasha barged in on us this morning?” Rina
Ayame’s jaw dropped as she looked at her pregnant friend. “You didn’t tell me that part!”

Kagome was gasping for breath at this point. “Yes, I’m sorry! That was totally my fault! I woke him up at the ass-crack of dawn to bet him that you and Sesshomaru finally made it official last night and he took me up on it! He finally got so impatient to find out, he decided that he’d go wake you guys up by stomping on in under the guise of needing to ask you guys something completely unrelated. Neither of us intended for him to actually walk in on you guys just getting busy again!”

“So,” Ayame interjected with an amused grin on her face, “we’re apparently being overheard.” She nodded her head in the direction of their mates, who sat nearby with chopsticks halfway to their mouths, which were set into deeply reddened-yet-amused faces.

“Not hard for us to listen in even without demon hearing!” Koga chortled.

“Yeah!” InuYasha agreed. “You three started out all quiet and conspiratorial and you’ve only been getting steadily louder by the sentence!”

Rina looked over at Sesshomaru, who couldn’t hide his amusement to save his neck. “Well,” he, at last, said with a shrug, “they’re not wrong.”

The girls collapsed in laughter as they heard their mates’ feedback on their volume and then went back to their conversation, unrepentantly discussing their own experiences with the Mating ritual. Fuck it. They’d all gotten rather used to the irreverent and brazen ways of the Wolves that currently outnumbered them all.

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As promised, Sesshomaru took Rina to a hot spring not terribly far from the village once they’d eaten their fill and enjoyed the company of their friends and family. They’d thanked Ayame, Kagome, and Sango for their organizing the feast as well as everyone who had contributed food.

Rina sighed with contentment as she relaxed against Sesshomaru’s chest and enjoyed the hot water that soothed her aches.
“Why can’t things just stay perfect like this?” she murmured. “At least for a good, long, indefinite while?” She felt Sessho smile against her hair.

“That’s how I felt when I woke up next to you in the alcove. I didn’t want to leave, didn’t want to have to deal with the shit that awaited us in the outside world. That was the first morning I’d felt any real, actual peace ever in my entire existence.”

She smiled as she listened and nestled back against him when he tightened his arms about her. “Well, my existence hasn’t been nearly so long, but yeah, to scale, I get what you’re saying.”

“Well, glad to know that I didn’t need to wait two days for you two to get it over with!” the Morrigan’s voice broke into their solitude.

Rina’s eyes flew open and she felt Sesshomaru tense behind her. She came dangerously close to blurting something snarky about their peace having been disturbed, but she was thankfully able to keep that thought from flying out of her mouth.

“Yeah, I know, I’m sorry,” the Morrigan said, making it clear she’d heard the thoughts anyway. “But, really, the sooner we can get this conversation over with, the sooner, hopefully, the two of you and your families will have more of that peace you’re wishing for.”

“Sorry about that, my Queen,” Rina said sheepishly.

“I’m a goddess of war, death, and destruction, but I’m not entirely unreasonable,” the Raven woman waved away her apology. “Hell, if it were me and someone was abruptly disturbing a private moment between me and Cu Chulainn, I’d probably feel more than a little disgruntled myself.” Her gaze was momentarily far away and her expression lapsed into a wistful, “if only” sort of expression.

“Well, at least you didn’t come barging in on us in the act,” Sesshomaru replied in dry humor.

The Morrigan’s laugh sounded like the cawing of many ravens, spreading goosebumps across Rina’s flesh, and yet she was clearly laughing in mirthful enjoyment. “Hoo boy, I heard about that!” she cackled. She looked at them. “I like you, Sesshomaru. You’re a warrior who’s learned to find his sense of humor. Were you Celtic, I’d wish you to be one of my own warriors. But, alas,” she shook her head, still smiling. “I will look after you to the best of my abilities because of your
now-solidified tie to my daughter here without offending the gods that hold sway over you.”

“Your… your daughter?” Rina asked in confusion.

“Yes, in a manner of speaking.” the Morrigan nodded. “The bean sídhe are all my daughters and your mother was no different.” Rina’s jaw dropped at those words, but she maintained her silence. No way in hell did she want to interrupt the Great Phantom Queen.

“While I held you in catatonia during your captivity, Sesshomaru was able to learn of who I am because your friend, Izumi, had witnessed your tapping into your bean sídhe powers when she was nearly mortally wounded. Her girlfriend, Ryuka, had recalled the tales of her mother’s visit to Ireland, where she had witnessed bean sídhe keening for the impending deaths of their charges, and she was able to utilize your modern technology to, with Sesshomaru’s help, discern my identity.” She looked at him at that moment. “I must thank you, young demon, for respecting my wishes in not relating that information to Katarina before it was time.”

Sessho inclined his head to her. “Of course, my lady. I had no wish to have your wrath focused in my direction, after all.” He smirked at her and she laughed another crow’s cackle.

“Very good!” Then she turned back to Rina and continued her tale. “One of the bean sídhe that Ryuka’s mother encountered was, in fact, your own mother, Katarina. Ryuka’s mother is a Dragon of Far-Seeing and she was able to See that your mother was destined to bear a daughter. Your mother wished to live again because she had fallen in love with one of my warriors, a man I’d blessed who’d fought alongside Robert the Bruce in days when the Old Worship had been all but purged in those lands and the gods and goddesses forgotten. Despite the heavily Christian presence, your father was able to see me ever since he was a small boy. I trained him myself in the art of war and when he became a man grown, he gave me his oath. He was the first and last warrior I’d collected from the battlefield in centuries. He gave his life in battle, seeking Scotland’s freedom from the tyranny of Brittania.”

The Morrigan tore herself from her memories briefly to look at Rina, who sat unmoving in her mate’s arms with widened eyes.

“My father…” she whispered. She thought back to the collection of tartans her father, whom she remembered as having been a university professor of Celtic lore and history, had possessed when she was little. Tartans of varying patterns and purpose that had belonged to Clan Campbell from that time period. “Those tartans were his actual tartans,” she whispered. She felt Sesshomaru’s curiosity, so she grasped his hand and opened her memories to him.

She remembered the picture of her parents when they’d gotten married. Her father had worn his best dress tartan.
“He’d worn that tartan when he married his first wife, the wife he’d had in that lifetime,” the Morrigan explained. “Their’s was an arranged marriage and they had no children. He died in battle not long thereafter.”

Rina gasped as another memory surfaced. She’d been maybe about 4, two years before her parents had died. She’d gone into her father’s study to look at the tartans on the wall that he’d told so many stories about. She’d found him kneeling by a chest, holding a tattered and stained battle tartan with a peculiar, sad expression on his face. She hadn’t understood because she was so young but, recalling the memory now, she realized that the look on his face had been a haunted one.

“That’s the tartan your father wore the day he died and was claimed by me to the afterlife to become one of my Wolves,” the Morrigan said softly.

“So, what happened?” Rina asked hoarsely.

“You don’t want to know the circumstances of his death in that life, child,” the Great Queen answered gently. “It was a battlefield death and no matter what the songs say, there’s no glory in it. They’re only lies meant to try to make the likely possibility of dying by the blade of an enemy a little less frightening. The reality that warriors such as your father faced were far less kind. And that was no less true at the hands of the oppressive English army. Leave it at that, child. Trust me.” She then took a deep breath.

“That’s why I’d make sure to snatch up the souls of my chosen and bring them to where they could find as ample a reward for their sacrifice as possible. Warriors like your father would often not be found for burial because I would not just take their souls, I would take their bodies as well and give them the ability to shapeshift. Essentially, I’d turn them into what the Church would swear were ‘demons’. And, whenever I could, I’d give them over to Bran for them to be reincarnated with their abilities still intact.”

“So, it’s from my father I inherited the ability to become a Wolf?” Rina asked softly.

“Yes, child. And it gave me no small amount of happiness to have your parents reincarnated so they could enjoy the love they were denied in their previous lives. Your mother was reincarnated with some of her latent bean sídhe abilities, but she wasn’t really meant to. Those are Phantom abilities, unlike your father’s ability to Wolf-shift. But the combination of their abilities that were passed to you is why you’re able to shift into multiple different forms. And cursing death upon people the way you were able to with the Reptilians was actually a bit of a surprise to me. Bean sídhe can’t actually do that, and yet when you keened for what you reasonably thought was your friend’s demise, you were able to tap even deeper into my own power of death.”

The Morrigan took a deep breath. “I don’t know if that makes any sense. But you must be careful,
Rina. That’s not an ability you’re supposed to have and tapping into it could exact a much heavier cost than was incurred last time.”

“Wait, what?” Rina finally blurted, completely confused.

“You didn’t know?” the Morrigan breathed, sorrow and compassion stealing over her face.

“No, she didn’t,” Sesshomaru spoke up. He hung his head in shame.

“It’s not your fault, Sesshomaru. Your telling her would have revealed things she would not have yet been ready or able to deal with and it was not your place to be the bearer of this difficult information.” Turning back to Rina, she said, “Do you remember cursing those lizards to die before the next sunrise?”

“Oh, shit…” Rina whispered. “Yes.”

“Kumayomaru would have perhaps killed the whole village regardless when he came for you, it’s true. But you didn’t have proper control over your rage or the words you spoke.” The Morrigan played the memory of her curse. Rina’s face paled. “You were focused on them, but your words specified that none of them would live, that you’d kill them all. Your rage spun your power out of your control and placed a death-pall over them all -- the Reptilians in your apartment and everyone in the village at the time you had decreed -- and solidified Kumayomaru as the instrument of your curse.” She cast her eyes downward. “I’m so sorry. I know this is a horrid thing to hear.”

Rina felt like she’d just been punched repeatedly in the stomach. She looked up when the goddess gently called her name.

“Rina, you need to train hard in your powers over the next few weeks. Sesshomaru can help you learn to control the base of them, but it’s imperative that you learn to transform into your other forms.”

“Other forms?” Rina asked, feeling increasingly stupid.

“Yes. You’ve already discovered your basic Dire Wolf form. You also possess a more anthropomorphic wolf form, but you also have your Ultimate Wolf form, which rivals even the size of Sesshomaru’s full Daiyokai transformation. I don’t know if there’s enough time to train you up.
to reach your Ultimate form, but your Anthro and Dire forms will hopefully be enough for you both
to end this conflict with that pestilent Bear once and for all.”

The Great Queen rose to her feet. “There is still so much I need and want to tell you about your
parents, but I’ve already thrown a lot of information your way for one evening.
"Sesshomaru, you need to help her to become more acquainted with her powers and abilities. I will
return in a week to see if she’s yet capable of harnessing her transformations with more control.”

Sesshomaru nodded. “Yes, my Queen. It will be done.”

“Oh, and Sesshomaru? You are also going to need to contact your mother. She has some things she
needs to tell you and it is time for you to know them. You must also entreat her to be here for when
Kumayomaru comes for you. I know not yet what may be. I foresee several possibilities for this
battle’s outcome. Some of them, if they turn out in some of these… less happy ways… your mother
very well may be needed.” She leveled an apologetic glance at them for her cryptic words before
she faded from their sight with a farewell.

Rina trembled. She was suddenly so cold despite the exceeding warmth of the hot springs that still
enveloped her.

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Sesshomaru hadn’t seen his mother since she’d rendered her aid after Rin’s death. And she clearly
had not expected to hear from him nearly so soon. Mother, I need to see you. It’s urgent, he
called to her mentally through their usually-dormant familial bond. He felt her surprise followed by
a touch of motherly delight, though tentative, and she said she would be there within the hour.

He met her on the outskirts of the village by Rin and Kohaku’s graves. He’d waited for her here,
bringing some of Rin’s favorite flowers to leave at her shrine, his heart aching still. It actually
surprised him to realize just how much he’d finally managed to heal, however. A year and a half
ago, he’d been shattered beyond what he thought possible to repair. And now, though his heart still
ached with missing his daughter, he found himself surrounded by family and friends, overflowing
with affection, and Mated to the most incredible woman.

“You’re looking well, my son,” he heard his mother’s voice gently behind him.

He rose from Rin’s grave shrine to greet her with a bow. “Mother,” he greeted her formally,
“welcome.”
Kimi strode up to him to place a hand on his face with an affectionate stroke. “I’m so, so sorry about what happened to your daughter, Sesshomaru.” She produced a bouquet of flowers out of thin air and turned from him to place them on Rin’s grave. Then she produced some flowers he’d never seen before, tied in two separate bouquets joined by a red string and placed them in between Rin and Kohaku’s graves, each bouquet leaning against a shrine. “These flowers are my wish that they are reincarnated together and have another chance at the life they were supposed to have but were deprived of,” she explained to him softly.

Sesshomaru felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes. He didn’t know what to say.

“Ahh, my son, you have finally learned to cry. To grieve.” Kimi gave him a proud yet compassionate look. And then she smiled when she saw the mark upon his neck. “Who is she?” She laughed at her son’s uncharacteristic blush. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“She’s exactly why I called you here, Mother.”

“Oh?”

He explained the situation they faced, allowing her to pull his memories. When Kimi pulled back from the visions, her eyes were darkened and red with rage. “That infernal Bear!” she spat, her hands shaking as she fought for control. “Ever the walking disease of malice!” She was so angry that Sesshomaru was rather startled and wary to see tears of rage escape her reddened eyes.

“The Morrigan said you’d have some things to tell me, Mother,” he said quietly. “Does it have anything to do with why I can’t remember anything about my encounters with Kumayomaru?”

Kimi sighed heavily. “It does,” she answered at last. “Let’s find somewhere we can sit, my son. This is likely going to be hard for you to hear.”

He followed her until they reached the river and seated himself beside her. She was silent for several moments, clearly lost in her thoughts and struggling with where to begin, before she finally spoke.

“When you were born, you were the light of my life,” she began softly. “And for those first years of your childhood, I doted on you with all the love and affection that a mother is supposed to give to her children. I was a powerful Inu Daiyokai, after all, and wife of an equally powerful Inu.
Surely, I could afford to believe that I was powerful enough to protect my son from all harm. “Kumayomaru ruined that illusion for me when he began his relentless quarrel with your father. When he met nothing but failure against Toga on the battlefield, he began to attempt more devious means to exact his revenge. Naturally, for a creature such as himself, his eye fell upon us, Toga’s family.”

Sesshomaru heard his mother’s voice begin to thicken with tears and, without thinking, he reached for her to grasp her hand. She returned the gesture with a tight, loving squeeze and did not relinquish her grip as though fortifying herself.

“You, obviously, were his primary target. For how better could he cripple his enemy than by throwing him into a pit of grief to mourn his child? When you were still very small, still such a whelp, he lured your father away into a battle. However, while your father and his forces fought the army that Kumayomaru threw at him, Kumayomaru himself came to our castle. He stole onto the grounds, silently killing the guards he came up against, and he snuck into your window.” Now Kimi’s voice started to grate with long-buried sobs that she was beginning to lose control over. Her eyes were haunted as the memory played across her mind.

Suddenly it was like a locked box in Sesshomaru’s own mind sprang open...

He’d been awoken by a strange, unfamiliar smell, and it had frightened him. All his life, he’d been surrounded by those familiar, those he could trust. Mommy and Daddy would never let a stranger into the castle and not so late at night. He’d awoken on his bed to see the huge stranger looming over him. He’d tried to cry out for his mother, but the Bear had grabbed him by the throat and squeezed his windpipe so hard he couldn’t make a sound.

“Do you want to know what happens to you if you scream?” the Bear’s silky, threatening voice asked the terrified child. He pointed over to Sesshomaru’s nanny, still sleeping mere feet away. Sesshomaru whimpered, wanting nothing more than to wake her up so she could go and get Mommy.

With a swiftness that horrified the young demon, Kumayomaru drew his blade and slashed out, severing the woman’s head before his eyes. Sesshomaru couldn’t help it. He tried to scream at this brutal first taste of horrific violence, but the sound merely came out in a rasping squeak.

“Now, be a good little boy. I need you to stay alive so I can kill you before your father’s eyes.”

The little demon was so frightened that he soiled himself and he cried as shame and embarrassment mixed with the terror he already so starkly felt.
Mommy! his mind screamed. And screamed. And screamed.

Sesshomaru? His mother’s voice sounded in his head with alarm and he cried harder from the relief. Sesshomaru, what’s wrong my baby?

His mind babbled, playing the vision of his nanny’s decapitation over and over in an incoherent wail.

Then his mommy was there. She launched through the wall at Kumayomaru, roaring in an absolutely mindless rage. “Get your hands off of my baby!” she shrieked in a guttural howl as her features began to rapidly change. She deftly grabbed Sesshomaru from the grasp of the Bear, tossed him to land harmlessly on his futon, and kicked the Bear so hard he was flung through the outer wall of Sesshomaru’s bedroom into the courtyard outside.

He wanted to hide, wanted to cover his eyes, but he didn’t want to let his mother -- his light and his safety -- out of his sight. He crawled from the bed, trying not to look at the ruined body of his nanny, his best friend, and huddled himself against the opening that his mother had torn into the wall.

His mother, now fully transformed, was enormous, but the Bear was the stuff of nightmares. His young mind couldn’t even comprehend his sheer size much less the oily energy of malice that radiated from the monster. And yet his mommy, even in the face of this evil, did not hesitate to rip into him. As terrified as he was, he couldn’t help but watch with breathless fascination as his mommy battled the monster with an awesome rage and skill. His father was an incredible warrior who had, of course, captured Sesshomaru’s hero worship. But his mother? She surpassed his great father in that moment, both in skill and in passion.

What terrified him was that the monstrous bear looked like he could possibly best his mother with his own skill and lustful cruelty.

Daddy! his mind screamed in desperation, hoping with all his little heart that his father would hear him somehow. Daddy, help us! Moments later, he felt his father’s fear through their bond.

Then… Sesshomaru! Hang on, son! I’m coming!
Sesshomaru was yanked out of his thoughts when a horrible screaming howl split his ears and shook the castle wall he clung to. His heart lifted with a brief feeling of hope as he realized his mother had torn open the Bear’s chest with her venomous claws. Yet, it was his mother screaming?

Mommy?! he cried out. She was staggering. Blood flowed like a river from a deep gash in her throat.

Sesshomaru… Run… she gasped in his mind. Run, my baby!

He couldn’t move! He was too scared! Mommy! he cried again, completely frozen.

RUN!!! she screamed in his head, the power of command in her mental voice propelling him into compulsory action. He tore through his room, crying out when he tripped over the headless body of his nanny. Sobs of terror wracked his chest as he scrambled to his feet, his tiny claws leaving gouges in the floor in the process.

Sesshomaru, an evil voice purred in his head, elongating his name in a singsong fashion that drove his fear to even greater heights. Then it whispered the words that could terrify any child past all reason: I’m coming to get you.

His little feet carried him blindly through the castle. Moments after the Bear’s sadistic threat poured across his mind like poisonous, oily tar, he could hear the demon crashing through the walls, tearing down the castle as he went, as he sought the fleeing child. The Bear was so fast! Three ginormous strides and he caught up with Sesshomaru as he hurtled out of the castle to run towards the front gates.

He screamed as the Bear, now back in his towering human form, grabbed him up by the scruff of the neck. “Where’s my mommy?!” he shrieked as he tried to beat the Bear with his tiny fists.

Kumayomaru laughed at him malevolently as he dragged the little boy close to leer in his face. “If your mommy isn’t already dead, she’s dying from the cut I left on her throat,” he sneered.

Sesshomaru screamed in rage and grief and lashed out with his claws, raking four tiny gashes over the Bear’s left eye. The gashes glowed green with the venom he’d unleashed and burrowed the cuts deeper, ensuring that the Bear would carry these scars for the remainder of his life. The Bear howled with surprise and pain, reflexively dropping the little boy to cover his face with his hands. Clearly, he hadn’t expected the tyke to be able to cause him any actual pain whatsoever.
Sesshomaru didn’t hesitate. The moment his feet touched the ground, he bolted off, mentally screaming for his father again. He’d always been quick as a child, but now he was running at speeds he’d not before reached. His blood ran cold as he heard the Bear’s roar of rage. Oh gods, he was huge again! The ground shook under his feet as Kumayomaru gave chase, gaining on him despite the speed he now ran with. He cried as he felt the nightmarish demon gain to within a couple of strides of him and he braced himself for the end.

“Sesshomaru!” he heard his father’s voice bellow. “Get down!” He didn’t even think. He nimbly turned on a pin and dove back and to the right, rolling to hide in a bush as Toga exploded into his immense Dog form and tackled Kumayomaru to the ground.

Between Kimi’s venom gashed into his chest, Sesshomaru’s venom coursing through the blood vessels of his face, and now the shock of Toga pummeling into him, Kumayomaru no longer had the strength to hold onto his Bear form.

The last thing Sesshomaru saw was his father flashing back to his human form to brandish the Tetsusaiga against their enemy. “Wind Scar!” Toga bellowed with a thunderous roar, swinging the sword and releasing its lethal power against the great Bear. The last thing Sesshomaru heard before he fainted into unconsciousness was Kumayomaru screaming…

Sesshomaru gasped as was finally freed from the grip of that memory. Shaken, he looked over to his mother, still sitting beside him on the river bank. He reached over to brush her throat. Despite the glamour she had up, he could feel the ridge of the scar that Kumayomaru left and she smiled at him sadly.

“Why couldn’t I remember?” he asked hoarsely.

“After your father sent Kumayomaru fleeing from the Wind Scar, you wouldn’t wake up. You were so traumatized, you were terrified of coming back to us. In your mind, you couldn’t even believe that I was still alive, that your father had come just in time, and that you were safe. So, I used my power to lock away as much of the memory as possible.” She paused to look up at him. “I’d never before attempted memory magic, but I was desperate to get you back and I didn’t know what else to do.”

Sesshomaru grasped his mother’s hand and squeezed, his heart breaking at the recovered memories. “So, what happened after that?”
“Kumayomaru is the reason I became distant with you ever after,” she said softly. “He cured me of my arrogance in thinking I was strong enough to protect you from all dangers and he taught me that having emotional bonds could put my loved ones in danger to be used against me. So I distanced myself from you and your father. Toga tried to get me to realize that I was being a coward, but I just couldn’t see it.

“Ultimately, it’s why we divorced, you know. Ours was initially a political marriage, but I’d grown to love him with all my heart even though we never went so far as to forge the Mating bond. After Kumayomaru, I couldn’t face the fear that I would lose either of you, so I hardened my heart in hopes I’d be able to bear it without being destroyed should that happen. So, Toga decided that he could no longer endure our marriage that had blossomed into love only to be frozen in the ice of my fear and he left me. I can see why he later ended up falling in love with Izayoi,” Kimi said contemplatively. “That human woman, so much more fragile than any demon, yet unafraid to risk everything to follow her heart. It’s easy to understand why your father ultimately chose to consummate a Mating bond with her, even.”

Sesshomaru looked at his mother as she spoke and his heart ached with what he saw. Kimi still loved Toga. Had never stopped loving him. It had broken her when he left, but she’d already had so many years of practiced, ironclad stoicism that she had hidden it remarkably well.

“I’m so sorry, Mother,” he finally said. She looked over at him with a gentle smile.

“Don’t be, my beloved son. After all, without these events, you would not have your younger half-brother and I would not have adopted an additional son.”

“Wait, what?” Sesshomaru started in surprise.

“When you were enveloped in your grief at the loss of your daughter, InuYasha never left your side. His loyalty to you further touched my heart and I promised him that from that day forth, he was my son as well. And I promised Izayoi that I would look after him evermore.”

“Well, then, have you yet heard that you’re essentially about to be a grandmother?” Sesshomaru teased her lightly.

Kimi whipped her head around and speared him with a look. “Really?”

“Kagome is carrying.”
“Oh!” she squealed with delight. “I must look in on them! But first, I must meet your mate! I don’t suppose you two are going to produce children anytime soon?” She looked at him with such intense hope that Sesshomaru couldn’t help but blush.

“Well, Rina and I have talked about it a bit, but we’re not sure yet. It’s not something we’d ever really had cause to consider individually in our lives until recently and it’s not something I wish to force upon her.”

Kimi smiled broadly at him. “That’s good. Parenthood is not something that should be forced. But I do find myself hoping that she will decide that it’s what she wants.”

“I hope so too,” he said softly, picturing his mate for what had to be the billionth time with a belly rounded and full with their child. It made his body harden to think of it.

“One last thing before I take you to meet her, though,” Sesshomaru promised. “Mother, why do I not remember much about my other few encounters with Kumayomaru?”

“That, I think, may have been a side effect of my locking away as much of your memories of your first encounter with him,” she said apologetically. “If your other encounters with the Bear had traumatizing elements to them, then it might be that they were caught up in the long-reaching effects of my spell and locked away, too.” She paused thoughtfully for a moment. “Now that I’ve unlocked your first memories of him, I would think that your other memories will gradually return as well.”

“Fair enough.” He smiled at her and offered his arm. “Shall we?”

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“Very good, Rina!” Koga barked with approval and Rina couldn’t help but preen a little with pride. She had just achieved her first Anthro transformation with Koga and Ayame’s thorough and grueling coaching. She hadn’t managed it last week within the initial timeline given to her and Sesshomaru by the Morrigan, so when the Great Queen had dropped by for her promised status check, Rina had knelt morosely before her, feeling like a failure.

“Rina, you are still so new to your gifts,” the Morrigan had assured her. “Yes, it’s vital that you start getting the hang of it, but you’re only going to defeat yourself further with this demeanor.”
Koga and Ayame, not realizing that Lady Raven was in Sesshomaru and Rina’s hut, had barged in to ask something and had been thoroughly shocked to meet the goddess they’d been hearing about. Her power, of course, had frightened the ever-loving shit out of them and they had immediately prostrated themselves before the Morrigan and begged her pardon.

“You are the Wolf demons who helped Katarina, are you not?” Lady Raven had asked them.

“Yes, my lady,” Koga had practically whimpered.

“Arise, Koga, Ayame,” she bade them. “This country is your land, your territory. I am the intruder here, not you. Besides,” she’d smiled at them, “I am well acquainted with the manner of Wolves, you might remember. We’re a rather boorish lot by more civilized standards, yes?”

They’d grinned sheepishly at her. “Begging your pardon for butting my nose where it doesn’t belong, my lady,” Ayame questioned hesitantly, “but may I ask what this is about?”

“Absolutely,” the Morrigan had answered. “In fact, I don’t know why I didn’t think of this sooner. You and Koga may be of invaluable help in acquainting Rina with her powers.” She’d explained to them what she had commanded of Rina and Sesshomaru at her last visit and the troubles that Rina was experiencing in accomplishing her task. “I know she’s trying her hardest and Sesshomaru has been working with her to the best of his ability, but perhaps she needs the perspective and methods of fellow Wolves. Will you help?”

“It’d be our pleasure, my lady!” Ayame had agree enthusiastically.

Now, not three days after this visit, with Koga and Ayame’s thorough instruction in methods of meditation they found worked well for them, Rina had finally achieved her Anthro form.

She was so tall, it was disorienting! She towered over her two Wolf friends at an engulfing height of at least 9 feet!

“Dayamn!” Ayame whistled. “She could rival Royakan in size!”

Rina, having met the guardian of the forest not long after she had arrived here, wagged her massive black tail at the compliment. “I bet he would be rather impressed!” Holy shit, her voice sounded weird! She laughed, becoming entirely too distracted by the odd sound of her voice. Kind of like
Ryuka had the first time she’d inhaled helium.

“Ok, ok!” Koga laughed. “Focus… hey! Rina!” he snapped his fingers at her. “Jeez, you’re as bad as the pups! Focus!”

“Sorry, Koga,” she said, trying to sound meek, but another snickering chortle escaped her muzzle.

“She giving you trouble again, Koga?” She whipped about at the teasing sound of her mate’s voice with an excited yip.

“Sesshomaru! Look! I did it!” Her tail wagged furiously as he beamed at her.

“I knew you could do it, Rina-chan!” he called to her affectionately. That’s when she noticed the woman beside him. One sniff and she knew exactly who she was even without factoring in how much she resembled him. She looked young enough to maybe be his sister, but her scent ensured that Rina knew better. This was Sesshomaru’s mother.

“Rina, I’d like to introduce you to my mother, Kimi.”

Kimi beamed up at her with warmth. “I’m so glad to meet you and at such a proud moment for you, my daughter!”

Rina was glad for the thick black fur that covered her body at the moment because she knew she’d be blushing as red as her normal hair. She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to focus.

“See yourself taking the form you want,” Koga coaxed her, trying to help her bring her bouncing thoughts in line. “Take a deep breath… hold it… see your human form clearly in your mind… now, breathe out and transform.”

Rina felt herself shrinking as her body became enveloped with ethereal light and, when she opened her eyes, she was her normal height and form again. Her emerald eyes sparkled as she, at last, approached her mother-in-law. “My apologies for taking so long to respond, Lady Kimi!” She bowed low before her beloved’s mother. “I am so happy to meet you!”

Kimi scoffed at her good-naturedly. “Come now, child, you needn’t hold to such formality. I welcome you to call me ‘Mother’ if you so wish!” She held her arms open for an embrace and Rina
gladly returned the gesture. “Oh, it is so good to meet you! You have done wonders for my son, truly, and I will ever be so grateful!” Beaming up at him, she added, “She is absolutely spectacular, Sesshomaru!”

Now, without the cover of her fur, Rina’s face flamed brightly enough she was sure the people in the village would think some kind of flare had been set off.

“Aww! Lookit her blushing!” Ayame teased her, reminding her so much of Izumi.

“Shyuddap!” Rina nudged her, giggling with embarrassment.

“She is adorable when she blushes like that!” Sesshomaru joined in, stepping forward to kiss her soundly. Then he looked to the Wolves. “My apologies for interrupting Rina’s training. If you like, we will get out of your hair so my mother can go see Kagome and InuYasha and gush over her impending grandchild.”

“No problem, Sessho,” Koga waved him off. “We’re almost done. We’ll catch up to you guys shortly.”

Rina couldn’t help a moan when Sesshomaru kissed her one last time, deeply and almost impolite for company, before he walked away from her. I’m so proud of you, my love. And your Anthro form is absolutely gorgeous. I look forward to ravishing you later. His words poured through her mind like silk and honey, accompanied by visions of all the things he planned to do to her to make good on his promise.

Rina’s face heated again, as did her body with anticipatory delight, as she waved at her mate and his mother before Koga went back into Master mode.

“Alright, Rina!” he snapped his fingers at her again, provoking her to snap to attention. “This was a very worthy interruption, but we still need to work on your focus, so I want you to practice your breathing exercises again for five minutes and then I want you to try to transform for me three more times, if you can. Got it?”

“Yessir,” she said gamely. Ultimately, though, no one was surprised that her focus was so shattered for the day she was only able to pull off one more transformation before Koga called it a day.
“Hey, don’t worry about it! You did fantastic for your first day of success!” he encouraged her with utmost sincerity. “We’ll get back at it tomorrow, ok? Don’t be hard on yourself. But let’s make it our goal for you to be able to go Anthro at the drop of a hat by the end of the week. I want to work with you on your fighting skills so you can get used to using your hand-to-hand skills and katana when you’re in that form. Sound reasonable?”

“You got it, sensei,” Rina grinned, laughing at Koga’s scowl. He always got that look when she called him that, thanks to a hot tip from Ayame. He didn’t think of himself as a teacher and only lent himself as such under special circumstances. Ergo, the title irked him to a hilarious degree.

He directed his scowl to his mate, who leered at him with a snarky grin. “Woman! I am so gonna punish you for teaching her that one!”

“Promises, promises!” She winked at him before she turned to sashay away.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?!” he tried to keep the outrage in his voice. But it fell increasingly flat as he stared at her swaying, retreating backside with an expression that plainly declared his mouth was watering.

Rina laughed heartily as she watched Koga race off after his capricious mate to scoop her in his arms, causing Ayame to squeal with laughter, and bolt off in the direction of their borrowed hut. She rather thought that Koga and Ayame had the right idea. It had been difficult for her to concentrate after Sessho’s mental promise to ravish her at the first opportunity. Goosebumps peppered across her skin as she recalled the memory again.

“But, that’s the kind of distraction I need to be able to fight against,” she mused aloud to herself. Even her sensei back home would tell her that it’s most unwise to count on life-or-death necessity to call forth skills she hadn’t yet become consistent in. And foolish gambles such as that were not an option for what they yet faced. There was no choice. Tomorrow, she had to knuckle under even harder and get this shit right.

Chapter End Notes

Bean sídhe -- pronounced "banshee".

Also, sorry it took so long to get this posted. I had a really hard time with this chapter, but I hope y'all enjoy it nonetheless.
When Fates End

Chapter Summary

The night we've prepared for and dreaded has finally arrived and although we knew that we were likely to face losses on this dark night, I don't think any of us were prepared for this level of brutality...

Chapter Notes

TW: Graphic depictions of violence, gore, and death.

Time was coming down to the wire. Rina had been busting her ass to fulfill Koga’s expectations and had practiced her meditations and transformations til she was able to flash into her Anthro and Dire forms without hesitation. Sango, Koga, and Sesshomaru took turns helping Rina to become more comfortable in her larger Anthro form and become accustomed to fighting in it.

And whenever Sesshomaru wasn’t working with Rina, he was working with InuYasha on his sword skills. Kimi, upon hearing that InuYasha would be human and vulnerable on the night Kumayomaru was expected to attack, had procured a demon sword that he’d still be able to use.

“It’s not as strong as Tetsusaiga,” she’d said apologetically. “It doesn’t have any flashy powers. It will simply help you to hold your own and it cannot be broken by any demon. However, I’ve infused it with my venom for an added kick in your favor. But you will need to sharpen your skills with a regular sword in order for it to help you as much as I hope it will.”

“I will handle that, Mother,” Sesshomaru promised. InuYasha had gone into their training rather cocky, which didn’t surprise Sessho in the least. “Be warned, little brother, I’m not going to go easy on you.”

“Don’t you worry about me, Sesshomaru,” InuYasha had replied with a smirk as he tested the weight of the practice sword he’d been given.

With a shrug, Sesshomaru, using a practice sword as well, leaped toward his little brother and had him on the ground in two slashes. He couldn’t resist a chuckle at his little brother’s outraged expression. “Now, little brother, if you’re quite through with your cockiness, are you ready to get serious?” It was actually quite startling to Sesshomaru to see sheepish humility on InuYasha’s face.
as he climbed back to his feet and grasped his practice sword again.

“Yes, Sesshomaru, I’m ready.”

Sesshomaru grilled InuYasha for hours each day as they counted down and each night the brothers looked upon the waning moon with increasing trepidation until the final night was upon them.

“We will not be training tomorrow,” Sesshomaru said to everyone as they gathered together in what had effectively become the communal space of the village. “If you wish to train at all tomorrow, keep it light. I want everyone at their full strength for tomorrow night.

“And let’s not kid ourselves,” he continued. “It’s highly unlikely we will come out of this unscathed. By that next sunrise, we will likely have comrades to mourn. So, spend these last remaining hours with your friends, your family, for they’re the ones you’re ultimately fighting for. Leave nothing unsaid, leave no grudges standing.” His thoughts floated back momentarily to what he’d said to InuYasha before Rin had been killed when they’d been preparing to leave for what had been a false mission. “If we are to say goodbye to anyone, make sure there’s nothing left unsaid.”

The mood was sober and tense as the Pack and Sesshomaru’s family and friends contemplated what he’d said.

It was Koga who broke the rippling, murmuring quiet. “Sesshomaru’s right. So, if you would all excuse me,” he reached out and hefted a chuckling Ayame over his shoulder with a cocky wink, “Ayame and I are off.”

Sesshomaru watched with quiet amusement as other couples followed Koga’s lead and made off with their own mates in short order.

“Looks like they’ve got the right idea,” he heard Rina murmur quietly next to him. He could feel her anxiety. She’d been putting on a brave face and throwing herself into her training more and more each day, embracing the distraction that her preparations lent her.

He remained silent as he stood to his feet and drew her into his arms. Before anyone could speak to them, he headed in the direction of the hot spring. Rina said nothing as he bore her aloft. She merely laid her head quietly against his chest. They had both become quieter the past few days. More introspective. He could feel her growing fear through their Mating bond and he sought to bolster her strength with his own as much as possible.
Once they reached the hot spring, he set Rina down on her feet before him and gazed studiously at her somber emerald orbs. He maintained her eye contact as he silently began unknotting her robe, running his hands slowly along the skin of her arms as he pushed the fabric from her body to pool at her feet. Her eyes continued to hold his as she returned the gesture. A delicious thrill worked up his spine at her touch, her hands running down his arms and, at the loss of his garments, meandering their way back up his torso. She seemed to be memorizing every solid dip of his abdominals, every scar, the sloping indentation of his hips. Her touch was so light, he found his eyes beginning to close so he could memorize her, too. No, he didn’t want to lose sight of her, though.

Her fingers trailed up to his chest, exploring the taut muscles of his pecs and brushing over his nipples in a feather-light caress that sparked the beginning embers of his desire. No, not yet, he said to himself. He could wait. More prevalent was the desire to soothe his mate’s fears about tomorrow as best he could. To make her forget as much as possible.

“Tomorrow is tomorrow,” he said to her softly as he lifted her into his arms and carried her slowly into the soothing waters of the hot spring. “Tomorrow will be here all too soon as it is. Just be here with me now.”

Her eyes flashed brightly at his words and he felt relief and calm begin to course through her. He sank them down into the water until it was up to their necks and he heard her sigh, her body pliantly nestling into his, as the heat began drawing out the tensions that had kept her body coiled so tightly the past several days.

“I’m here with you, Sesshomaru,” she breathed, her voice low, with her face nuzzled into the crook of his neck. She was exhausted. He could feel it. The nightmares had continued to try to plague her even though she battled them back with more and more success.

**Hopefully tomorrow night will spell the end of that infernal Bear once and for all,** Sesshomaru glowered to himself. Whether or not he deserved peace was debatable. She, on the other hand? She’d never been a monster. She’d always been loyal to those she cared for. It had taken him over 900 years to learn the things that had always been part of her character.

“What’sa matter, Sessho?” she mumbled drowsily, sensing his unrest. She looked up at him expectantly.

He shrugged awkwardly. She knew the basic fact of what he’d once been, but he’d always been too afraid to share his memories of his actual brutality. He’d once been about as heartless a monster as Kumayomaru. Guilt tore at him as he realized that he should have shown her everything before consummating the Mating bond with her. If she knew now and despised him for it, she’d
essentially be trapped with him anyway. The bond was irrevocable. He looked at her as she raised a hand questioningly toward his temple.

His shoulders slumped but he nodded his permission. She felt his hope from a few moments ago and she slid down the slope of his self-deprecating emotions and down into his memories. With a heavy sigh, he bared everything to her. He couldn’t look at her. She forgave him without hesitation for what he’d had to do to the Dragon Queen. But how could she forgive all his centuries of cold, heartless cruelty?

She blasted through all his memories, taking them in, back and back and back until, he realized with a start, she was observing the terror that Kumayomaru had put him through as a small child.

Then she went forward through his memories again, quietly taking in each act of brutality. He shuddered as his sins played before his mind’s eye. Then she arrived at a memory that had marked an immense turning point. Rin. She watched as the scrawny, mute little girl came upon him gravely wounded in the woods. Watched as he’d first tried to frighten her away with a red-eyed snarl. Felt his deeply-buried and almost-unacknowledged confusion as she didn’t run in fear but, rather, had come back to bring him fish to eat and water to drink.

“Your generosity is wasted on me. I don’t eat human food,” he’d said coldly without looking at her. Still the little girl had remained unfazed. Then he’d given in to grudging curiosity to ask about the bruises that peppered her face and kept one eye swollen shut. She hadn’t answered but, instead, had bestowed him with a happy, silent smile.

Rina watched as he, after recovering enough to move on from that place, had turned back when he’d smelled the Wolves of Koga’s tribe swirling with the scent of Rin’s blood. Watched as he’d brought her back, telling himself it was only because he was curious about Tenseiga’s abilities. And perhaps that had been mostly true at the time.

You wouldn’t have been able to bring her back if it were only curiosity that drove you. Sesshomaru started a little as the thought floated across his mind. Rina’s thought. It was wispy, like she hadn’t intended for him to hear it but almost like she was trying to point it out to this past self of his that they now observed together.

On and on the memories went until she was at the night where he’d found his daughter slaughtered. He wanted so badly to push Rina out of his memories so he wouldn't have to watch this again, but he restrained himself. He wished he could close his eyes and block it out while it played before him again. But all throughout, he realized, Rina kept her hands tightly gripped to him, trying to bolster him. What? Why? He felt stupid for wondering, but he couldn’t help it. Why should she try to protect him now that she knew exactly how despicable he’d been for most of his life?
She didn’t let go until she watched him step through the Well into her time, mere days before they would meet. He couldn’t look at her. She was so quiet, it was killing him. But he couldn’t look at her.

She didn’t give him a choice. She placed a gentle hand on his jaw and turned his face to her, angling her own until he couldn’t escape her gaze. “This is why you think you don’t deserve peace?” she asked softly.

“How is it you’re able to look at me without loathing?” He tried to look away again. To his astonishment, she growled at him fiercely before turning him back to her. Her emerald eyes popped and snapped with an angry fire.

“Seriously?” she snapped. “Are you that frippin’ dense?”

“I should have told you about all this before--”

“I already knew, you silly dolt!”

“I know you knew about--”

“I said I already knew! I already saw everything before we became Mated. Do I need to draw it out in crayon for you?” Her voice gentled from angry to tender with every word.

Sesshomaru’s mouth dropped open. “You-- But how?”

“Rin showed me,” she answered simply. “A couple of nights after my nightmares started, Kumayomaru tried to turn me against you with a few of those memory clips. I told him to kick rocks. When I woke up, Rin was there. She’d sensed what that crapsack was trying to pull and she figured that the best defense against that bullshit was for me to know everything. So, she showed me in a dream.”

“And you still chose to Mate with me?” He was utterly dumbfounded.
“Lemme ask you something, Sessho,” she said as she shifted herself around to straddle his hips and look at him straight on. “If I were not always this person that you know now, if I had once been as monstrous as you once were, would that make you hate me?”

“Well, no,” he admitted. “But I’d hardly be in any position to judge if you had been.”

“True,” she acknowledged. “But aside from your grudge against your father, you’ve never really been the judgmental type anyway. And that’s never been a factor in our relationship. I love you for who you are now.” Opening her mind, she pushed her memories of him to the forefront and, for the first time, Sesshomaru got to see himself through her eyes.

The first time she’d seen him at the beach, still freshly pissed after beating the shite out of the men who’d harassed her. When she saw him in the club and first realized he was Sota’s friend. The way her heart pounded anxiously when she’d brought him that bottle of sake and when he’d asked her what she was. The pleasure she’d felt at his gaze after she’d played her violin. The delight she hadn’t wanted to admit to herself when she’d caught his scent at the beach the next day. The way he’d looked at her when he’d teased about flicking her nose until she’d unthinkingly buried her face against his chest. The fact that she’d kept her face there for as long as she had because she’d wanted to keep breathing in his scent. The joy, relief, and terror she’d felt when he’d come roaring into the club to protect her from the gunman.

On and on the memories went and she walked with him through them all in no particular hurry. He felt how her heart had thundered when she’d woken up next to him the morning after she’d gotten shot. Saw her soothe him through whatever nightmare had briefly taken hold. Felt her elation when he’d kissed her that first time and the way her body responded when he’d lain between her thighs before Izumi and Ryuka had interrupted them.

Then she showed him approaching her from the mountain path at Koga and Ayame’s cave and the near disbelief she’d felt when he’d seized her to him, afraid that maybe he wasn’t real. And then, oh gods, her memories of their first night together, cloistered away in the alcove! Her memories of all their intimacies since their reunion took his breath away.

Finally, she released him from the hold of her memories and drew back to look at him with her heated, darkened gaze. “Now, do you still doubt?” she asked huskily. She didn’t even give him a chance to answer her one way or the other. She framed his face between her palms and took advantage of his still-slackjawed expression to kiss him breathless.

Sesshomaru hadn’t even known it was possible for his heart to burst open more than it already had. Yet with the knowledge that she’d known everything about him after all and loved him anyway, he felt the rest of his defenses fall to the side. His arms wended their way about her waist and enfolded her tightly to his heart. Her breath left her in a gasp and he relished the moan that
accompanied as he plundered and tasted the soft folds of her mouth.

He felt her shift in his lap and about saw stars from the contact. He’d already hardened about to the point of pain while she’d shown him her memories. Now, as she teased him, sliding her folds over him, he thought his body might combust altogether. No. Not here. He wanted her in their hut. Their home. No castle had ever felt so safe and welcoming as their tiny hut did. He hauled her into his arms and leaped out of the water, snatching up their clothes as he went, and he carried her effortlessly back to the village. No one was around outside, not that he cared. His gaze was laser-focused on their hut.

Once inside, he roughly pinned her against the nearest wall, his blood boiling and his eyes reddening. She cried out and her own eyes began to change, answering the call that sang through his blood to their bond. His fingers found her folds and plunged into her as his mouth covered hers to swallow the yelp of ecstasy that tore from her throat. Gods, she was so wet! Her honeyed, musky scent reached his sensitive nostrils, begging and ready for him.

“Sessho,” she gasped, writhing against his hand furiously. “Sessho, please…”

“Please, what?” he purred against her ear before he laved his tongue up the outer rim to nip at the sensitive point.

Her body was pinned to the wall with his own and he held her wrists clasped above her head in one hand while he continued his teasing ravishment with the other. And yet, out of nowhere, he could swear he felt her fingers teasing his hardened length with feather-light strokes.

“Holy shit,” he gasped at the unexpected touch. Rearing back a little, he saw her darkened eyes dancing with mischief. “Did you--?” His question cut off with a forceful exhalation as it suddenly felt as though she’d taken him in her mouth.

“If you’re gonna tease me, you’re gonna have to step up your game,” her voice purled in a breathy, tantalizing growl.

“Oh my gods,” he groaned, his body shaking uncontrollably while she continued her teasing assault, using her energy to give life to what she envisioned doing to him. He snarled with delight as he fought to keep control of himself while he curled his fingers into her. Her own control slipped as he could feel her spiking closer to her climax.
“No!” she pleaded, trying to angle her body towards his arousal, her breaths coming in desperate, panting moans.

“What do you want?” he whispered throatily.

“You. Inside me. Now!” she demanded, her eyes blazing.

He was only too happy to oblige. He removed his fingers from her body, holding her to him with her legs hooked over his forearms, and he sheathed himself inside her with a growl of passionate relief. Her voice joined his own and she threw her arms around his shoulders to hold him close to her as her hips writhed against his. She was already so close! He could feel the tremors of her muscles beginning to spasm the moment he’d entered her. He drove himself into her at an angle he knew her body responded to and his heart overflowed with love and awe as he watched her begin to come apart in his arms.

“That’s it, baby,” he growled into her ear. “Give me all you’ve got.” Her body coiled tight for a brief moment, teetering on that precarious edge, before it let loose and exploded in response. She clung tightly to him, burying her face into his neck and let loose a keening shriek. He uttered a rumbling groan as her body pulsed and pulled around his, beckoning him to join her. Ah, but he wasn’t even remotely done with her.

She was still trembling as her climax continued to make her shudder when he carefully lifted her away from the wall to lay her down on their futon. He loved the way she held him when she came, as though he were her anchor that kept her from flying away forever into that celestial oblivion.

The moment her back rested against the mattress, she pulled his face down to hers to shower him with kisses before she finally latched her mouth over his. Taking his lead from her earlier antics, he reached through their bond to tease her body in every sensitive, responsive area he thus far knew of. The tips of her ears. The back and sides of her neck. Her taut, hardened nipples. The underside of her thighs. He reveled in every sound that dredged from her at his ministrations as he angled himself against her core. Within moments, he could feel the tremulous pressure building up again. And when he felt her reach through their bond to brush the seam of his sac with a gentle grasp, he felt his body begin to tumble off the precipice as her own began to quake. With a final thrust, burying himself as deep inside her as he could possibly get, his voice crashed around them like thunder as his body spent itself within her. She curled around him as he spasmed, her body cradling his own and absorbing the impact of his climax until his tremors quieted at last.

He didn’t want to move. He let his elbows bolster most of his weight so he wouldn’t crush her underneath him, but otherwise he let his eyes fall closed and relished the sensations of her fingers stroking his hair. They lay like this for quite a while, still joined, the sound of her heartbeat lulling him as it slowed and her breathing began to return to normal. Here in this hut they were wrapped in their own private, perfect world. Here they were home.
He projected his love and contentment to her through their bond, not wanting any words of his to ruin the peaceful silence they were cocooned in. And when she returned her own feelings to him, his pulse gave a skip of pure happiness.

They remained in their hut the remainder of the night and all the next day, making love at times, talking quietly at others, interspersed with little naps in between. They could hear sounds emitting from the other huts in the village of so many others spending these dwindling hours doing similarly.

“What do you want to do when all of this is over?” she asked him contentedly as she laid her head on his chest after another bout of lovemaking, tracing her fingers absently around the muscular cords of his pecs.

“This. For a solid week,” he grinned against her hair.

“Mmmm… Yes, please. That sounds like heaven,” she replied with a contented sigh. “Nobody bothering us…”

“Or walking in on us like my pain in the ass brother,” he interjected with a chuckle, to which she giggled.

“Not having to worry about training, at least not for something like this,” she continued.

“Getting to actually think about our future.”

“Maybe even start planning for a family…” she let the words hang in the air.

He looked down at her, startled. “You mean…?”

She smiled sleepily against his chest. “Yeah, I mean.” She looked up at him. “I mean, it wouldn’t be right for Kagome and InuYasha’s baby to be without at least one cousin to play with, don’t you think? And gods know, I love… ahem… practicing with you.” She punctuated that last sentence with a teasing wink.
He pulled her up to him so that he could kiss her senseless. “I want you to know, though, that you are enough for me. Even if, for whatever reason, we were never able to have children, you are enough for me and then some.”

She drew herself up to straddle him and return his affection. “As are you, my love,” she promised. They groaned in unison as she took him into her body once again. “You’re more than I ever thought to have any hope for,” she gasped against his mouth as she rode him, slow and sensuous. “What we have already is more than I ever thought I’d find.”

“Likewise, my Rina-chan,” he replied fervently as he lost himself again in her touch. In her body. In her love. And gods help anyone who took her away from him again.

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It was dark. Shortly before sunset, everyone had quietly eaten a small amount of food that had been dried for expediency and to fuel them up amply for what lay ahead of them. Everyone was where they were supposed to be. Miroku, Kagome, and Kimi were positioned in the safe den, projecting the barrier and the illusion of the Pack’s vulnerable children. InuYasha, black of hair, guarded the alternate safe den where the Pack’s pups actually were, accompanied by 15 of the Pack’s adults. All the huts were taken up with Wolves, dressed in clothing that smelled of the humans they had learned to impersonate. A pair of Wolves, whom Kimi had cast an illusion over, were in InuYasha and Kagome’s hut, masquerading as them.

There were also a pair of Wolves in Sesshomarunaru and Rina’s hut, posing as them as well.

The rest of them were interspersed strategically nearby, hidden in the nearby forest. Sesshomaru kept their scents and energies cloaked and he sensed the Dragon Queen nearby, ready to lend further aid. And though the Morrigan could not directly assist in this fight, Sesshomaru could sense the goddess watching as well.

And they waited.

He felt Rina reach for his hand and interlace her fingers with his. She wore Celtic battle armor gifted to her by the Morrigan. Her waist-length mane of red hair had been bound back into battle braids by the goddess herself. Tied into her braids with leather thongs were raven skulls and feathers carrying the Morrigan’s blessings of protection, stamina, and fortitude. Lady Raven had also smeared Celtic battle paint of blue woad on her face, accentuating a mask of black raven wings that had been painted across her eyes, up to her brow line, and down to the top of her cheekbones.
Belted at her waist was a demon katana gifted to her by his mother as well as a long-knife, both of which Kimi had enchanted to change size with her whenever she went Anthro. When Sesshomaru wasn’t training with InuYasha, he’d worked with her on her dual blade-wielding skills. She was ready. As ready as she could possibly be. They all were. They would just have to trust that it would be enough.

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He’s here! Koga’s mental voice rippled through to them all at last. Sesshomaru sensed that it was nearing midnight. He’s coming from the east! And he’s got an army with him! Sesshomaru nodded quietly. He was not surprised. No way in hell would Kumayomaru have come alone. That would have taken a level of fortitude the Bear had never possessed.

He acknowledged Koga’s alert. Everyone hold! he commanded. He positioned himself to watch for the advance upon the village.

There’s a regiment also coming from the north, Ayame reported from her position.

My lady Kaguya, Sesshomaru intoned to the Dragon Queen. Would you please fly up and see if there are any other regiments approaching from the west and the south? The last thing they needed was to be flanked.

Already on it, she replied. He felt her energy depart. Moments later, she returned. You’re right. There’s a squad approaching directly behind your position here and another coming from the south.

He relayed the message to the rest of the Pack. Hold your positions for as long as you can. If they draw too close, try to take them out without raising any alarm.

They’re really close to us, but they don’t seem to realize that we’re here. Good thing your disguising ability is working so well, ’cause a bunch of these fuckers are demons, Koga reported.

How many are there?
I’d guess around 30 at most?

Can you and your group take them out quietly?

Yeah, if it comes down to it.

Be careful, my son, Kimi’s voice broke in with a warning. I sense a link between all these soldiers and it’s anchored to Kumayomaru. He will sense it if they are dispatched and thus your positions will be given away.

He frowned.

Don’t worry about that, Kaguya intoned. I can keep the body link going as though they’ve not been felled. Her energy fled in the direction of Koga’s patrol. I’ve got them. Tell Koga that they’re in the clear.

Koga? Attack when ready, but keep it quiet.

Yeah, yeah, I got it! the Wolf grumpily replied. Sheesh, what are you, my mom?

Several moments later, Koga reported back that the squad had been neutralized, followed by Kaguya’s report that she had kept their body link active and still tied to Kumayomaru.

Sesshomaru directed Koga to move his squad to take out the group coming in behind them from the west and directed a number of his own patrol to meet Koga to sweep in from both sides in a pincer move. Kaguya accompanied them and, when they successfully neutralized that group, kept their body link active as well. Sesshomaru kept his senses open to what Koga and his company were doing while keeping his eyes steadfastly on the village.

Would Kumayomaru follow Rina’s scent to their hut and try to force her hand right away or would he send some of his soldiers to neutralize the village’s “citizens” and take hostages first?
He’ll likely do the latter, Sesshomaru decided. Sure enough. A small number of soldiers skulked toward the darkened huts.

Kaguya’s energy flew forward to delay the extinguishing of their body links as the soldiers were neutralized by the Wolves they encountered in each hut.

There. On the other side of the clearing, he saw an odd glimmer in the darkness of the trees. It was Kumayomaru’s eyes. Black as night to the normal view, they now burned with an unholy fire in the dark that could make just about anyone else wet themselves. He squeezed Rina’s hand and gave a slight nod in the direction of the two pinpoints of light. He felt her tremble next to him, her energy seething with a desire to taste his blood.

Alright, he’s about to advance to the village, he silently called to the Wolves down there. Get out of there. They were Koga’s stealthiest and there was no indication from Kumayomaru’s camp that they’d drawn any notice as they skulked out and away from the village, hiding in bushes and crawling silently through the tall grass with nary a whisper.

As he anticipated, Kumayomaru advanced with a small number of men, a scowl of impatience on his face as he wondered what had become of his scouts. His men ran ahead of him to look and Sesshomaru could hear their cries of outrage as they found the bodies of their comrades. Kumayomaru roared in rage as he advanced to the hut that carried Rina’s scent the strongest.

“Where is she?!” he bellowed. “Where are you, Wolf woman?!"

Rina growled softly beside him, but a gentle squeeze of his hand quelled her back into silence.

“I can smell that Dog all over you, you whore!” Kumayomaru shrieked, his size beginning to double as his control over his temper began to unravel. His eyes were wide, his face was mottled, and he tore angrily at his hair.

Oh, big move, you rank bastard. So original, Rina’s voice quipped in Sesshomaru’s mind.

“Bring them to me!” Kumayomaru turned and bellowed at his men.

Rina’s confusion was almost palpable. Bring who? Her confusion didn’t last, however, as his men
returned with two female forms, bound and hooded. Sesshomaru felt her tremble next to him. Oh, no… No, please…

“I know you’re here somewhere, you faithless slut! And if you want these two humans to keep breathing, you’ll reveal yourself now! Come and face me!” He tore the hoods off of the two women and Rina whimpered. It’s Kotone and Azuna!

Sesshomaru felt sick. We can’t give up our position. Not yet. No amount of apology in his voice could make up for this feeling like he’d just made Kotone and Azuna the sacrificial lambs. I’m so sorry. He could feel how desperately she wanted to argue. To plead. But she remained silent.

He’s right, Rina, Koga said bitterly. They could hear the pain in his voice. He wanted to save Azuna just as much as she did. But revealing their position too soon would throw this encounter more into Kumayomaru’s favor and that was something they simply could not afford.

“I know you’re here, Wolf woman!” the Bear continued to rant. “Are you really such a coward that you’d watch your friends die?! You were already such a coward that you abandoned them to save yourself! Perhaps you merely thought you would not have to witness their fates!” He yanked Azuna to him with enough cruel force that they could hear her arm breaking from where they hid. Azuna’s scream rang across the clearing despite the gag in her mouth.

That rank rat bastard piece of shit! Koga howled.

Kumayomaru ripped the gag out of Azuna’s mouth. “Beg her for your life!” he demanded.

Azuna glared up at him, her eyes seething and dark with hate. “Do not falter for our sake, Rina!” she shouted. “We knew we’d likely pay with our lives for helping you escape! Don’t--” her words cut off with a keening scream of agony as Kumayomaru’s face enlarged to a grotesque degree to bite off and consume her broken arm.

Oh gods! Rina screamed silently, her shaking hands flying up to her mouth. Blood. There was so much blood…

“Yours will not be a quick death!” Kumayomaru raged at the screaming woman. “You will suffer beyond comprehension before I grant you that mercy!” He looked around him with growing malevolence. “The sooner you come out, the sooner this woman can be spared from this misery, Wolf woman!”
Rina kept her hands clamped over her mouth to stifle her hyperventilating whimpers. Sesshomaru tried to draw her against him so she wouldn’t have to watch, but she shook him off and kept her eyes glued to her tortured and dying friend, refusing to be blind to what Azuna was going through for her sake. *I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!* she whimpered over and over, tears streaming from her eyes.

True to his word, Kumayomaru took his time. Sesshomaru watched with a dark, growing rage as the Bear broke every bone in Azuna’s body one by one, pausing between each one to demand that Rina show herself. With every bone broken except her spine, Kumayomaru then began to tear pieces of Azuna’s body off and consume them slowly.

Azuna’s screams had, blessedly, dulled before this as her psyche had shattered and her body had lost blood while her bones were being broken. When Kumayomaru tore the remainder of Azuna’s other arm off, Sesshomaru noted with bitter relief that hardly any blood flowed from the tattered flesh. Thank the gods. Azuna had passed beyond the Bear’s reach at last. Still, Kumayomaru did not stop his desecration of Azuna’s remains. He ripped her apart, tearing her in half by her legs and ripping into her flesh with his jaws until there was nothing left.

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Rina couldn’t take anymore. She lurched behind where they remained hidden and retched quietly, tears raining down her face. Oh gods, she couldn’t get those crunching, ripping sounds out of her head! She felt a hand on her shoulder and she turned with a snarl to face Koga, whose face was so pale she thought he might actually pass out. Or was that just the lights she was starting to see flashing around his face like a bunch of starry fireflies?

_Breathe, Rina_, he coaxed her silently, his hands on her face in a brotherly grasp. _Breathe in, 2, 3, 4 and hold, 2, 3, 4, and breathe out, 2, 3, 4…_

Her breaths were still too shaky as her stomach continued to try to rebel. She gripped his hands in terror as she heard Kotone screaming.

_Nnn- noooo!_ she whimpered, trying to wrench out of Koga’s grasp.

_No!_ Koga thundered roughly in her head while forcing her to keep facing him. _I’m so sorry!_ There were tears in his eyes. _You can’t help her! I’m so sorry. Just keep looking at me, little sister._ His hands moved to press over her ears, but even with his hands blocking her ears and even
with her pulse pounding deafeningly, she could still hear the sounds of Kumayomaru’s demanding roars and Kotone’s continued shrieking. She saw Koga look over at the carnage and wince his eyes shut before looking back at her fiercely.

Kotone screamed again, but her voice was suddenly cut off. Koga held her gaze, still counting breaths for her as she struggled to match his pace. She heard mental gasps of horror from Sesshomaru and their comrades a split second before something thumped to the ground mere feet from her and rolled to hit her hard on her left thigh.

No! Koga shrieked, trying to hold her face, but her head whipped about in instinctive alarm anyway. All breath left her as she stared at what had hit her and her brain completely shut down. The world went almost completely white. Everything but the ghastly sight before her. No. No, this was just a bunch of bullshit. It had to be something like the Halloween decorations she’d helped put up for a haunted house once. That… that couldn’t be Kotone’s actual head gaping up at her with such a grisly expression. She couldn’t move. She could only stare while she struggled to find her breath.

Her body was limp as she felt Sesshomaru’s arms wrap around her to drag her against him and turn her away from the horrifying sight. Why was everything happening in slow motion? Why did it feel like Sesshomaru’s body was getting smaller?

Nothing made sense to her. But Kumayomaru… her eyes were fixated on him. He was coming closer. His movements were still uncertain. He’d guessed that she was over there somewhere, but he hadn’t pinpointed her exact location.

Get everyone moved to a different position. Her mental voice sounded so strange and foreign as she gave the order to her mate. So dull and empty. Soulless. I will draw him in.

What?! No! Sesshomaru barked back. He was so small next to her.

Get everyone moved, now! she snarled, her voice reigniting with a stoic yet deadly rage. There’s no stopping this now. Her eyes were not only red, now they positively glowed and Kuymayomaru would notice any second now as the remainders of Rina’s control unraveled.

There was no choice. Sesshomaru ordered everyone to fall back and he barked out their new positions, leaving her to draw the Bear’s attention alone. Once they were at a safe distance from her, she rose to her feet, crouched forward and away from the shadows and roared.
Kumayomaru’s face snapped around to face her and, to her disgust, he broke out into a huge, delighted grin. “Wolf woman!” he greeted her as though they were long lost lovers. She held her ground, her fangs bared and dripping with the lust to bury themselves into his throat.

“Wolf woman, I’ve missed you so much! You have no idea!” He seemed completely oblivious to her -- her crouched posture, her red-eyed rage, the growl that seethed rabidly from her throat. “You broke my heart when you left me!” Now his voice sounded less warm and darkened with hurt and rage. “I’m sorry I’ve had to punish you like this, but it’s your own fault for leaving!” Her rage doubled upon hearing his projecting his responsibility for Kotone and Azuna’s deaths onto her.

“Oh, eat shit and go fuck yourself, you monstrous coward!” Yet he continued toward her with his beckoning expression as though he hadn’t heard her.

He was close now. He still could not smell or sense any of the others around. He was fixated only on her and she felt an increasing level of disgust and violation. His shining black eyes were wide with madness.

“Now, let’s go back home and all can and will be forgiven and forgotten--” His voice cut off as Rina lashed out at last and sent him flying so hard he crunched into one of the walls of the huts.

“Fuck you!” Rina bellowed as she finally let loose the full roar that had been choking her since he’d begun torturing Azuna.

Kumayomaru came to his feet, a look of shocked rage and utter confusion on his face. “You mean- -”

“I mean fuck you!” Her voice was so strange still. Guttural yet soft and silky with menace. “You are beyond delusional if you think I would ever have anything to do with you! You disgust me! You are vile!” Kumayomaru’s face exploded with fury as did his body, shifting violently into his full Bear form. “Bring it on!” Rina roared at him.

The Bear looked at where his men still hid in the trees from whence he’d come and roared his order to advance. He did the same to his regiments to the north, south, and west. Rina smiled evilly. He still didn’t know that the south and west regiments had been slaughtered. Then the Bear leveled his malevolence towards her and charged.

She could sense Sesshomaru off to her right with a group and Koga off to her left. She backed away further into the trees to draw Kumayomaru and his men into the pincer move that her mate and their comrades had set up. Then the Bear was upon her and her body erupted into movement.
She ducked under his swiping paw and dodged to the right, leveling her claws deep against his chest. She gritted her teeth as the impact felt like it almost dislocated her shoulder! Kumayomaru spun about to face her with a nimble swiftness that surprised her and she leaped back again.

“You’re mine!” the Bear screeched at her, fully enveloped in his psychosis.

“I’d slit my own throat before I ever let myself belong to you!” she spat at him. “I would roast my own ass in the deepest pits of all the hells before I’d ever let you fucking touch me!”

“I will dismember and devour that little whelp you Mated with--” his words cut off as she lunged forward with blinding speed and struck him with an uppercut, punching her claws up through his chin and pinning his tongue to the roof of his mouth. The howling shriek that ripped at her ears was as glorious as it was painful and she sneered at him with an evil, sadistic delight. The Bear screamed again as she ripped her claws free. “If I can’t have you, I will take away everyone you’ve ever loved!”

Before Rina could respond in any way, he whipped about and swung his gigantic paw at her, sending her crashing backwards through a couple of trees. She lay there, stunned and dizzy, and watched as he turned and began to head toward her friends and her mate. They hadn’t been able to pull off their pincer maneuver due to the speed with which his soldiers attacked.

Sesshomaru! she called out dazedly. Be careful! Kumayomaru is on the rampage! Her eyes widened as one of Kumayomaru’s soldiers came at her where she lay. She rolled quickly out of the way a split second before his blade would have buried itself in her forehead. She swung her legs about and knocked the bastard’s feet out from under him, trapped his head between her feet, and wrenched until she felt and heard the sickening crunch in his neck that made him go limp.

She rolled to her feet and drew her katana and her long-knife, whirling and slashing to meet the ten that surrounded her. She towered over most of them and even though they quailed at her 9 feet of height, they seemed confident that she’d be slow. Guess again, fuckers, she snarled silently at them. They were dead at her feet within half a minute.

A flash over her shoulder caught her attention and she heard the mental reports of alarm over some of Kumayomaru’s stronger soldiers having found the safe den and in the process of trying to bash down Kagome and Miroku’s barrier. She’ll be ok, Rina thought. She’s got Miroku, she’s got Mom, and she’s got Shizuka in there with her. Her thoughts snapped back to her surroundings as she found herself beset upon by another group of soldiers.
“Bring it on, boyos,” she grinned evilly, her fangs glinting as she brandished her blades. She flashed out of her Anthro form, deciding to save that energy in case it was more needed later. The demons surrounding her began to chuckle, confused at first, before breaking into full outbursts of mocking laughter.

She laughed with them, a soft, mocking chuckle, her eyes still glowing red through the black wings on her face, before she struck, her mind emptying and becoming nothing but clockwork machinery for this next bout.

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Sesshomaru, occupied with his own opponents, heard Rina’s voice as she fought and, once he felled the last in his particular group, he allowed himself a few moments to watch his mate in action, keeping his senses on high alert for any who might seek to take advantage of his distraction.

She was surrounded by about 15 or so soldiers yet she handled herself with mindless, instinctive calm. Her eyes were sharp, catching every movement, and her face was blank as she addressed each attacker with reflexive grace. She looked like she was dancing. Whirling and slashing, parrying and pirouetting, her long-knife deflecting while her katana felled one enemy after another.

Someone ran with a snarl at Sesshomaru’s back, their scent reaching him several seconds before they made their move. He didn’t take his eyes off his mate. He merely bode his time til the last possible second before he flourished his sword behind him so his would-be attacker skewered himself on the blade. Wrenching his blade free from the newest corpse it had made, he watched with a remarkable calm as one demon managed to land his meaty fist in a blow across Rina’s face. She allowed her body to follow through with the force of the strike to spin and hook her leg around the back of her attacker’s neck as he stumbled past her, manipulating his forward momentum to plant him face-first on the ground before she wrenched and broke his neck.

Gods, she was beautiful. Beautiful and lethal. He felt his heart swell with pride as he watched her, thinking back to the first time he saw her on the beach. Those cretins hadn’t even been a challenge for her. She’d gone to the lengths she had to prove a point. And now, against foes who were certainly trained and skilled, she didn’t waste time with any showing off. She certainly wasn’t foolish or ruled by ego like so many other warriors, but she was no less confident and determined. Coldly determined. She was out for blood and she would make every last one of them pay for their loyalty and service to the monster who had tortured and brutally slaughtered her friends.

Sesshomaru was pulled from the scene as a group of five soldiers was sufficient to require his attention. As he dispatched the newcomers, however, he found himself feeling uneasy. Where had Kumayomaru gone? Rina had called out a warning to him when she’d gotten knocked back by the Bear before he’d charged away from her. He’d thought the Bear would immediately come after
him, given the threat he’d heard Kumayomaru make at her. And yet, the Bear had never come for
him.

**Everyone, report!** he barked out to his comrades. **How fare you? And has anyone seen where
Kumayomaru went?** His mother checked in first, reporting that the demons were still trying to get
into the cave but were still having no luck against Kagome and Miroku’s barrier. Koga checked in
next and said his group was about done with the chunk of soldiers they had managed to split away
from the main force.

**Ayame, how are you doing, sweeheart?** Koga then asked jovially, his mental voice making it
abundantly clear that he was enjoying his battle. The silence that followed was an icy punch to the
heart. **Ayame?** The humor draining audibly from Koga’s voice and being rapidly replaced with
fear. **Ayame?!**

**Has anyone seen Ayame?!** Sesshomaru thundered as he tore through another group of soldiers.
And where was InuYasha? Even in human form, he could still communicate mentally. Why hadn’t
his brother checked in?

**InuYasha?** Silence. Oh gods. **InuYasha?! Answer me, brother!** Koga crashed through some
bushes and came to a full stop by Sesshomaru, his forest green eyes wide and his face pale with
mounting panic. Rina joined them, having dispatched another group and picked off nearby
stragglers. Only now it was occurring to Sesshomaru how small Kumayomaru’s numbers actually
were. How easy this had been.

Without a word, the three of them tore off in the direction of the safe den where the Pack’s pups
were sheltered.

**Sesshomaru?** Kimi’s voice came through anxiously.

**Mother, dispose of those demons trying to get through. They were as much a decoy as that
safe den was.**

**Where is your brother?**

He didn’t want to answer her. She pushed an image of Kagome looking at her with frightened eyes
while her arms wrapped instinctively around her swollen belly. Fuck. He noted the slain demons
behind the Miko. Kimi had wasted no time in eradicating them. **Just see to Kagome. I’ll report
back as soon as I know anything.**
Oh gods, please, he prayed silently to himself. Please don’t let me have to tell my sister that she is a widow. Please!

They slowed when they saw Kumayomaru’s tracks leading to the den.

“Oh gods,” Koga breathed with a rasp. “Oh gods, no!” Even without the Jewel shards in his legs, he was still faster; Sesshomaru and Rina struggled to keep up with him the remainder of the distance to the cave. The evidence on the ground showed that Kumayomaru had transformed back to his normal form to confront the human hanyō and a struggle had clearly taken place. There was blood everywhere.

Sesshomaru dashed into the entrance of the cave. Kumayomaru’s stench came in here. However, as he rounded a bend, he came upon a wall of fallen boulders. Whimpers from within dictated that the pups on the other side were still safe, albeit shaken. “Ginta! Are you in there?!” Sesshomaru bellowed.

“Sesshomaru, is that you?!” came the Wolf’s frightened reply.

“It is!” Sesshomaru quickly pushed a vision of him and Koga just outside the wall as they spoke.

“Ginta! Is Ayame in there?! Are the children ok?!?” Koga demanded hoarsely.

“I thought Ayame was out fighting with you?” Gina replied with confusion.

“Fuck!” Koga cried out in agony.

“The children are all ok, though!” Gina assured them. His voice was choked with tears, however. “Kumayomaru came. He slaughtered six of the other guards! He wounded InuYasha! Hiromi drove the rest of us back here and she sprung the door trap. She… she didn’t make it. She couldn’t spring clear of the boulders in time and she was crushed.”

Sesshomaru sank to his knees as he processed the report. InuYasha missing. Possibly dead. Hiromi dead. She’d sacrificed herself to keep the children safe. The cave here was too small for Kumayomaru to change into his Bear form and just big enough for a cave-in barrier to be effective
in keeping him out and away from the pups. The cave remaining on the other side was spacious enough that they would not lack for oxygen, but there was no other way out and it would take a team to remove the boulders so the children could be freed.

“Go find InuYasha and Ayame!” Ginta called to them urgently. “We’re fine in here! Go find them!”

They needed no other encouragement. Sesshomaru, Rina, and Koga fled from the cave to follow the scent trail of Kumayomaru’s next destination. Tinges of InuYasha’s blood followed his path. At least he was still alive when he came this way, Sesshomaru thought grimly.

“You two go find InuYasha. I need to go trace Ayame’s scent,” Koga said. His voice was full of a panic that Sesshomaru wholly understood. He’d be losing his mind if he couldn’t find Rina and couldn’t get an answer from her.

“Rina, you go with him,” Sesshomaru ordered her quietly. She opened her mouth to protest but he silenced her with a shake of his head. “Help him. Else he might miss something that your more level mind will catch.” Koga rounded on him with a look of rage.
“That was not an insult, Wolf,” Sesshomaru cut him off with more calm than he felt. “You are in a very understandable panic and she might help to balance you out no differently than you did for her earlier.” He didn’t wait for any further response or reaction from them.

“Go. Go find Ayame. I will find InuYasha.”

Rina grabbed Koga’s hand and dragged him away at speed in the direction of where they’d last scented Ayame’s whereabouts. As they headed away from him, Sesshomaru soberly updated his mother of what they’d found at the safe den. He could hear Shizuka weeping at the loss of her sister while praying the gods show favor to her sacrifice.

And you’re sure that InuYasha is still alive? Kimi asked, her voice thick with worry.

As of now, yes. His blood is fresh though not dropping so fast as to think he is gravely wounded. He didn’t want to think of what condition he could potentially find his brother in at the end of this trail.
Rina had a hard time keeping up with Koga as they raced to the position they’d last known Ayame had been at, so she flashed into her Dire Wolf form. She could keep pace with him a lot easier now. They skidded to a halt when they found a point where Ayame’s scent lingered. Rina’s nose immediately went to the ground. As sharp as her sense of smell was in her normal form, her Dire Wolf senses were even more potent. Her feet moved automatically and her nose followed Ayame’s scent as sharply as if she were being reeled in on a string. Koga, also following Ayame’s scent, trotted after her until she told him to just get on her back already.

Here is where Ayame had led her squad to handle the charge of Kumayomaru’s regiment closing in from the north while the Bear had charged at Rina. Ayame’s tracks, along with her scent, practically glowed in Rina’s eyes. She had fought a group here and Rina could see the dancing progression of Ayame’s footwork. A shuffle step here had been where Ayame had dodged an incoming attack. A pirouette there had been where she had spun and leaped into the air to fell the demon whose corpse now lay before Rina’s feet. Koga, who was only detecting Ayame’s scent, asked Rina why she had slowed.

I’m reading what happened here, she replied, and explained to him what she was seeing from Ayame’s tracks. Then she trotted on, following the story of Ayame’s battles left in the indentations in the soil. She growled low in her throat. A demon had snuck in behind Ayame. It wasn’t Kumayomaru, but it was still quite large, judging by the size of the foot, yet it had managed to walk ridiculously light, judging by the shallowness of its footprint.

Ayame had been battling a group of about 10 demons here. They’d been in on the plot. They hadn’t completely surrounded her but, rather, had kept her facing into the wind so she wouldn’t turn around. And then this demon had come in and… oh, shit, there was Ayame’s blood.

Koga launched off of Rina’s back with a cry of despair, having caught the scent of his mate’s blood.

She was ran through with a pike, Rina deduced as she read the blood that had spilled. But she was struck in a place that, for her, would not be lethal, only incapacitating. She was wounded and captured. Her heart iced over in dread. The demon that did this to her was ordered to take her alive.

Koga leaped back onto her back and she broke into a run, following the scent of the mercenary that had taken Ayame. East past the village and into the woods from whence Kumayomaru and his soldiers had emerged from. She slowed when she saw the stride of the demon’s tracks shorten. Signaling Koga to get off her back, she flashed back to her human form and quickly assessed the air. Everything was so still as though the wind itself were holding its breath.
Rina and Koga crouched forward carefully until she turned and ordered him to hang back.

**The hell you say!** he raged at her mentally.

**Koga,** she snapped in an accurate mimicry of Sesshomaru’s tone that brooked no argument. **If we see Ayame strung up and helpless, are you really going to be capable of hanging back and maintaining your self-control until we can get some backup or are you going to be more likely to run in half-cocked and possibly get us all killed? Stay. Here.**

He glowered at her silently but said nothing more. She knew it was torture for him to follow her order. **I swear, I will hurry,** she promised before she silently moved forward towards where the demon’s scent and footprints lead. They were close, she sensed, and she crouched down to crawl on her belly through the clump of bushes in front of her. Carefully. Slowly. She made absolutely no noise.

Once she had a sufficient view of the clearing, she stopped. And so did her heart. Ayame was there. As was InuYasha, still black of hair. Some of Koga and Ayame’s other comrades were there, at least a half-dozen, but they were already dead. They were hanging upside down from nearby trees, their throats slit. Rina swept about with her senses. Kumayomaru was there though she couldn’t see him. He was waiting. **Sesshomaru, I’ve found InuYasha, Ayame, and a few others that went missing.** She projected to him what she was seeing and her overall whereabouts.

“Oh, good,” Kumayomaru’s voice sounded behind her. “I was growing impatient.” He loomed over her from behind a tree she’d crouched near and he had Koga’s limp body slung over his shoulder like a sack of meal.

Rina flinched with a gasp but didn’t have a chance to cry out or move before he struck her and rendered her world to blackness.

The first thing she was aware of when she awoke was the pain in her wrists, bound tightly by a cord that held her aloft. The ground was just out of reach of her toes so she had no way to alleviate the pressure of her weight from her wrists. Then her ears, which had been ringing since she regained consciousness, became aware of a voice. **Sesshomaru?** She dazedly looked around. She found him across the clearing from her. He’d been captured. She stared stupidly at him as she tried to comprehend the sight of him hanging by his wrists next to InuYasha. She looked to her left and saw Koga hanging next to Ayame.
Rina, look at me! Are you alright? She took in the sight of her mate again. His torso had been stripped. His weapons were missing. She felt the hum of their energy somewhere behind her and off to her left.

Sesshomaru, how… she started to ask, but it split her head with pain to try to talk, even mentally.

I was foolish, he admitted heavily. I saw your vision and saw that Kumayomaru had captured you and I went into a panic. I’m so sorry.

I’m the one who was careless. I took for granted that Kumayomaru’s energy in the clearing meant that’s where he actually was. I wasn’t careful enough when I couldn’t see him. Shame and rage swelled up to a choking level. All she could think of was how her carelessness had caused a domino effect that had resulted in Koga and her mate getting captured as well.

Rina! Rina, stop! Sesshomaru barked. Look at me! She looked up and met his fierce gaze. My love, you have no idea how proud of you I actually am! Her expression must have been rather dubious because his expression darkened for a moment before he took his cue from several hours and a lifetime ago. He pushed his memories to her, allowing her to see herself through his eyes. This was not only your first taste of actual battle, this was your first real and even confrontation with an actual nemesis. Nobody would dare fault you for falling apart when he… did what he did to your friends. But you did more than fall apart. You got angry. But instead of letting it take control of you as so many others tend to do, you used it. You took it and let it fuel you rather than losing complete control. And where your control did unravel, you turned it around and used it to your advantage, too.

As her mate spoke, she saw what he’d observed when she first confronted Kumayomaru. She felt how he’d been absolutely breathless with fear and pride as she’d exploded into her Anthro form, towering and alone, to face off against the demon that had terrified and enraged her.

Then the memory flashed forward and she saw what he’d observed of her outnumbered battle earlier. I couldn’t tear my eyes away, he said softly. You were beyond breathtaking, my battle goddess. The memory vision of her battle continued, but Rina found herself noticing more the mounting feelings of his pride and awe as he’d watched her. Never before had I witnessed anyone who looked like they were dancing as they fought. Or perhaps I have and just don’t remember. If so, that only means that they didn’t captivate me the way you did. So, believe me when I say that I’m proud of you. And you know I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean every word.
She smiled thinly at him. She hated that he was so far away from her. Hated that they’d fallen into Kumayomaru’s grasp that already looked so hopeless. A groan off to the left of her across the clearing signified Koga beginning to wake up. Before the Wolf could say anything, Sesshomaru assured him that Ayame was still alive, as was InuYasha, though neither had yet stirred to wake. That alone made Rina feel increasingly uneasy. Had something been done to them to prevent their waking up?

Ayame, Koga groaned his mate’s name blearily. Ayame, sweetheart, please wake up. He began reaching out with his leg to try to nudge her. Ayame! Wake up! Please, wake up! Koga’s voice began to climb in panic at his mate’s unresponsiveness.

Across from her, Seshomaru was trying to wake InuYasha as well. Come on, brother. Wake up and say something smartass to me. InuYasha!

“Rather cruel of you to try to wake them,” came Kumayomaru’s mocking voice, silken as poisoned oil. “After all, awake, they’ll only be made to suffer as you will.”

“Rot in hell, you putrid shitstain!” Koga snarled rabidly. His growling increased an octave as Kumayomaru reached out and caressed Ayame’s hair.

“Leave her the fuck alone!” Rina roared. The Bear speared her with a frigid glance.

“You broke my heart, Wolf woman. More than anyone ever has.” His voice deepened with bitter, hateful sorrow. “So, I’m going to break your friends’ hearts. Your mate’s,” he spat that last with the utmost vitriol, “and then I’m going to crush yours before I take you back home with me.”

“You leave them out of this!” she raged, her voice beginning to thicken and deepen. “Your issue is with me, you—” she cut herself off before she could call him a dickless coward. Such insults to his ego would likely provoke him to lash out at her loved ones even quicker and with more cruelty. “Just stop this! This is between you and me!”

“Oh, come now, Wolf woman. I’m sure you know by now that’s not true.” He tsked his disappointment at her before turning his malevolent gaze toward the dangling form of her mate. Sesshomaru returned the Bear’s glare with angry, dignified defiance. "First, this bastard whelp’s father kept me at bay, thwarting every attempt to defeat him. He, a mere Dog, somehow had enough power and skill to thwart a Bear?! Then, the whelp himself found the audacity and fortitude to maim my eye before he managed to escape me!”
The deranged Bear dropped his glamour so they could see how Sesshomaru’s venom had not only ruined his left eye but had also deeply and grossly disfigured his face like it had been burned away with acid. It took every shred of Rina’s self-control to not flinch or show disgust.

“Oh, wah!” Koga retorted. “All I’m hearing is you whining about your ineptitude and about a little kid managing to maim you after you attacked him in his home!”

“Koga!” Rina hissed as her fear for him and Ayame skyrocketed. “Shut the fuck up!” She had grossly overestimated the Wolf’s understanding that one should not attack a narcissist’s ego in cases such as this. But even if she had, she knew that the impulsive Alpha would still likely have lost control over that mouth of his.

“No one here feels the least bit sorry for you,” Koga continued as the Bear leveled his icy, furious gaze at the Wolf who mocked him. “You’re seriously bitching because you weren’t given an easy win over anyone that you were stupid enough to underestimate? I guess that’s why you’ve had to get your jollies off by slaughtering humans!” He kept plowing ahead while completely ignoring Rina’s and Sesshomaru’s roars for his silence.

Rina struggled in vain against the cords that bit into her wrists and held her bound. “Kumayomaru, don’t!” she shrieked her plea. “Leave him alone!” her voice spiked in pitch as he, in terrible slow motion, reared a clawed hand back. Then, in a movement too fast to behold, he struck, tearing an immense, gaping hole through the Wolf’s chest. Rina screamed as she felt her rage beginning to spiral. She could vaguely hear Sesshomaru’s roar joining hers.

The Bear flashed a smile of sick glee and held up his bloodied claws, dripping with shreds of Koga’s viscera. Koga choked and gasped for air through his pulverized ribcage and ruined lungs. Figures, he managed to choke out mentally. **Figures that the only way you could kill any of us was while we were tied up.**

“Don’t die yet, Wolf,” Kumayomaru drawled out mockingly as he wiped Koga’s blood across the dying Wolf’s face. “I’ve got something else to show you.” The moment his eyes fell to Ayame’s unconscious form, Koga’s gasps wheezed furiously through his wounds and his mouth fell open with soundless screams. He was so weak now, he could barely even thrash in desperate protest.

Kumayomaru’s face enlarged again, the way it had with Azuna…

*Rina! Sesshomaru cried out desperately to her. Rina, don’t look!*
Rina couldn’t move. Her breaths were heaving in horrified gasps and she was too frozen to look away. Koga’s screams were deafening in her mind. Rina’s own whimpers of horror began to dredge from her throat as Kumayomaru’s face stopped growing and he simply stared at them, letting first Koga and then her get a good look.

“Kumayomaru, please just leave her alone!” Rina pleaded. Her words cut off in a wailing scream, however, as he whipped his grotesque head about. His mouth gaping wide and teeth flashing, he snapped his head forward like a striking viper and clamped his jaws around Ayame’s head.

Rina’s screams could not drown out the sickening sound of her friend’s head being wrenched away or the wails of Koga’s grief and rage that blasted through her mind. Kumayomaru walked back over to the Wolf, who had gone all but completely yet helplessly mad. Despite his wounds, Koga’s eyes seethed with potent hate and malice. The Bear’s face was completely passive, coldly stoic, as he reached a hand into the ruined cave of Koga’s chest, pushing his hand slowly through the tattered flesh and crushed ribs until he found what he was looking for.

Rina sobbed, helpless in her wrath, as she watched Koga’s face contort with agony at the invasion. Then his face paled and froze before his head lolled forward against his chest, his eyes sightless and dead. Kumayomaru withdrew his hand to show Koga’s heart cruelly speared onto his claws. Looking at Rina and Sesshomaru, he slowly and deliberately consumed the still-shuddering meat.

Rina’s sobbing breaths dragged raggedly through her, her rage intensifying and beginning to blossom beyond her control. But when Kumayomaru made an offhand-sounding remark about whether to consume InuYasha next or her mate, sounding as blase as if he were discussing the weather, her psyche utterly shattered with the explosive detonation of her fury and the world went completely white. And stopped.
A straining cry of stunned torment provoked Sesshomaru to open his eyes. InuYasha was awake! Golden eyes blinked in confusion as they stared at the claws protruding through his torso.

Golden eyes…

Sesshomaru gasped as he realized that the moonless night was over at last! He snarled with evil glee as his little brother, without his Tetsusaiga, quickly morphed into his furious full demon form.

“What?” Kumayomaru gasped in confusion when InuYasha, red-eyed and fully pissed off, lifted his feet to kick Kumayomaru back and across the clearing to collide against one of the trees. Then he flexed and snapped the cords that had held him bound as though they had no more tensile strength than a feather.

“What did you do?!” he exploded in guttural menace, his blazing eyes fastening on Koga’s and Ayame’s mutilated remains. He turned and slashed the cords that held Sesshomaru bound. Sessho drew himself up, ready to explode into his full Daiyokai form but he stopped.

“So, Kumayomaru,” he asked in a conversational tone that carried an unmistakable flow of sadistic smugness. “Where exactly is Rina?”

Kumayomaru froze and turned around. He’d been so focused on InuYasha that he hadn’t noticed first, the increasing pitch and timbre of Rina’s fury or, second, her silence. But he’d been expecting the war horse size of her Dire Wolf form. What he found, instead, was her Ultimate. Her back was as tall as the trees that surrounded them. Her eyes were a swirling mix of blood red and demonic black. Her fangs, a quarter of Goshinboku in diameter, were as long as Kumayomaru was tall and they dripped with saliva that swirled a lethal, venomous green.

Even InuYasha, still red-eyed in his barely restrained demonic form, backed the fuck up. Rina didn’t even seem to notice. All she saw was the gasping form of the putrid creature that had slaughtered her friends. She bent low to look him full in the face. “Run,” she said in a soft rasp that succeeded in causing the Bear to soil himself.

Sesshomaru’s flesh prickled with the eerie terror that washed over him. That wasn’t Rina. It didn’t smell like Rina in the slightest. It was definitely her Ultimate form, no doubt about it, but Rina was not the one driving this immense, beastly body that she had exploded into. A huge eye rolled his direction and blinked in acknowledgment while sending a wave of familiarity over him.
Holy shit, that’s Lady Raven!

Then she was gone, tearing after Kumayomaru, who had transformed into his full Bear form out of sheer desperation. He spun around to try to face her and she tackled him to the ground. They rolled, snarling and screaming, crashing through and felling trees. Sesshomaru and InuYasha blazed after them, struggling to keep up. Sesshomaru cried out when he saw that Kumayomaru, though smaller than Rina, had managed to pin her and was trying to tear at her throat.

“What?” InuYasha’s demonic voice asked in confusion. “Is she… is she laughing?”

The sound sent chills down Sesshomaru’s spine as he realized his brother was right. She was laughing at the Bear as he tried his damnedest to hurt her. Finally, she seemed to grow bored before she kicked his hulking form back. She rolled onto her massive feet and lunged, twisting her head to the side to crunch her jaws down onto his right foreleg.

“Be gone!” she shrieked at him, flinging him through the air like a rag doll. He flew so far, he disappeared over the horizon. She’d wounded him badly. And as much as Sesshomaru wanted to run after Kumayomaru and finish him off, the decision was made for him when Rina’s great body collapsed onto the ground, unconscious, and flashed back to her normal form. The trauma of what had happened and the strain of her Ultimate transformation, which she had not been even remotely trained to withstand, had finally taken its toll and her energy reserves were completely gone.

Sesshomaru gathered her into his arms with a cry, calling her name, his heart clenching in panic. Her pulse was thready and her breathing was shallow. Fuck! Was she dying?! He looked up at his brother in panic.

“I heard your mother’s voice calling out to him. She was carrying Kagome carefully as she ran. Both were pale and tears streaked their cheeks. Clearly, they’d happened across the carnage that had taken place back in the clearing. Kagome’s sobs, which she tried to muffle behind the sleeve of her habuki, keened out of her control as her eyes found InuYasha still alive. She carried the Tetsusaiga with her as she lunged out of Kimi’s arms and flew to him.

InuYasha was so relieved to see that she was ok, his eyes flashed back to their normal gold even before he had the sword back in his possession.

While InuYasha and Kagome reunited, Kimi knelt next to Sesshomaru and his unconscious mate. She placed her hands on Rina’s temples, her brow furrowed in concern. Finally, she seemed to find what she was looking for and her eyes relaxed with relief.
“We need to get her back to the village. Her body and her psyche have endured too much all at once. We need to carefully get some broth down into her belly to help her body recover and her psyche needs rest.” She looked up at her son. “Where is Kumayomaru. Did you get him?”

Sesshomaru was too worn and completely stripped down to the base of his endurance to answer verbally. He pushed the memory of what had happened to his mother and she took everything in soberly.
“So, she wounded him but he’s still alive. Why didn’t she kill him, I wonder?”

“That wasn’t Rina,” Sesshomaru answered. At his mother’s confused expression, he explained, “That was the goddess she’s sworn to. Rina wasn’t yet capable of transforming into her Ultimate form on her own. I think her body spun out of control after what Kumayomaru did to Koga and Ayame but she wasn’t capable of controlling it, so the Morrigan took over. And the Morrigan said it wasn’t her place to kill Kumayomaru herself. She’s bought us some time, essentially.”

“Shit.”

Sesshomaru blanched. He was definitely not used to his dignified mother resorting to anything resembling coarse language.

“It makes sense, but dammit.” She smiled a bitter smile. “Worth it, though, to see that pestilent pissant actually and truly afraid for once in his worthless life.” She looked tenderly down at her daughter-in-law. “She was magnificent, though. Let’s get her back home, my son. She’s going to need a lot of care to recover from the night’s events.”

Back at the village, Kimi got Rina settled and tucked into the futon mattress. Sesshomaru bolstered her up against him while Kimi carefully fed Rina’s unconscious form the potent broth she had concocted. It smelled utterly rank and the stench of liver was impossible to miss.

“This should give her body an extra boost to recuperate,” Kimi said softly as she finished feeding Rina the broth. Standing up, she said, “I’m going to go help look after everyone else. I’ll be back to check on you and Rina later.” Her face fell with sorrow. “The remaining members of the Pack have just dug through to free the children. Some will never see their parents again. Kagome is recuperating from everything and she’s in no shape to…” her voice faded with a weary sigh. “I just need to go help.” She sensed that Sesshomaru was about to argue and insist on lending his aid.

“No, my son,” she said gently yet firmly. “No. You stay with Rina. She needs you more than anyone else does, believe me. I’ve got this.” She patted his shoulder before she took her leave from his and Rina’s hut.
Sesshomaru curled himself around Rina’s body, nuzzling his forehead against hers, trying to find her in the darkness she had fallen into. His heart was heavy with sorrow as he drifted away into the blessed nothing of sleep.
Coming Full Circle

Chapter Summary

At last, I come to the end of my tale thus far, bringing my friends and the Higurashis fully up to speed as to the events that happened before Grandpa Higurashi found me cowering in the Well house. But where do I even go from here? What has Sesshomaru been doing in the month since he sent me back? My memory is whole again, but I'm still lost...

“Why isn’t she waking up, Mother?” It had been ten days since the confrontation with Kumayomaru and Rina had yet to show any signs of coming out of her coma.

“I would tell you to be patient, my son,” she said compassionately, “but I understand your fear. However, I do not know.” Her expression displayed how helpless she felt. “Her body is strong, it’s just waiting on her to open her eyes.”

“Her mind won’t accept what happened.” Sesshomaru and Kimi looked up to see the Morrigan standing a few feet away, her shoulders slumped. “I was afraid of something like this. Kumayomaru, for all his cowardice, is all too clever in how to break people irreparably with the maximum amount of psychological damage possible.” She cleared her throat as she considered her next words. “Rina is trapped in her mind right now. It’s replaying what happened to Kotone, Azuna, Koga, and Ayame on repeat and she keeps rejecting it. She can’t get past the horror she’s witnessed. And she won’t come back so long as she remembers it.”

Comprehension dawned on Sesshomaru’s face. “This is why you wanted me to summon my mother.” He saw Kimi look sharply at him in his peripheral vision. “This is why you wanted me to ask her about my memories of Kumayomaru.”

The Morrigan nodded sadly. “I’m sorry, but yes, that is why.” She turned to Kimi. “The trauma that Sesshomaru experienced when he was a small child kept him from coming back for several days, did it not?”

Kimi nodded quietly. “Yes.”

“And when you locked his memories, he came back soon after.”
“Yes.”

“This is the same level of trauma that has locked Rina away in her own mind. I need you to lock her memories.”

Kimi wrung her hands in distress. “But her memories of Kumayomaru are so intertwined with her memories of Sesshomaru. What will happen?”

The Morrigan sighed heavily. “I don’t know, to be honest. I don’t know how deft you are in your skills of manipulated memories. But I would advise sending her home. Back to her era. The Well has opened back up. Send her back home with no expectations beyond her safety and well-being. She’ll need what is familiar to her to help her move beyond what has happened.” She placed a sympathetic hand on Sesshomaru’s shoulder. “I promise I will keep looking out for her.” Then she vanished.

Sesshomaru’s heart felt hollow from grief. After all this, after all they had been through and survived to be together and now, ultimately, Kumayomaru was getting his wish.

“What do you want to do, my son?” Kimi asked him softly. He wrestled with himself for several minutes. Just get it over with? Put it off until the morning? She squeezed his shoulder gently. “I’ll come back in the morning, my son. I should prepare as much as I can. Maybe I can wield this spell better this time than I did with you.”

He didn’t sleep at all that night. He kept her in his arms and alternated between talking to her, trying desperately to coax her out of the darkness, and trying to reach her through their bond. Wherever she was trapped, it rendered their bond at a certain point to this odd, snowy nothingness that had made him so increasingly uneasy. Is this the nothingness that his mother and father had experienced when he wouldn’t come back after what Kumayomaru had done? Now he understood far better his mother’s desperation when she had mucked around with his memories.

After yet another attempt to try to reach her through their bond and guide her back, he gave up and tried to bring himself to a place of acceptance. He would be losing her tomorrow. She wouldn’t remember him. Would possibly never remember him ever again. And he still had to find Kumayomaru and finish the goddamned Bear demon off for good. Preferably before he could recuperate from his injuries too much.

By the time Kimi returned to him in the morning, Sesshomaru had forced himself into a shell that
was all too reminiscent of who he used to be -- stoic, passive, and completely walled off. He hated it. But he didn’t know how else he was supposed to deal with what was coming. “I’m ready,” he said by way of greeting his mother. His mind rebelled against the lie. Bullshit. You’ll never be ready. Her expression, however, showed understanding and compassion.

She knelt next to Rina’s body and put her hands on her daughter-in-law’s temples while Sesshomaru backed away. He could sense Kimi diving into Rina’s psyche, her abilities allowing her to go deeper than Sesshomaru had been able to. He knew when Kimi had found what she was looking for by the way her expressions changed. A few minutes more and she was done. She pulled back out of Rina’s psyche and came to stand by him and wait.

They only had to wait for a few minutes before they saw Rina’s eyes moving about under her lids and only a couple minutes more before her eyes began to flutter open. Despite all the hours he’d spent preparing himself for this and trying to separate himself from hope, Sesshomaru couldn’t help but hold his breath as those emerald orbs began darting about nervously. His mother must have sensed his unease because she quietly grasped his hand.

He watched as Rina’s eyes took in her surroundings with increasing confusion until they focused on him and his mother. Her eyes lit up for a moment with something akin to brief recognition and then that dimmed as well. Sesshomaru’s shoulders slumped.

“Who…?” she began hesitantly. “I feel like I should know who you are,” she finished sheepishly.

“It’s alright, dear,” Kimi said gently, stepping toward Rina with her hands held out in a non-threatening gesture. “To put it bluntly, you’ve been through some pretty horrible shit and it seems to have affected your memory.”

Rina blinked at Kimi in confusion for a moment, but her eyes kept returning to Sesshomaru. His heart ached and it took every shred of his notorious self-control to keep himself rooted where he stood instead of doing what he longed to do. He tentatively tested their Mating bond, but just as when she had been comatose, all he found on her end was static. He felt completely disoriented. He’d had no idea just how intrinsic his bond with Rina had been to him and now he felt completely lost at sea with the unnatural way their bond had been paralyzed.

“What’s your name?” she asked softly. He looked up to realize she was talking to him and looked away as her question twisted his gut further.

He took in a deep breath to try and steady himself and then cleared his throat. “Sesshomaru,” he finally replied, his voice thick with the buildup of his emotions. He passed a rather helpless glance
toward her. Was it his imagination or did she look lost like he felt? Of course she’s lost, you idiot, he thought bitterly to himself. She can’t remember who you are or where she’s at. She probably doesn’t remember anything past the point when she met you.

Still, there was something more than the disorientation of her current amnesiac state. If he were capable of a clearer head, he’d be far more certain of it. She looked like something was missing, something vital that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Was that why she kept looking at him like she was trying to figure him out?

“My apologies,” he said more gruffly than he’d intended as he bowed to her, turned on his heel, and fled the hut with a brisk stride. He had to get out of there and collect himself before he fell apart before her and frightened her further.

“Did I say something wrong?” he heard her ask as he went through the door.

“No, my dear,” his mother reassured her. “It’s not your fault, I promise. The past several days have been quite rough on him as well and he’s been terribly worried for you.”

“Worried about me?” Rina questioned. “Why?”

“Without your memories intact, it’s difficult to explain,” Kimi said slowly, trying to measure her words carefully. “Perhaps it’s better if your heart and soul are able to remember rather than hearing it from people you don’t currently recall that you know.”

At Rina’s silence, Sesshomaru continued on, not quite sure where he’d been intending to go until he found himself at InuYasha and Kagome’s door. He’d been by Rina’s side ceaselessly these past several days and everyone had been keeping to themselves as they recovered from the battle and the losses they’d suffered. The only time he’d come out from the hut and away from Rina had been when they’d had a funeral pyre for the people they’d lost. Especially Koga and Ayame. His heart felt hollow and blown to pieces as he remembered his friends and how instrumental they’d been in his and Rina’s reunion.

And then, unbidden, he recalled his and Rina’s last day together before their battle against Kumayomaru. He straightened himself and walked away from InuYasha and Kagome’s hut. He wanted to be alone with his memories right now.

“What do you want to do when all this is over?”
“This. For a solid week.”

“Mmmm… yes, please. Nobody bothering us…”

“Getting to actually think about our actual future…”

“Maybe even start planning for a family… I mean, it wouldn’t be right for Kagome and InuYasha’s baby to be without at least one cousin to play with…”

As the memory faded, he came back to himself and realized he was running. His eyes reddened with fury as his heart howled in confused anger at this loss. He didn’t know where he was going. He didn’t care. Right now, he just wanted to hunt himself a fucking Bear…

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Rina was quiet as she considered Kimi’s words. She couldn’t quite understand, but she felt as though there were something… attached to her? It was some sort of energy, but it felt wrong. Incomplete. Somehow, it had something to do with Sesshomaru. She felt like she was lost in darkness even beyond her memory loss. Something was broken that should never have been able to be broken. But it didn’t feel impossibly permanent. Still, she realized, when Sesshomaru had been there, she felt like she could possibly begin to remember something. Like he was her anchor. And now, without him there, she felt adrift.

“Where did Sesshomaru go?” she finally asked the woman who smelled like she was his mother even though her looks made her seem more like his sister.

Kimi frowned. “I don’t know. Do you want him to come back?”

Rina swallowed hard and nodded.

“I’ll go find him, child, don’t you worry. In the meantime, why don’t you try to get some sleep and I’ll bring you something to eat soon, alright?”

Rina nodded again. A touch from Kimi and her eyes felt so heavy. Wait, was she dreaming
already?

“I’m so sorry, child,” Kimi’s voice carried an odd, echoing quality that made her head feel strange. “Neither I nor the Morrigan anticipated what this would do to your and Sesshomaru’s bond. You cannot go on with your life not remembering anything. But if your memories come back all at once, your mind may shatter all over again.” The reverberation in Kimi’s voice increased in intensity, echoing all around her as Rina wandered, disoriented, in this strange darkness. "I bid your mind to unlock slowly. Remember bits and pieces at a time. Tell your story to someone who will believe you when you get home. I bid your mind to unfurl from the shadows a bit at a time.”

The words were so strange, they made absolutely no sense to Rina as she felt herself drift further away. But no matter how far she fell, Kimi’s voice followed her, whispering to her. Secrets not yet meant to be known. Promises. The last thing she remembered before she slipped away in the arms of sleep was an odd popping sensation as though something had been opened.

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Her sleep was dreamless, as far as she knew anyway, for it seemed like she had only just closed her eyes for a moment before she opened them again to the late afternoon sunlight streaming into the hut. A sound across the room from her to her left achieved her attention. It was the silver-haired man, Sesshomaru. The man who had seemed so familiar, judging by the way her heart had both thrilled and ached whenever she’d looked at him earlier, and yet had remained frustratingly beyond the reach of her memory. He was slumped asleep against the wall. At first glance, his face seemed passive in his repose. Yet Rina could read the signs of the hopeless, resigned despair that surrounded him.

Without warning, she saw him watching her at the beach. Oh, she remembered this!

She had just beaten the fuck out of those two douchebags! How strange. She had remembered that incident with uninhibited clarity and yet, as soon as that portion of the memory had ended, it had been strangely blank until now. And yet now that portion of the memory was back!

She had smelled him from several yards away and his scent had gotten her attention because he had obviously not been human. She could starkly recall the look on his face when she had turned and pinned him with a stare without so much as a second of hesitation.

And the club that night! She had found out that he was Sota’s friend! And he’d had a cloak of despair about him very similar to what enveloped him now.
The club. Sota. Izumi. Was she just imagining this life in another time that occupied so much of what memories she still had? She felt so confused and muddled. There were so many holes in her memory that she felt disoriented. There were so many impossible things buzzing around in her brain, she began to fear that she was beginning to fall into irrevocable madness. Her pulse began to thrum, picking up in pace, and it began to inhibit the ease of her breathing. She whimpered when she realized that her anxiety was beginning to spiral out of her control.

She hadn’t even noticed that he’d awakened, but Sesshomaru was suddenly there in front of her, his eyes wide with concern, and he grabbed her hands gently without hesitation. Reflexively, she clung to his hands like they were her lifeline and met the molten gold of his eyes with relief that she didn’t have to weather this alone.

“Rina, it’s ok, baby. It’s going to be ok,” he said to her with an unthinking ease that bespoke of long-established habit. This clearly was not the first anxiety attacked he’d soothed and supported her through. One hand let go of hers to rest lightly on her cheek to keep her focused on his face. The other maintained a gentle grasp on her other hand, his thumb smoothing gentle, rhythmic circles around the back of it.

"Breathe, Firefly," he crooned, his voice a soothing hum. He breathed with her, giving her a rhythm to follow for a moment before he counted, “Breathe in, 2, 3, 4… Hold, 2, 3, 4… And breathe out, 2, 3, 4…”

Finally, after a few of those breathing cycles, Rina felt her pulse begin to calm and her breathing become easier. Relieved, she rested her forehead against Sesshomaru’s chest without thinking. It felt like a familiar habit and it brought her further comfort. She felt his breath hitch and heard his heartbeat pick up a thundering pace. He hesitantly wended his arms about her. Light at first but relaxing into the embrace when she calmed further under his touch.

Finally, he tensed and carefully pushed Rina away from him. He kept his expression carefully hidden from her view as silence hung thick in the air between them. There was so much Rina’s mind still whirled with and wanted to ask him about.

He’d called her “baby”. She knew that such endearments were otherwise nonexistent in this era. So did that mean she really was from that other time?

“I saw you on the beach,” she blurted at last, not knowing how to verbalize any of the other thoughts cycloning through her mind. He looked at her sharply, his expression startled yet softened with a touch of hope driving back some of the dull resignation in his eyes.

“You remember the beach?” he asked slowly, seeming unsure as to how much he should say.
“I remember that I saw you right after I kicked the shit out of a couple of guys that tried to harass me,” she blurted hurriedly. “I remembered the incident itself, but it cut out to dark after I laid them out. I don’t know what happened, but before you woke up, while you were still sleeping, that gap just… I don’t know… it filled in. But you looked and smelled the same as you do now, differences in clothing aside.”

She studied his face. He was trying so hard to maintain a neutral expression, but she could read his eyes like she could read sheet music. “You’re right there on the edge of my memory,” she whispered, “and I feel like it’s killing me.” She lifted her hands to his face and watched his eyes freeze over with a deep sadness. Even without anyone saying it, she knew that he loved her, and he’d felt lost since whatever had happened that had stolen her memory.

“It’s clear to me that my heart remembers everything that my mind doesn’t,” she finished. She didn’t know what else to say. She didn’t know how to say it. It was all so abstract and confusing.

She took a breath, intending to steel her nerves, but Sesshomaru, looking just as desperate as she felt to not be lost anymore, beat her to what she intended to do. His hands gently framed her face and pulled her to him, brushing his lips over hers in a soft whisper of touch. Her heart, which had felt so unbearably lonely, as though something vital had been violently ripped away, leaving an impossible hole, blossomed with relief when he kissed her.

He growled with relief of his own when her tongue begged at his lower lip and her heart sang when he opened to her. She whimpered as she tasted the textures of his mouth and reveled in how he returned her caresses. He gently lifted her into his arms so he could cradle her on his lap. The feel of his arms so tightly about her, as though he were afraid of her disappearing from him, increased the ache in her heart again. There was no playfulness in him as his tongue swept through her mouth again. She had the feeling that such was quite unusual for them. He kissed her as though it might be the last time he ever did so.

She had the horrid feeling sitting heavily in her gut that he was trying to commit her to memory, as she was trying to bring him back to hers, because this moment would not last. Kimi’s voice rang in her memory but she couldn’t remember what she had said to her as Rina had fallen asleep. Hadn’t Kimi spoken to her as she’d fallen asleep? Or was that a dream? She couldn’t remember. She’d been so drowsy, so heavy. There was something about Kimi’s voice as she’d spoken, though, that made her heart weep as though it knew that something was about to happen that would threaten to break her.

Even Sesshomaru’s manner seemed to rail against this coming dread. He made no attempts to take things any further with her than this. Rather, he held her tenderly to him, taking his time as he kissed her and touched her, smoothing his hands over her face, tangling his fingers in her hair, breathing in her scent.
Something in her cracked and broke when he pulled back from her. Whatever shadows had lifted from him as they’d been locked in their embrace descended again and his features once more had the empty resolve of a marble statue. He looked like he was dying inside but would be damned if it would be so obvious to anyone else as it was to her.

“Come, Rina,” he said softly as he lifted her off of him and moved to get some space between them.

“Where are we going?” she asked warily.

“It’s not safe for you here.”

“Why not?”

“You won’t remember, but you and I have an enemy named Kumayomaru. We fought him a few days ago, but he got away after killing some of our friends. It’s you he’s mainly after. I won’t let you be in danger from him anymore.”

She could feel her anxiety waking again, but she clamped it down viciously. “So, where am I going?”

“You’re going back to your own time.”

“What? How?” Confusion ripped through her. So, her memories of having lived in another time were truly real after all?

“You’ll see.”

“Are you coming with me?”

His eyes closed and his body became rigid as though he were bracing himself. “No.”

“Why?”
“I can’t have you in any more danger. It nearly killed me, what he’d already put you through. I wasn’t able to protect you—”

“I don’t need you to protect me!”

“I know that, Firefly,” he said with a sad smile. “Believe me, you’re one of the strongest and most capable women I’ve ever known. But I couldn’t live with myself if he were to come back and finish what he started. I need you to be safe and out of his reach, at least until I can find him and kill him myself.” He moved to pick something off the floor -- her backpack, she realized -- and his body language spelled a finality that was starting to piss her off.

“Then what am I supposed to do?” she barked, her temper beginning to ignite.

“Live,” he answered simply. “Heal. Regain your strength. You came horribly close to dying in that battle.”

That last sentence knocked the wind out of her. There was no getting around this. He was making her leave. She still didn’t understand how the hell she’d get back to her own time. Hell, how had she gotten back to this era to begin with? She kept quiet, however. She’d be finding out the answer to that question all too soon. He wasn’t giving her a choice. And even though she had no memory of what he spoke, she could understand why.

She followed him from the hut, feeling the cold fist of ice on her heart starting to spread until she felt completely numb with the same resignation that had emanated from Sesshomaru when they’d first awoken. She didn’t ask where they were going when he led her away from the village and into the forest, walking toward an odd hum of energy. They stopped when they reached a clearing. In the middle of it stood a well. The odd pulses of energy that Rina had been sensing were emanating from within it.

“What the fuck?” she asked under her breath. She looked hesitantly at Sesshomaru. He didn’t look at her. His gaze was locked on the well in the clearing and he seemed lost in thought. His expression was empty and neutral. “What is that?” she finally asked him.

“That is the Bone Eater’s Well,” he said at long last. “Made from Goshinboku, the Tree of Ages, it’s able to act as a portal from this era to yours. It’s been closed off for several weeks, but yesterday, before you finally woke up from your coma, it opened back up and has been calling for you.”

He sighed. “It’s complicated and would take too long to explain right now. Perhaps if your memories return, you’ll understand.”

“How do you say it’s calling for me?”

“Because you’re the only one it’s allowing passage to,” he replied dully.

“What? What do you mean?” she asked in deepening confusion.

“I mean that you are the only one who can go through the Well right now. It won’t let me through. It’s closed to me.” Before she could ask any more questions, he took a heavy step towards the Well. She followed him, dreading and yet curious. Would this Well really take her back home? Dorothy, click your heels three times and eat your heart out.

“This is how I came to your time almost a year ago,” Sesshomaru spoke softly and pulled her out of her thoughts. He was gazing down into the Well, but it was clear he was seeing nothing but memories playing before his eyes. “I’d lost my daughter several months prior and I was lost and broken. I didn’t know how to grieve, didn’t know how to move on. I was holding everyone else back from moving on as well. And then I met you. And you knew just how to go about getting me to confront my grief. You brought me back to life, Firefly.” Despite the blank mask on his face and the tone of his voice that tried to match, it was impossible for Rina to miss the grief building in his eyes that he tried so hard to not show.

“Sesshomaru,” she began before she realized she was at a loss for words. Don’t make me go back. Not yet.

“The Lords of Time have spoken and it’s time for you to go back.” Before she could say a word, he lifted her into his arms, holding her close like it may be the last time he ever did so. “Don’t put your life on hold for me, Rina. I don’t know how long it will take to find Kumayomaru and ensure your safety. It’s not fair to expect you to wait for me. So, go on with your life as if you will never see me again, for you very well may not.”
He kissed her that one last time and something sparked to life in the strange energy cord that Rina had been unable to unravel. Her mind flooded with a jumble of images. Memories from Sesshomaru’s past. His daughter. Her death. The first time they met on the beach. Him watching her at the club. On and on and on they went, as though someone had dumped a bucket of puzzle pieces into her brain but only the first few came to her put together in anything resembling a coherent image.

“Sesshomaru, wait--” but she was unable to say anything further before she felt a gentle shove, the Well hitting the back of her legs, and then the surreal sensation of falling. She felt like she fell for a hundred years among the stars that surrounded her and carried her, buffeting her fall. The pieces of memory surrounded her and mocked her, too terrifying to look at. A huge Bear was hurting a couple of people she couldn’t remember but knew that she’d cared about. Was that… was that Kumayomaru? Oh gods, he’d brutalized them! Mauled them! Tore them apart!

Rina screamed and tried to cover her eyes so she wouldn’t have to see all this again. She didn’t even realize she was no longer falling. Amidst the panic of these horrible flashes, something else caught her attention. It was so noisy! What the hell were all those sounds? She looked up. She could no longer see the sky. No. Instead, all she could make out was… was that a roof? As soon as these things caught her attention, most of the memory pieces she’d seen more intensely in the Well faded from her recollection like bits of a bad dream that hung just out of reach while leaving their terror behind.

Trembling with the still-roiling force of her panic, she tried to climb up out of the Well. She stumbled and fell a couple of times before she finally made it to the top. The Well was inside a shed of some sort and the world outside of it was horrendously noisy. The sounds were familiar enough from her memories, but holy shit, she hadn’t remembered the sounds being so oppressive. She curled up against the side of the Well, which no longer pulsed with the energy she had sensed earlier, and hugged her backpack close to her, rocking back and forth.

Thus, Rina found herself home, in her time again, dazed, scared, and grieving for hours until Grandpa Higurashi found her…

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Rina sat back on the couch with her refilled cup of tea that Mrs. Higurashi had given her. She was accompanied by Ryuka and Izumi when she returned to the Shrine two weeks later to tell the rest of her story to the Higurashis after she had remembered everything. But first, she had needed time to process everything that had been restored.

It was still so strange how much calmer and more capable she felt since filling in the rest of the gaps in her memory, even the most horrifying ones. She wished she didn’t have to have those
particular memories back, but after the gaps in her memory had been filled back in, she’d been much better able to work through the multiple traumas one at a time. And even though she’d been angry as hell at first when Ryuka had informed her that someone had meddled with her memory, she now understood why Kimi had done so.

She looked absently out the window as Mom, and Grandpa Higurashi conversed incredulously with Ryuka, Izumi, and Sota about everything she’d told them. She stared in the direction of the Well house. It was just as quiet as it had been when Sesshomaru had tossed her through. She wondered how he, Kagome, InuYasha, and everyone else back home was doing.

**Back home…**

She couldn’t really say she felt surprised by her thinking of the village in the Feudal Era that way. She’d had a life there that, despite the dangers that had awaited them as they’d prepared for Kumayomaru, she’d felt like she belonged in. She’d had a place there. She’d mattered. She hadn’t been a freak to the world back there.

As those thoughts crossed her mind, she immediately felt a flash of guilt. She didn’t discount that she mattered to Izumi and Ryuka and neither had ever made her feel like a freak. But she couldn’t… be herself as openly in this world. She got weird looks whenever she caught a scent that others couldn’t smell or heard sounds undetectable to the humans around her.

Before she’d ended up in the Feudal Era, she’d accepted that she was weird to everyone and didn’t much bother with what they thought. She was fine with being a freak. But now? After having spent months in an era where she was surrounded by people who not only knew what she was but was completely normal to them? Including the humans? Granted, she knew that such would not have been the case in other villages. She knew that all too well, given what she recalled having been told of InuYasha’s childhood. But that village had been her oasis. It had been special. She could Wolf out and no one batted an eye. The human children had loved her gigantic Dire Wolf form.

Here in the modern era she was trapped.

“Rina? Earth to Rina,” Ryuka’s gentle voice pulled her sharply out of her thoughts.

“Hmm?” She looked at them. “What? I’m sorry, I was kinda zoned out.”

“It’s alright, dear,” Mrs. Higurashi reassured her, “I completely understand. I was asking if you’d
like to send a letter through the Well to Sesshomaru.”

“Don’t wait for me, Rina, for you might very well not see me again.”

His words rang through her mind. Would he even want to hear from her? Had he moved on the way he’d expected her to? There was no longer the static interference in their bond. Not like it had been during her memory loss. Instead, he just felt very far away. But, dammit, they were Mated! That was for life! Her eyes hardened with a glint of finality.

She got up, grabbed a small piece of paper and a pen, and simply wrote the words, “I remember everything.”

“How has Kagome and InuYasha been doing?” she asked Mom as she handed her the paper to include in her next letter to Kagome.

“She’s so sick and tired of being pregnant,” Mom laughed, beaming again at the thought of her impending grandchild. “But they’re doing alright otherwise,” she continued before she sobered. “Kagome’s been on bed-rest since the battle with Kumayomaru. The stress of the battle and the grief for her friends were pretty hard on her and I guess she almost went into early labor because of it. But she’s supposed to be due in a little more than a month now.”

There were so many other things that Rina wanted to ask about, like what happened to Koga and Ayame’s orphaned pups? Was the Pack still there? Who led them now that their Alphas were gone? She must have accidentally broadcast some of her thoughts because Ryuka piped up and asked them for her.

“Oh, Kagome did write to me about some of that,” Mom replied sadly. “I’ll find those letters for you, ok? So, what are you going to do now, Rina?”

Rina blinked. She hadn’t even thought that far ahead. Then she blushed as she had to admit to herself as to why she hadn’t. Once her memory had been recovered, she had assumed she’d be able to go back to her life in the Feudal Era. It hadn’t occurred to her that the Well would stay closed to her.

“I guess,” she said haltingly, “I’ll start with going back to work at the club.”

“Sounds like a good start to me!” Izumi chirped, cheerfully hooking her arm around Rina’s
It had been a month since Sesshomaru had sent Rina back through the Well and he was on his way back to the village after having been gone for the past few weeks trying to locate Kumayomaru. He’d stayed one night in the village after he sent her back, but couldn’t bear the emptiness of their hut.

InuYasha had come to him with some sake that night and they drank quietly together, joined briefly by Kimi, who was granted a break from looking after Kagome when the bedridden Miko had gone to sleep. No one said anything and Sesshomaru was fine with that. He didn’t want to hear the condolences as though Rina were dead.

Kimi drank a couple of bowls of sake with them and began to excuse herself for the night when Sesshomaru stopped her.

“I’m going to start looking for Kumayomaru tomorrow,” he informed them. They both looked at him, startled, but neither InuYasha nor Kimi said anything. “I just… I can’t be here right now. Not without her. And not while that sonofabitch still lives.” Inaction, when he felt helpless, was something that tended to drive Sesshomaru right up a tree.

Kimi sat back down with a sigh and served herself another bowl of sake. “My son, I must ask you something,” she said firmly. “When Kumayomaru had you, your brother, Rina, and Koga and Ayame strung up, you, Koga, and Rina were awake, yes?”

“Yes,” Sesshomaru confirmed, his heart twisting in pain at the thought of his deceased friends.

“InuYasha, once the Moonless Night was over, succumbed to his demon transformation automatically because he didn’t have Tetsusaiga on his person. And his demonic strength enabled
him to break fairly easily through those cords. As did Rina when she lost control to her Ultimate form.”

Sesshomaru’s breath had gasped out at his mother’s gentle words as he realized she was right. Guilt immediately tore a hole in his chest. He could have prevented Koga and Ayame’s deaths, but he hadn’t been thinking!

“Sesshomaru, stop!” Kimi had commanded with a loving sharpness. “Don’t do that to yourself or you’ll only be easier prey to further machinations as this.” She took a deep breath. “I ask you this, not to inflict guilt or blame upon you but, rather, should Kumayomaru or any other enemy as sadistic as he should catch you like that again, you’ll be more ready and clear-headed for it. "What makes Kumayomaru such a powerful and terrible enemy is not necessarily his power in and of itself, though it certainly is formidable. Rather, a lot of it stems from his sadistic skill at trapping his enemies deeply in their worst fears to where they lose their capacity for clear thinking. He used nothing but mere cords that night because he knew you, Koga, and Rina would be too afraid for each other and for Ayame and InuYasha to think clearly enough to realize and remember that you each had the power to free yourselves. "He was able to beat you because he set the stage for your fear, knowing you three would be too consumed by that fear to do anything else but drown in it. Do you understand, Sesshomaru?”

He had stared at her wide-eyed, too stunned and stricken to do more than nod. She was right. He had awoken, not even able to remember how he’d been rendered unconscious in the first place, and disoriented as hell from the get-go. And when he’d seen Rina hanging by her wrists across the clearing from him, his mind had spiraled down in panic, able to focus only on her -- something he’d not previously experienced in any other battle.

At that moment, more than ever, as he had contemplated Kimi’s words, he had finally and truly understood why his mother had kept him and his father as far away from her as possible, emotionally speaking. He looked back up at her and expressed as much.

“Yes, my son,” she had said with thick regret, “but as you now know, that wasn’t the right path to take either. I’m sorry, Sesshomaru. I neglected you out of fear but I also did you another disservice in not being able to teach you how to regulate your emotions so they would not take you over and inhibit your ability to think in such a situation. One cannot teach what they themselves do not know and I was too afraid to try to learn.

“However,” she continued sternly, “with that being said, I cannot stop you from looking for Kumayomaru, nor will I try. But you are still being ruled by your emotions, which are still out of balance from your ability to think and to calculate.” She kept going even when she had sensed Sesshomaru beginning to bristle. “You are hurting and you are angry, which is more than understandable, but your heightened emotions still make you an easy target for Kumayomaru to manipulate. I would implore you to wait until Rina returns before you pursue him.” Kimi held her ground and his gaze firmly even when Sesshomaru’s eyes flashed.
“She’s gone, Mother,” Sesshomaru had snapped bitterly through his teeth. “She’s back in her time, the Well has closed, and her memories of me are gone! Our Mating bond is…” he gestured helplessly with his hands as his building sorrow increased his difficulty in articulating himself.

“Is still there,” Kimi said patiently, “and will be reopened. I promise.”

“Even across time? Even if the Well doesn’t open again?”

“It will open up when it’s time to. Sesshomaru, I understand your feelings, please believe me. But you’re not thinking and that’s exactly why I don’t want you hunting or facing Kumayomaru alone, especially right now.” Her own voice carried a rising measure of panic that had caused him to pause.

“What am I not thinking of, Mother?”

“That Fate had brought you and Rina together and insisted you both complete the Mating bond in order to kill Kumayomaru together. Did not even Rina’s goddess point out that it would take the both of you working together to accomplish this? Did you really believe that that was your only chance to do so?” She’d placed a hand on his cheek. “You’re still operating from a place of fear, my son. Seek out Kumayomaru’s whereabouts if you must, but do not face him alone, do you understand me? Please.” She used no power of command in her voice. Merely the pleading of her mother’s heart.

“Alright, Mother,” he had promised at last. “I will seek him but I will not engage. I swear it.”

He’d left the village the following morning. The last thing Kimi had said to him as she saw him off was to urge him not to rush. “Kumayomaru will return eventually, you know. He’s got a vendetta to finish. So take your time on your search and reflect on what I’ve told you. Find your balance.”

So, he’d taken his time, accepting the wisdom his mother had offered him even though it had been excruciating to hear. She had been right. He’d been terribly off balance ever since Rin’s death.

That’s not true either, Father, he heard her speak to him as he followed the remnants of Kumayomaru’s scent.
When have you ever had your emotions in balance with your logic?

Damn. He winced. Rin was right. Before her death, he’d kept his emotions carefully locked away. When her death had brought his emotions exploding out of their cage, his ability to think clearly had drastically reduced. His task was to now bring his emotions and his clear thinking into balance for the first time ever in his 900 years.

It had taken him two weeks to track Kumayomaru’s scent to the island where he’d held Rina captive. As Sesshomaru had suspected, Kumayomaru had abandoned the isolated castle, leaving behind the corpses of servants that looked like they’d been dead for months. He was glad that Rina hadn’t had to see with her own eyes what had become of the other people she had interacted with and possibly befriended while she was here. He looked about the abandoned island for whatever clues he could possibly find to divine Kumayomaru’s next move, but he wasn’t particularly surprised that he found nothing. He followed the Bear’s scent away from the castle until it reached a beach and disappeared. It appeared that the Bear, who had still been quite wounded when he’d come this way, had fled farther north.

Father, it’s time to go back home. He looked at Rin, who had manifested beside him and regarded him with a gentle smile.

Yes, I do believe you’re right, dear daughter. “Home”. It still felt too hollow a word without Rina there. But he was learning. Learning to function. Learning to find his balance. At least Rina was safe back in her time. That would have to be enough. And, he realized as that thought crossed his mind, it actually was enough. He missed her like hell, but this separation was a stark contrast to when she’d been kidnapped and missing for all those months. Knowing that she was safe, out of Kumayomaru’s reach, and could easily handle whatever dangers her modern era might present gave him a great deal more peace amidst the loneliness.

He had been forcing himself to not obsessively check the connection of their Mating bond. The loneliness he felt without that solid tie to her still gnawed at him, but he had remained steadfast in working through and processing those feelings. He understood that he couldn’t depend on or wait for any changes in that connection to save him from the loneliness or the self-work he needed to accomplish.

His first night back on the main island heading back toward the village, he’d dreamed of her. It was different than the dreams of her he’d been having since she’d returned to her time. Wishful dreams of them together. Memories playing back before his sleep-shrouded mind. No, this was different.
He was watching her, completely invisible to her, observing her like a ghost. She was in the guest room at the Higurashi Shrine, the same one he’d stayed in, and she was pacing restlessly around the room, stopping every few minutes to look at herself in the vanity mirror and touch her fingertips to the right side of her neck. She could see the Mating mark again! She looked exhausted. Her eyes had shadows circling them and were reddened as though she’d been weeping.

As he watched her, he saw brief flashes of her telling Grandpa Higurashi what she could remember and of her memory gradually filling itself in. Somehow, he could sense that she’d been back in her time for about a week, give or take, by this point. She hadn’t yet left the Shrine. Hadn’t yet been reunited with her friends. She’d only yet had the strength and fortitude to try to pick up the pieces and process through them by telling her tale to Grandpa.

But now she needed her friends. She was afraid. She was increasingly afraid of what she could not yet remember. He watched her try to lay down but she could only toss and turn while looking every so often at the clock as she continued to struggle with her indecision.

It’s time, Rina. You need your friends and it’s time, he spoke softly to her without thinking.

She got up then, seeming eerily as though she’d heard him, and fretfully grabbed for clothing and for a jacket -- the same one he’d worn the night they met. She closed her eyes and breathed in his scent that must have still clung faintly to the material.

I need you too, you fucking idiot.

Sesshomaru couldn’t have been more surprised if she’d turned around and slapped his dream-world body right across the face! She’d heard him! She’d actually heard him! Her voice was tinged with lonely, confused bitterness, not that he could blame her in the slightest. Especially considering how much she still had yet to remember at this point. He was, after all, cognizant of the fact that the dream-world had taken him into her recent past. Gods only knew how much she had remembered at the current point.

But she’d heard him! And she remembered him! Remembered their Mating bond and could see her marks! That alone caused a bittersweet elation in his heart. The dream faded away as she left the room and Sesshomaru dreamed nothing else til his eyes opened the next morning.

Despite how afraid he was of getting his hopes up upon waking, his calmer mind knew that she was, indeed, remembering him. He had no other dreams of her like that the rest of his journey back to the village. Knowing that she was remembering everything, however, only increased the maddening temptation to scour their Mating bond for any increase in their connection. He remained
steadfast in his resolve to not check. Rather, he would wait til he got back home. He would spend the rest of the journey home meditating and contemplating just as he had done for the journey away.

Now, as he neared the village, it had been about a month since he’d sent Rina back to her time. His eyes immediately found their hut in the distance as he crested the last hill that had hidden the village from his sight. His heart thudded a dull ache at the thought of being there in that hut without her. Still, he drew a resolute breath and continued forward.

Miroku was the first to spot his arrival in the distance and he waved eagerly at him before he went running in the direction of Kagome’s herb fields. Sesshomaru tipped his head curiously as he drew nearer, and even moreso when he saw InuYasha and Kimi hastening out to meet him. His anxiety spiked briefly, but he noted that nothing in their demeanors gave any indication that anything was amiss, so he took a couple of deep breaths and forced himself to relax.

“So!” InuYasha bellowed his greeting, waving something excitedly in the air. “Welcome back, brother! It’s about fucking time!”

Sesshomaru smirked in amusement at his little brother’s boorish greeting, feeling the sudden urge to put the hanyo in a mischievous headlock and give him a long-overdue “noogie”. As soon as his brother was in grabbing range, he didn’t hesitate in acting on that still-strange impulse of brotherly affection. It was actually a relief to distract himself with this amusement after the past few weeks of solitude and solemn introspection.

Kimi looked at them both with motherly exasperation as Sesshomaru grabbed InuYasha in the planned headlock and got about as far as one drag of his knuckles across his little brother’s scalp.

“No!” InuYasha yelped. “Dammit, Sesshomaru! Not the scalp again!” InuYasha was nimble and quick and managed to sweep a foot out, upsetting Sessho’s balance enough that he released the glowing hanyo. “Fucks sake! Where’d you even learn that anyway?!” he complained as he rubbed the top of his head. His outrage only thinly disguised the grin that twitched the corners of his mouth. Clearly, he’d not been expecting such a mischievous greeting from his brother. Not after what Sesshomaru had endured.

“I saw Ryuka’s brother do that to her a couple of times,” Sesshomaru shrugged with an unrepentant smirk of his own.

“Just you wait! I’ll scalp you like that!” InuYasha threatened.
“Dream of when you’ll be fast enough, little brother, before we’re both decrepit,” Sessho retorted.

Kimi rolled her eyes to the heavens for a moment, unused to the two of them being so boisterous. “So this is what it’s like to have such sons,” she said to no one in particular. “I’ve witnessed it elsewhere and heard the tales for centuries, but never experienced it.”

Sessho and InuYasha glanced at each other for a moment. Sesshomaru’s eyebrow arched as InuYasha’s eyes took on a mischievous glint. “Oh, we could give you more of that full experience if you’d like, Mother,” Sesshomaru quipped solemnly. No sooner than the words left his mouth, he reached his arm out to elbow InuYasha with a shove that caused him to stumble slightly.

InuYasha didn’t miss a beat. “Mo-o-o-o-om!” he whined in an exaggerated wail. “He pushed me!”

“He started it!” Sesshomaru countered, attempting to replicate a similar tone that he couldn’t quite pull off. It was all he could do to keep from laughing at his mother’s hapless, blinking expression as she took in their antics.

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“Oh dear gods, save me,” Kimi broke in as she continued to gape with wry amusement at her sons, both natural and adopted. “InuYasha, don’t you have something to give to your brother?” she chided.

Clearly, InuYasha felt this question was too easy. He quickly pressed the envelopes he’d been holding into Kimi’s hands before anyone could fully register the movement and cheekily replied, “Yes, Mom, I do! I believe Kagome called it a ‘knuckle sandwich’!” and proceeded to tackle Sesshomaru to the ground the way they’d seen the village children wrestle.

“Oh for gods’ sakes!”

Sesshomaru had InuYasha pinned and tapping out in no time, a smug expression painting his features. “Correct me if I’m wrong, brother, but isn’t a ‘knuckle sandwich’ supposed to involve
"What on earth?" Miroku’s baffled voice broke through the commotion. "What the hell is going on?" Sesshomaru climbed to his feet and offered a hand to InuYasha, both still chortling with their exceedingly rare show of mischief.

"Apparently, the boys felt that I needed the ‘full experience’ of having rowdy, cantankerous children," Kimi replied to the confused monk, who promptly facepalmed.

"I don’t know whether to laugh or to be disturbed."

"My thoughts exactly," Kimi chuckled, shaking her head.

"It’s still weird to me to see them trying to kill each other like normal brothers rather than trying to actually obliterate each other like they used to," Miroku quipped, earning a baleful look from them both.

"And with that!" Kimi directed their attention to the envelopes that InuYasha had handed to her before he’d pounced his brother. "Sesshomaru, these seem to be for you!"

Sesshomaru’s heart stopped for a moment as he recognized Rina’s handwriting on the paper, spelling out his name. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to read the contents while under scrutiny.

InuYasha didn’t give him much choice. Snatching one of the envelopes, he said, "This one arrived first about a week ago," and stared expectantly at Sesshomaru, who sighed in hesitant capitulation and tore open the envelope. The message was simple but it was enough to make his breath catch.

*I remember everything.*

The emotional energy attached to the paper at the time she’d written it was still a tumultuous mix. She’d still been processing the avalanche of her memories and the sorrow they’d carried with them, but she’d also felt a lot calmer at the same time. More whole.

She remembered everything. She understood why Kimi had locked her memories. And she’d felt
lost. This message was the most she’d been capable of at the time. Sesshomaru pressed the paper to his face and inhaled her scent.

InuYasha’s quiet touch on his arm brought Sesshomaru back out of his thoughts. “What does she say, brother?” he asked eagerly. Sesshomaru handed him the paper and watched his brother’s face as he read the simple message. For once, InuYasha’s expression was inscrutable as he gave the page back. “That’s a relief,” was all he said. “What about the other one?”

“This one I’m going to read alone, brother. I have a feeling there will be more to it. When did this one arrive?”

“Just two days ago.” InuYasha clapped a hand to Sessho’s shoulder. “We’ll leave you to it, then, and see you at dinner, alright?”

Sesshomaru regarded his little brother with a small, grateful smile. “Yes, I will see you at dinner.” He embraced his mother, who smiled at him encouragingly, and clasped Miroku’s forearm before he set off in the direction of his hut.

Once he’d gotten settled in and removed the trappings of his armor, he seated himself on a floor cushion and regarded the unopened envelope in his grasp. He realized he was slightly afraid to open it and he didn’t know why. Had she wondered why she hadn’t heard back from him? Had she thought that he’d abandoned her, refusing contact, to force her to continue on her life without him for good?

He took a deep breath and sussed out the energies that still clung to the paper. No. He didn’t sense any emotions of that sort. Stop being such a coward and open the damned letter. He carefully tore open the envelope.

Dear Sesshomaru,

After I sent my initial message through the Well, Kagome wrote to tell me that you’d gone to track down Kumayomaru the day after you sent me back to this time. I hope you return soon so that this letter finds you safe.

I don’t quite know where to begin. It’s been a month since you sent me back here through the Well. When I first came back here, my memories were so muddled I didn’t realize I had been gone from here almost a whole year.
The Higurashis were gracious enough to let me stay here with them while I adjusted to being back in this era and processed through what I could remember. Grandpa Higurashi helped me a lot with that by asking me to tell him what I could remember. And the more I told him, the more memories I was able to recover.

Ryuka was able to help me recover the rest. She’s the one who helped me to figure out that my memories had actually been locked away; she and Izumi both helped me handle it when the reason for that became clear. My memories have returned fully, but they don’t feel real. What happened to Koga and Ayame doesn’t feel real. It’s the last thing I remember before I woke up and couldn’t remember you or Mom.

It’s all still such a mind-fuck, to be quite honest.

Once I recovered my memories, though, and returned to the Shrine to convey the rest of it to the Higurashis, Mrs. Higurashi (she also said I could call her “Mom”; guess I’ll refer to her as Mama Higurashi) asked me what I was going to do now. That question packed a helluva wallop. I don’t know what I was expecting. Actually, scratch that. That’s bullshit. I fully expected to be able to return to you through the Well. All I wanted was to be able to come home. But the Well was, and is, still closed to me.

Truth be told, I check it every time I come to visit Mama and Grandpa. I feel bad for it; I don’t want them to think I’m using them or anything. But they seem to understand. They told me that Kagome did the same thing when she was stuck on this side for those three years before the Well opened and allowed her to return.

I’ve been staying with Ryuka and Izumi at their cottage for the past couple of weeks. Mama and Grandpa welcomed me to stay with them as long as I liked, but I felt like I’d imposed upon their hospitality long enough. It was a blessing to have their support while I worked through things those first several days, but I felt that my time for convalescing was over and it was time for me to figure out my next move.

Izumi and Ryuka cleared out my apartment several months ago after the investigation into what happened stalled out and they were allowed to remove what of my things they could salvage. I’m staying in their guest bedroom for now. Maybe I’ll eventually strike out and get my own apartment again. But, quite frankly, the thought makes me shrivel. It feels too… final, I guess? Too much like having to accept that maybe you’re right. Maybe we won’t see each other again? I’m not ready to accept that. I just can’t.

In the meantime, I’m back to working at the club. Oh! And Izumi and Ryuka found a way to
actually forge their Mating bond some months before I returned! I saw their Mating marks when I finally had the fortitude to leave the Shrine and go see them. Same-sex marriage is still not recognized here, but ask them if they give a fuck. They got their Partnership Certificate and they want to have an actual wedding anyway. They waited to do that until I got back, so Izumi has been keeping me distracted with helping her plan their wedding. Mama and Grandpa immediately offered the use of the Shrine if they so wish.

I haven’t gone back to work at the wildlife center yet, but I have been out to see my wolves. A couple of them actually kinda remind me of Koga and Ayame now and, even though it hurts to think of them, I can’t seem to think of them as anything else. Their names, which I’ve known their whole lives, no longer stay in my head no matter what I do. They’re even the Alpha pair here. Who knows? Maybe they are the reincarnations of our friends. A rather bittersweet thought as well as a comfort, I suppose.

I’ll be starting back at the wildlife center in a couple of weeks. My bosses there were super relieved that I’d returned. I guess my disappearance had made the news, especially after what had happened at my apartment. Detective Kanagawa helped to smooth over my overall return. Officially, with some help from his buddies to establish a paper trail, I turned up at a hospital in Kyoto without any memory of who I was and transferred to a mental hospital here in Tokyo. And while everyone knows I’ve recovered the vast majority of my memory, I’m supposed to maintain a shrugging memory loss surrounding the events of what happened in my apartment and my disappearance, if anyone asks.

I hope they don’t, though, in the grand scheme of things. I just want to be left alone so I can return to my life here, however much I have to, without a crap-ton of fuss surrounding it. If anyone goes shrieking to the news outlets, I very well may Wolf out and rip some throats. I’m only just barely kidding.

Well, I suppose that’s all there is to write about for now. Ironically, writing all this out to you was the easy part. The hard part is trying to convey how much I miss you and how much I love you. I’ve never been particularly good at writing out my feelings. I could probably wax on about why that is, according to my adoptive parents, but this letter is already quite long as it is. Just know that I miss you all the time and think of you just as much.

Your loving mate,

Rina

Sesshomaru read her letter again and then once more. The emotional state her energies conveyed was still quite shell-shocked. Numb. Lost. Much the same way he’d been feeling without her, he surmised; like he were merely existing as best he could while missing the most vital part of him.
Rina was his heart. Without her, he felt like he was a ghost. The energies clinging to the paper told him that she was experiencing the same.

Of course that was the case. It was part and parcel of the Mating bond. It was why, if one died, the other usually did not last very long. Literally, they died of a broken heart, both figuratively as well as literally. Cases of forced separation weren’t as common. Cases where the forced separation was a result of being separated by time, even less so, obviously. And Sesshomaru had never heard of any other Mated pair experiencing a static interruption in the connection between them like what he had felt since she’d fallen comatose.

At last, he gave in to the temptation he’d been holding himself away from. He closed his eyes and focused on the energy of the Mating bond. It was still there, beginning in threads anchored at each of his chakra points that twined together in an energy rope that spanned however far it needed to keep his soul tied to hers. She was somewhere on the other end.

As he’d tried previously after the battle with Kumayomaru, he followed the cord. The static was still there, but it was different and far weaker than it had been when Rina had gone comatose. This was not the snowy void of a connection inhibited by lost memories but, rather, that of a connection made frail by unnatural distance. Across the centuries that separated them, their bond stretched, thin but still intact.
So, I've at last regained all my memories that had been locked away. Unfortunately, there's still something clogging up the bond between Sesshomaru and me -- something that still interferes with the strength of our connection -- and I don't know what it is or what to do about it. Until this obstacle can be identified and dealt with, I'll continue to endure the detrimental effects of the blocked connection in our Mating bond.

Meanwhile, the anniversary of when Sesshomaru and I met approaches...

Rina just started back at the wildlife center last week and it had already provided a significant measure of comfort to be back and working with her wolves again. It was quite bittersweet, though.

When Ryuka had insisted on taking her out there to see her wolves, it had warmed her to see that they had not forgotten her. The Alpha pair, Nyani and Kenai, a pair of timberwolves the center had taken in as pups from Alaska a few years ago, had been especially boisterous at seeing her again. Her old boss had insisted on accompanying her out there just in case and he'd about had a heart attack when the wolves immediately swarmed her, whining excitedly. She thought he was going to keel over when Nyani leaped up on her and tackled her to the ground, followed very quickly by Kenai.

“I’ve missed you guys, too,” Rina said softly, stroking her hand through Nyani’s white fur. “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner.” At her words, Ayame went strangely quiet… wait… no, not Ayame. She shook her head. She was… dammit, her name was…

Fuck! Was her brain having more memory issues like some unforeseen side effect of Kimi’s magic? Aya… no… dammit! The white wolf was still looking at her intensely as was her mate. The other six wolves were still behaving quite rambunctiously and demanding their turn with Rina’s attention, but Koga… goddammit, that’s not his name! The black wolf warned the rest back with a snarl.

“Why… why do I keep wanting to call you two Ayame and Koga and why can’t I remember your actual names for the life of me?” Rina whispered, her heart bewildered and aching. Unbidden, the memory of what Kumayomaru had done to her Wolf friends flashed before her eyes with such vivid strength that Rina curled on her side with a cry and hid her eyes.

“Rina!” Ryuka called for her in alarm while Takeda moved forward to shove the wolves back.
“I’m fine, Takeda-san!” Rina quickly answered. “Just… a bad memory flash. The wolves are fine, they didn’t hurt me.”

“Are you sure?” he asked nervously.

“Yeah, no, they’re fine, I swear. They still remember me and they’re not being aggressive,” she promised.

About a half hour later, Takeda had finally felt reassured enough of her safety to leave her alone to go about his duties and promised her that he’d get the paperwork pushed through to have her employment reinstated.

“We never actually terminated your employment,” he’d explained. “It was merely put on suspension in hopes that you’d be found and want to come back to us when you were.” His words had made Rina’s heart pang with a bittersweet ache. It truly was nice to know that she’d been appreciated and she’d made sure to bow deeply to show the gratitude she wished she could feel as deeply as her logic acknowledged it.

_I’m such a selfish ass. I can’t help the way I feel, like I still don’t belong here. But I wish I could actually feel the gratitude deeper than the surface level._ She’d sighed. _But I guess I still wish even more that my having to come back like this hadn’t been so necessary in the first place. That’s selfish of me, isn’t it? Ungrateful, even?_ She felt so disconnected and the self-deprecating voice of her anxiety was the loudest voice she could hear.

What would Sesshomaru say about this? He always knew how to help her reconcile the truth from the falsehoods whenever her anxiety became overbearing. But the ongoing blockage in their bond combined with her emotions remaining suspended in an odd zero-space meant that she couldn’t even anticipate what Sessho would tell her at this moment, much less reach through their bond to ask him.

She shook herself out of her afflicted thoughts so Ryuka could show Rina the section of the spacious enclosure where she’d gotten permission to bury the four who had died. Rina’s heart ached at the loss.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here,” she murmured to her wolves. “Those things that attacked you, some of their buddies got me in my apartment.”
Ay… the white wolf growled, causing Rina to hike a brow. Yeah, she’d always felt that her wolves understood her, but this was just getting weird. Maybe Ayame did understand her and remembered the attack. She had, after all, been almost fatally injured. Ryuka had told her about it, as had Sesshomaru, but Ryuka’s longstanding friendship with the wolves had made her better able to convey who had been hurt and who had died. Sesshomaru hadn’t even had the opportunity to fully learn their names before the shit had hit the fan.

When she left that day, she’d promised her wolves that she would be coming back. Koga and Ayame glared at her forlornly as though they didn’t believe her. “Don’t worry,” she’d promised them, giving up on trying to recall their real names. Maybe it was just because they reminded her of her friends somehow. “I’ll be back to visit and then you guys will see me every day once they get my employment situated, ok?”

Did Koga just nod at her?

She’d followed Ryuka back to her car, the elation of being reunited with her wolves dissipating as she settled into the passenger seat and silently stared out the window.

“So…” Ryuka had elongated the word into a question.

Rina had looked at her with bland curiosity. “Hmm?”

“What’s on your mind, Rina?” the Dragon asked patiently. Ah, Ryuka and her endless, blessed patience. Rina smiled softly, reminded of how thankful she was for her friends and their understanding that she still had a long way to go in her recovery.

“I… I don’t know how to put it,” she finally said. “I think my memory is still fucked up or something.” Ryuka remained silent as she waited for Rina to say more, prompting her finally with a sidelong glance. “I can’t remember their names. The Alpha pair,” she clarified.

“Kenai and Nyani?”

Rina wanted to smack herself in the head. “Yeah! I still knew their names no problem when we got there and when they first greeted me, but now they’re gone and… well… maybe it’s just that they remind me so much of Koga and Ayame.”
“Your friends who died?” Ryuka asked sympathetically.

“Yeah.”

“I saw your memories of what happened even before they were unlocked to you.” Ryuka’s voice was laced with sadness. “It’s one thing to see it in someone else’s memories, I know. There’s still that sort of filter like when we see that kind of violence on ‘Game of Thrones’. I can’t even imagine…” her voice trailed off as she struggled to find the words to express her feelings. When she couldn’t, she settled for projecting her feelings to Rina and allowing her to feel the horror and sorrow she felt at what Rina had endured and witnessed.

“Yeah,” Rina replied when Ryuka’s emotions washed over her. She didn’t know what else to say either.

“I wish I could have been there to help,” Ryuka finally said, her voice thickening with emotion. “I wish Goshinboku could have allowed me through. And yeah, fine, I understand why he couldn’t. But I wish things hadn’t been solidly fated the way they were.”

“Me, too.” Rina went back to gazing at the scenery as it flew by, numbly watching the rural melt into the concrete and glass forest of Tokyo.

True to her word, she had visited the wolves several times, almost every other day, while waiting for her employment reinstatement to be processed. And now that she was back to work, she was grateful for the distractions that both of her jobs offered her once more.

She’d also taken to bringing her violin with her, taking it with her to the beach as she resumed that treasured ritual as well. It was easier to think at the beach. Easier to try to feel, even. Her emotions were still in a state of numb static when left to her own devices.

Her wolves brought her comfort and bursts of much-needed joy. Her job and her friends at the club, especially Dazz, gave her a break altogether that was almost addicting. It was a lot easier to pretend she was ok when she had to hurriedly keep up with drink orders along with catching up with the long line of regulars who were so happy to see her back.

At the beach, however, she was granted no clemency of distraction. At the beach, she was forced to confront and process through the tangled ball of her feelings. Rina had no doubts that her PTSD
had increased, as had her depression and anxiety. And it all weighed down on her so heavily all at once that it was just easier to remain enshrouded in a cocoon of depersonalization and dissociation.

*Gods, I can just imagine what my parents would say about this. It’s essentially codependency even if it can’t be helped,* she mused in her ongoing contemplations at the beach. *The bond is supposed to combine the strengths and bolster both parties. It was never meant for such unnatural separation and disconnect.*

But despite the psychological knowledge her adoptive parents had imparted to her, she knew it was deeper than that. These were surface symptoms. And it’s not like there was anything in the DSM-5 or the ICD-10 or any psychology journals pertaining to what a human-raised Wolf demon was supposed to do to deal with the effects of a direly unnatural separation from her mate and the strains of a Mating bond stretched impossibly thin.

The more time passed without the connection being fully restored, the more this perverse, unprecedented depersonalization deepened. The more her bond with Sesshomaru atrophied. A dying, gangrenous limb that could not actually be severed while it continued to drag her spirit down into the crushing depths of nothingness and she, powerless to stop it.

She felt like she was living without her heart. She felt empty and robotic, far deeper than she’d ever experienced with even her worst depression spirals. Any time she’d experienced depersonalization prior to this, it had always been a relief being able to feel absolutely nothing for a little while, sometimes days, sometimes weeks, until she’d felt capable of managing her emotional shit again. But this? This was different. Drastically different.

She didn’t feel separate from everything quite the same way. It was similar but… Argh! She slammed her fist on the retainer wall out of frustration as understanding this abstract remained just out of her reach. Scowling, she bent over her recently-purchased music composition notebook.

She’d never previously tried composing music beyond the most basic required classes, much to the disappointment of her teachers in high school and university. She’d always been content to play what others had written, never really feeling like she had anything to say through music that hadn’t already been expressed by someone else.

She’d always envied people like Lindsey Stirling and Taylor Davis for their abilities to not only do amazing violin covers but also compose their own original music. Even ViolinN00bie, another violinist YouTuber she enjoyed, had managed to compose her first piece after only a few years since she’d started learning to play. Izumi had shown her the video after Rina had returned. And for a first piece, it was really good!
Now, however, she had things to express that had never been said by anyone else in music. But it was definitely intimidating trying to translate her feelings into notes on the page, almost as much as trying to put them into words. And, aside from Izumi, Ryuka, and the Higurashis, there was no one in this world who would even remotely understand if she tried to tell them. Not with words.

At first the process had been awkward as hell and she found herself regretting not having taken more than the basic composition classes in high school. At least she’d taken all the Music Theory that had been required. That definitely eased the early process a little as she, stumbling at first, figured out what process suited her best.

Now it was a little less awkward as she became increasingly absorbed, playing the notes on her violin until they sounded right enough to jot down into her notebook for later revision. The more she drew the melody out on her violin and transcribed it onto the paper, the more she relaxed into it. The more it came to her. The more it flowed. She paid no mind to the people that curiously looked her way whenever she’d pick up her violin to test out the flow of the notes again. She didn’t care if they smirked whenever the flow was awkward or not quite right.

Two weeks since she’d begun writing this piece -- right after sending Sesshomaru her letter -- she felt she was very close to having it finished and polished.

Rina shook her head forcefully to yank herself out of her thoughts and back to the present, this day that she’d been dreading in particular, aided by an insistent, nudging muzzle. “Sorry, Ayame,” she murmured. She looked at the rest of the pack. All of them looked distinctly impatient and Koga looked like he was flat-out glaring. “Sorry, guys,” she apologized again. “Didn’t mean to zone out, especially at feeding time. Be right back.”

She returned promptly with their food, a couple of small Sika deer carcasses, which were a routine part of the wolves’ feast-and-famine diet. This was something else she’d always been considered a freak for: being able to heft the carcasses without assistance, especially the larger ones.

She walked the fence gap til she reached the first hefty grated opening where food was pushed through, first to the Alphas on one side, and then through another grate on the other side of the enclosure for the rest of the pack to reduce fights and food aggressions. The pack order and etiquette was very well maintained by Koga and Ayame, which was why this wildlife center was able to maintain a larger than usual pack size for captive wolves, which usually only would number at about four or so, give or take. But feedings were always supervised nevertheless just to be on the safe side. Even the most well-mannered packs could erupt into discord sometimes.
She watched them eat quietly and pulled out her own lunch from her worn, beaten backpack and settled into the bento box’s contents. She actually enjoyed feeding days. They were the most peaceful since the wolves were never fed on any of the three days allowed for visitors or volunteer groups. They’d get treats like watermelons, stuffed pumpkins, and other such benign, healthy things. But their full feedings were always left to days when possibly-squeamish visitors would be there.

After she finished eating, Rina checked her watch, trying to avoid looking at the date. She had another two hours before she could leave for the beach and she had already completed her other duties for the day, particularly that of supervising and assisting with the wolves’ yearly vet visit and vaccinations. She couldn’t help but feel proud that her wolves were all declared perfectly healthy even though she’d had very little to do with it over the past year. It just made her happy that they had, of course, remained well cared for in her absence.

She took her backpack and her empty lunchbox to her car and grabbed her violin and composition notebook. She used to play for her wolves all the time on the days when the park was closed to visitors. She used to joke that it was particularly special on feeding days because fine dining was always best when accompanied by a string quartet.

“Just because I’m 3 short doesn’t make that any less true,” she’d quip. And, as they always used to when she’d play for them before she’d disappeared, the wolves went silent as she began to draw her bow across the strings. It seemed rather fitting that her wolves were her first real audience for her first written piece. As the piece flowed into its final refrain, Ayame lifted her muzzle skyward and emitted a howl that, to Rina, felt as though she were singing along. When the other wolves joined in, Rina couldn’t help but smile.

That night at the club promised to be a very special event. It was the one year anniversary of the inaugural Karaoke for Kindness event and it promised to be a helluva bash. Tickets had completely sold out, both for performers as well as for the audience seats. It, of course, also meant for Rina that this was the one year anniversary of when she and Sesshomaru had met and it made her heart ache that he wouldn’t be here for it.

Rina was almost glad for Izumi’s text asking her to come in ASAP. It was three hours early, but she couldn’t really handle the lack of distraction right now. When she arrived through the door, Izumi and Ryuka practically tackled her.

“Rina, I have a huge favor to ask of you and, considering what day this is, I didn’t want to just
ambush you out of nowhere like I did last year,” Izumi said hastily. She and Ryuka had been trying
to convince Rina to get up on stage to sing or even play her violin again since she’d been back, but Rina had always declined. She hadn’t felt recovered enough to be able to participate in performances and hadn’t wanted her melancholy to possibly affect anyone else there.

Rina immediately felt a pit in her stomach. Oh, fuck. She knew what was coming. “Izumi, I
don’t…”

“I know you haven’t felt up to playing, love, but Ryuka and I have been listening to you play that piece you’ve been composing and… well…” Izumi flushed sheepishly, “I took the liberty of looking at your notes and composed some piano accompaniment.”

Rina blinked in surprise. “You did what, now?”

“I wanted you to come in early so we could see how it sounds together and if you still don’t want to play it on stage tonight, I will absolutely respect that, but I really think people would like it!” Izumi begged. “Please, Rina?”

Rina hesitated. “But don’t you think it’s a little depressing?”

“Well, we were thinking,” Ryuka interjected, “with that rather lonely vibe it gives off, it’d be perfect during the end part of the intermission where we take a few minutes to memorialize transgender people that have been assaulted and murdered all over the world this year, since the theme for this event is raising awareness for transgender rights and issues.”

Rina chewed her lip thoughtfully for a moment before she shook her head out of her reverie. There wasn’t much time and she owed it to her friends to at least see if this would work before she just lumped it off with another refusal. “Alright, let’s get to it and see how it goes.”

Izumi gave a happy squeal and dragged Rina to the stage where the piano and Rina’s performance violin were already waiting. Rina stood behind her as Izumi showed her how the introduction sounded and pointed out at what point Rina’s violin would come in. Rina listened to the introduction a couple more times until she felt she had a good feel for it and lifted her violin to her shoulder.

It actually felt really good to be collaborating with Izumi on this. She hadn’t even given any thought to other parts for this piece as she hadn’t really thought she’d ever perform it for anyone
else. They worked together to smooth out a few areas where the piano’s part was a little rough against the violin.

Finally they got through the whole piece from beginning to end without stopping and Izumi grinned up at Rina like the cat that had eaten a whole buffet of canaries. Her grin grew wider when Rina couldn’t resist a wide smile of her own.

“That actually sounded really good,” Rina admitted. She couldn’t express how much it touched her heart that Izumi had gone so far as to write accompanying music.

“So…?” Izumi let the question hang in the air as she awaited Rina’s final pronouncement.

Rina nodded her concession. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

Izumi squealed with delight as she leapt up from her seat on the bench and threw her arms around her best friend. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she screeched. “They’re going to love it, I just know it!”

Parting from their embrace, Rina and Izumi quickly got to work on the rest of the preparations that needed handling before the doors opened and, for the first time that day, Rina felt a little better about this bittersweet anniversary.

The first half of the KFK was, of course, a booming success. Rina had been behind the bar with Dazz again, which had been a further balm of delight as the level of business, combined with Dazz’s vivacious antics, were more than enough to keep her distracted from what would have otherwise been Rina’s ongoing temptations to keep looking back at the table that Sesshomaru had sat at last year. Thankfully, she didn’t have to worry about straddling duties. There was even more serving staff this year, so Rina’s attentions were wholly occupied with helping Dazz keep up with the never ending flow of drink orders.

During the intermission, Dazz and a few of the other employees got up on stage to sing some songs, which delighted the patrons. Then, towards the end of the intermission, Dazz took the stage again to speak of some of her own experiences with transphobia as a drag queen that moved much of the audience to tears.
“It’s hard enough being Asian in any sense and being anything but 100% straight,” she pointed out. “But when you’re Asian and you’re not comfortable being in the body that you were born into in any sense of the word, that just makes it even more frightening. Especially when you see, almost every day, the news that yet another transgender person has been assaulted or murdered?” Tears choked her voice.

“I mean, I’m content enough, for now, to just dress in drag and come to work here in this club that has become my home with my co-workers and my customers that have become my family and accepted me wholeheartedly. I don’t know if I’ll ever take the step to transition. It’s really difficult to not be terrified of the thought, actually.

"But tonight, at the end of this intermission, we want to take a moment to honor and remember the people that have been brave enough to be themselves like this full time and have paid a heavier price for it than they should have ever had to. And please know, I’m not saying this to shit on myself, on other drag queens out there, ok? We each dress in drag for our own reasons and there’s nothing wrong with that. You all know that, right? Nor am I saying this to crap on other transgender folk who haven’t or aren’t taking steps to transition. Gods, I hope you all know that.”

Her hands fluttered nervously as she worried.

Dazz smiled gratefully at the thunderous applause and hoots of approval that her anxious question was met with. “Then, please welcome to the stage our very own Izumi and Rina who are going to be performing an original piece that Rina composed recently and that Izumi felt was quite fitting as we memorialize and remember our transgender brothers and sisters who were deprived of their lives and their rights this year.”

Rina took a deep breath as she walked up to the stage, returning Dazz’s fistbump as she met her on the stage. “Screw that!” Rina hissed and she pulled Dazz into a tight hug. “We love the hell out of you, Dazzle Divine,” she murmured in her friend’s ear. “We love the hell out of you exactly as you are, for who you are, and we wouldn’t have you be any other way but what you are and want to be.”

Izumi joined in on the group hug for a minute as Dazzle wept against them for a moment. Finally, sniffing a little still and daintily dabbing her tears so as to not disturb her makeup, Dazz left the stage to a standing ovation of support and love while Rina picked up her violin and Izumi took her place at the piano.

The crowd quieted at last and, at Rina’s nod, Izumi began playing the melancholy notes of the introduction. Rina closed her eyes as she felt the moment for her violin to join in draw nearer. In her mind, she could see Sesshomaru sitting at that table. He’d have been supportive as hell of this were he able to be here. She knew this without a doubt and it gave her just enough comfort to draw from.

She lifted her bow to her violin and began drawing out the notes that had been written for him, for how much she missed him, that now also lent their grief and empathy to weep for and with those who’d been hurt and lost simply for being different. For those who dealt with a different kind of hopelessness, loneliness, and emptiness that was no less profound. As she played, she held the
people in the pictures displayed behind her and Izumi every bit as close to her heart as she held
him.

By the time she and Izumi wrung out the last few notes and took a quiet bow, there wasn’t a dry
eye left in the place. It was more than alright to her that no one there knew her personal reasons for
writing this piece. It was deeply humbling that her music had been connected to something so
personal for them as they honored the transgender women and men as well as the people in their
own hearts who struggled to be loved and accepted despite not being straight or cisgender.

When Rina returned to the bar, she got pounced on again by Dazz for another hug. “Rina, that was
so beautiful!” she sobbed. “You and Izumi were fantastic! Thank you for letting us use your music
for this! I don’t know what’s going on for you personally that inspired this, but damn, that feeling
of heartbreak was just…” her hands fluttered helplessly as she found herself at a loss for words.

Rina blushed deeply and teared up a little. Leave it to Dazz to noticed and understand that Rina had
written this for her own personal reasons and struggles. She felt a little embarrassed, afraid for a
moment that maybe her own personal shit made her somehow selfish for playing this piece on this
night after all.

“Whatever you’ve got going on that’s broken your heart,” Dazz tried again, her arms embracing
Rina tightly again, “thank you for sharing this with us and letting it resonate for us in our own
ways.” Rina gave her friend a wobbly smile and felt her momentary anxiety fall away.

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Rina couldn’t sleep. The rest of the KFK had gone just as beautifully as the first half had, but she
had felt palpable relief when the event ended at last. As soon as the bar had closed, Izumi, Ryuka,
and even Dazz had insisted that she go ahead and leave early.

“Honey, I know you’ve still got a lot going on,” Dazz had firmly silenced her when she tried to
argue, “and, like I said earlier, I may not know what it is you’re going through, but even I can tell
that you’ve already given everything you’ve got for tonight. And you did good, shug. You did real
good. Besides, you’ve always had my back. The least I could do is have your back when I can tell
that you’re hurting for your own reasons.”

Rina had looked uncertainly at her friend. “Yeah, but, Dazz,” she countered, “tonight’s more about
you than it is about me. If anything, you should be heading out early, not me!”
“Baby girl, it has been a rough night,” Dazz conceded as she gave Rina a reassuring smile. “But I’m ok, shug. As rough a night as it’s been, it’s been so in a good way. I mean, are you kidding? I got to see a whole building crammed to the gills with good people who were vociferously supportive of people like me, people who are trying to transition, people who have transitioned, et cetera. It’s been a huge night emotionally for me, but I’m floating on air right now. So, don’t you worry about me, ok? I’ve got this, shug. You go on home and get some rest.”

Rina allowed herself a couple of breaths to let Dazz’s words sink in and quell her rising guilt-rooted anxiety before she gave her friend a fierce hug. “Love you so much, Dazz!”

“I love you, too, girlfriend,” she said affectionately as she returned the hug. “And thank you for being so awesome. And don’t argue with me!” Dazz winked at her as she cut off the open-mouthed Rina before she could even counter that last. “I know I’m awesome, shug, but I feel like you need that reminder more than I do right now.”

Rina had arrived home, eaten a snack, and holed up in her room with some anime in the background but she couldn’t seem to wind down enough to sleep, even when she tried. It wasn’t hard for her to determine why, though. Even though it was past midnight and the previous day itself was technically over, her mind was still on it having been the anniversary of when she’d first met her mate. And, oh gods, how she missed him.

Fretfully, she got back up out of bed and padded barefoot out of the house to pace beside the lake. She wore the long jacket that still had his scent on it and found herself grateful for even that much comfort. She perched herself on the ground next to the lake and closed her eyes. Without thinking, she found herself pulling herself along the invisible cord of her and Sesshomaru’s paralyzed and starved Mating bond.

Previously, whenever she’d tried to follow it back to him and reconnect with him, she’d not had the strength to traverse the trickling current of her own accord. Prior to the battle against Kumayomaru, she’d never had to. She’d been able to ride the current between them to find him. Since waking up and recovering her memories, she could only get as far as her own strength allowed, which was never very far. The remaining static always sapped her strength as the connection sought to replenish itself back to what it was supposed to be.

Tonight, however, the power of her restless energy was so high she practically flipped off the static of their stretched connection as she blazed past one static obstacle after another and kept going. He was out there, still tied to her across the centuries and the Well that was still closed to them. And tonight, the anniversary of when they’d first met, she would not be denied, dammit!

There! She at last found his energy where it had stretched as far as it could before being dammed up. Blasting past that final barrier that separated them, his energy enveloped her in such a way that,
for the first time in over a month, she finally felt her heart come alive. The moment her energy touched his, it was like an atomic explosion of fireworks and suddenly the remaining parasitic barriers on his side of the bond were gone at last!

She screamed in orgasmic ecstasy at the tidal wave of sensations of their dehydrated bond being fully restored. The difference was beyond night and day. It reminded her of when her hearing had been dulled for at least a week once when she was a child due to water in her ears that she’d been unable to clear out. And yet, when the water had finally drained, the restoration of her full hearing had been so drastic and sudden, it had taken her breath away.

That’s how it felt to now have her bond with Sesshomaru so suddenly restored! From blinding darkness to piercing light in the span of a heartbeat, every sense previously dulled now restored and functioning better than they’d ever been. It was strange to be alive again after being dead for so long.

Rina’s eyes opened with a gasp, but she wasn’t back at the lake. She actually didn’t recognize where she was. She was in a Japanese garden that shone with a surreal, prismatic aura. Surrounding the gardens were the walls of a shrine, which was nestled among mountains that weren’t even remotely familiar. Yet, she wasn’t afraid. It was too beautiful and serene here for fear to have any place. The sky around her was still nighttime, however the stars above were a colorful nebula that whirled overhead in a breathtaking display.

She knew wasn’t in the dream world. A simple test on the part of the cord that led back to her body assured her that her body was still awake and in a meditative state by the lake where she’d left it. She knew she wasn’t traipsing the Astral plane either. Wherever she was, she knew she’d never been here before.

She heard a gasp behind her and she spun around, her throat closing immediately as she took in the sight of him. Her mate. Sesshomaru stared at her, dazed, like he really couldn’t believe that she was standing before him. Rina was hardly aware of her body moving as her eyes drank him in, but before she knew it, she was pouncing on him with a cry.

It was so surreal to feel him! His body felt strangely solid yet not all at the same time. They were both comprised of pure energy with just enough solidity to allow for touch, she realized. Touching him was like wrapping her body around a raw electric current without any unpleasant shock as their energies melded and mingled in a starlight rainbow of colors. Her arms and legs clasped about him and she felt his arms lock about her, his voice whispering her name like it was a prayer. Thoughts poured out between them on a tide of pent up and unspoken emotions, a cacophony of everything they had missed out on in the weeks since their separation.
She saw his journey out to and back from Kumayomaru’s island, his determination to find his balance, the conversation with his mother about how and why Kumayomaru was able to so easily trap them. Her heart froze over when Kimi’s words sank in. Dear gods, Mom was absolutely right. None of them had been able to think clearly upon waking as soon as they saw their dear ones in danger. **Find your balance**, Kimi’s face floated in front of her and Rina felt the order given take root in her own heart. She’d been so lost these past few weeks, but now she knew what she needed to accomplish next when she arrived back.

Sesshomaru pulled back from her only far enough as needed to claim her lips in a fiery kiss, his growls resounding in her head as he tasted her. One arm still supported her weight against him while the other snaked up her back so he could tangle his fingers in her hair and hold her to him. As their tongues battled desperately together, she felt him pulling the images of her memories as well, taking everything in and processing it at light speed. He slowed only when he came across her memories of her writing her violin piece and then playing it earlier that night at the club.

The sounds and strains of the music surrounded them audibly and Rina was vaguely aware of him sinking down to the ground and holding her tightly to him as she straddled his lap. His lips moved from her own and down to her throat, burying his face in the crook of her neck and inhaling her scent deeply.

*I’ve missed you*. The thoughts poured from both of them in a frantic, echoing whisper in a way that was impossible to separate their individual voices. Rina stroked Sesshomaru’s face as she rested her forehead against his as their thoughts continued to crash together.

**Happy anniversary**, she was finally able to coherently whisper to him.

**It’s killed me that I couldn’t even reach you today of all days**, his thought voice echoed back at her, accompanied by a flood of imagery of him by the Well, pleading silently for the Well to open to him. It was at that moment that Rina pulled back, having sensed a welling up of longing emotional energy, and saw the long-held tears of loneliness and sadness that he’d been unable to shed finally release from his golden eyes.

Her own heart cracked open as she was finally able to feel and release the same for herself. They held each other close through the coming tides, gently stroking each others’ faces and exchanging bittersweet kisses until their weeping at last spent itself.

**How did you find me?** he finally asked her once their minds were at last more settled and coherent.
I guess I finally had enough restless energy that I was able to blast past the static that still remained and blocked me from you? Rina shrugged helplessly against him, unable to formulate her thoughts any better than that.

I don’t sense any more of that static on my end. The moment your energy touched mine, it was like feeling a demonic miasma being purified away. I can feel my energy racing along our bond and reaching your physical body without impediment now. The wonder and relief in Sesshomaru’s voice was palpable in this strange place where they found themselves together.

So, it was up to me to remove that obstacle, Rina realized. It actually made sense to her. The static had begun when she’d gone comatose and had gradually decreased as she’d recovered her memories. It made sense that it had needed to be her to break down the last remaining cobwebs that had kept their bond from flowing the way it should have. A flash of regret resounded from her for not having figured it out sooner.

Shh, love, Sesshomaru soothed as he smoothed his lips over hers again. There has literally never been another Mated pair who’s had to face a separation like this after the Mating bond was forged. There was no one to guide either of us on something so unprecedented. Neither of us can be blamed for not knowing. Besides, he added, gazing into her eyes with so much love radiating from his own that his being literally glowed, you did it. You found the way and you saved us from this torment. You found me. You powered past those last blockages and you restored our bond to what it was. Now it spans the distance and centuries as though it were nothing. You did that, my love.

Rina’s throat closed as his words poured from his mind to hers like honeyed sunlight, driving away the remaining darkness and shadows that had kept her so mired. She sank her claws into his hair and leaned up to seal her lips over his. He opened to her gladly, drinking her in with a throaty groan that reverberated deliciously through her soul.

One last twist of anguish coursed through her as the memory of his parting words to her lanced her out of nowhere. She felt his hands tighten on her and she knew he was feeling that pain, too.

How could you say that to me? she cried out before she could stop the thought from formulating. But it had been something that had torn through her heart so many times since she’d been back in her time, she realized, that it had already been formulated and had been circling around her mind like a vulture until the opportunity presented itself to finally fly forth.

I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. The words crashed about her and his arms tightened around her as she felt the sorrow he’d felt at the moment he’d sent her into the Well. Despair.
Hopelessness. Lost. Alone. Afraid. Helpless. Thinking that Kumayomaru had unwittingly succeeded in his goal to tear them apart forever after all.

Rina’s heart broke open as those residual emotions tore through her and she felt how his faith had shattered, leaving a gaping hole where his heart had been, the moment he’d let her go.

*I love you,* their voices echoed desperately together as those last wounds were finally able to heal. They held each other close now, quietly enveloped in the blending energies of their raw soul bodies that blazed together as bright as starlight.

Rina opened her eyes and found herself back in her body by the lake. So strongly was Sesshomaru’s energy still intertwined with hers that she hadn’t even felt herself return. Her heart ached mildly at being back here without him, but it was quickly soothed by another strong pulse of her mate’s energy through her again. She smiled quietly to herself. They were still physically apart, but she could feel him again, their bond pulsating with their fully renewed and saturated connection.

“Rina?” came a voice behind her. Startled, she turned to find Izumi and Ryuka watching her nervously. “Are you ok?”

“How long have you guys been back? What time is it?” Rina blinked at them in confusion.

“It’s almost 4am,” Ryuka said gently. “We got back about an hour ago and saw you sitting here. Made us kinda nervous when we tried calling your name and you didn’t respond to us. We thought you’d maybe fallen asleep out here, but Izumi wasn’t able to even get close enough to you to try to shake you awake. The energy surrounding you was that potent. So we’ve been waiting it out. Are you ok?”

Rina smiled at them, feeling more at peace than she had in what felt like forever. Unable to find the words for what had just transpired, she pushed the memory to her friends, who rushed forth to enfold her in a radiant embrace before they rushed her into the cottage to discuss this turn of events over some cups of tea.

When Rina finally collapsed into bed as the sky began to lighten outside, she tested the bond again, afraid that somehow the static had formed again even though she knew it hadn’t. In response, she
felt a warmth of energy behind her curling up against her spine. Sighing in relief, she sank herself against the comfort of his energy.

It wasn’t the same as feeling him next to her physically, and yet it strangely wasn’t far off. She could feel the warmth of his arm draping sleepily across her hip and pulling her closer. She could feel his face nuzzling against the back of her neck. Pulling her coverlet up to her ears, Rina slipped away into the best sleep she’d had since before the battle with Kumayomaru that had torn her world apart.

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you? Practicing different forms of meditation isn’t a bad idea, but you would probably benefit from instructions of practical application of those techniques in the midst of battle.

Rina felt like face-palming. Of course that was the most logical step. “Damn my anxiety issues and their ability to affect my logical thinking,” she grumbled to herself.

She felt Sesshomaru’s energy surround her like a comforting hug from behind. Don’t be hard on yourself, my love, he soothed. I don’t have the experience with anxiety like you do, but I remember what you once explained to me about how feeling overwhelmed can make you overthink things. Just remember what you told me: It doesn’t make you stupid or lacking in intellect. Besides, we’re mated. We’re partners. And that means you and I work together. That means that we help each other with our perspectives and help each other to think of what the other has missed.

She smiled at the reminder and sent a wave of loving gratitude to him through their bond. Thanks, Sessho-kun. I needed that reminder, actually. Returning to the matter at hand, she contemplated her options. My first sensei retired years ago, though his daughter took over his dojo. But in order to get the best practical instruction possible, I need a teacher whom I can be frank with. Someone to whom I can tell my secret, have them believe me, and not freak the fuck out on me. I guess Ryuka would probably be the best person to ask for advice. Maybe she’s got some idea of who might be able to help me. Or maybe Detective Kanagawa, since he knows about us.

Sounds like you’ve got the start of a workable plan. His approval radiated to her on a wave of pride.

A few hours later at the beach, Rina pulled out her phone. She decided to call Detective Kanagawa first. When she’d first gotten back and Ryuka helped her to make that dreaded call to the police so she could let them know that she was no longer missing, she’d specifically called the detective’s precinct and insisted she would speak only with him. And when he’d concluded her interview after helping her formulate her official story, he’d given her his business card as well as his personal cellphone number, insisting with full sincerity that she not hesitate to call upon him should she need anything.

“Moshi moshi?”

“Detective Kanagawa?”
“Hai?”

“This is Rina Miyazaki.”

“Oh! Rina!” he greeted. “It’s good to hear from you! How are you doing? Are you integrating well back into your life here?”

She smiled. “Fairly well. How are you?”

They chatted and caught up for a few minutes before they finally got down to business.

“So, I wanted to ask you if you might know of any practical martial arts teachers that could help me.” She explained to him her need of finding a teacher who already knew of the existence of demons like her or could handle that knowledge and be trusted.

“Hmmm,” he mused thoughtfully. “How soon do you need this information?”

“As soon as you can possibly get it to me. I know that you’re very busy,” she added apologetically, “but the quicker, the better.”

“Let me make some calls around my network. Don’t worry, I will not specifically mention your name. My people all operate under the pretense of ‘need to know’ and that includes names. But they may be able to help me come up with something for you.”

“That would be great,” she replied gratefully.

“Is this number the best means of reaching you?” At her affirmative reply, he added, “And should I come up with something viable, do I have your permission to pass your number along or should I leave it to you to make the first move?”

Rina frowned thoughtfully. “I trust you,” she finally said, “and I trust your discretion depending on the circumstances you find.”
“Very good. You’ll hear back from me regardless so you can know what to expect either way, and
I’ll try to be back in touch with you in no more than two days’ time.”

She thanked him profusely and hung up. Now she could only wait. Urgh. She hated waiting. For
once, she was glad that tonight was her night off from work at the club. She peeled off her clothing
to the swimsuit she had on underneath and strode restlessly to the waiting surf so she could expend
her nervous energy.

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